

## 22 The meanings and contents of aesthetic statements

### 1 Introduction

Suppose that, after watching a movie, Peter and Carole have the following conversation:

- (1) Peter: It's beautiful.
- (2) Carole: No, it's not.

They have different opinions; that seems quite clear. But do they disagree? Do they actually contradict each other? If they do, *prima facie*, one statement is true, the other is false; and, therefore, either Peter is right and Carole is wrong, or vice versa.

There is, however, another way to interpret (1) and (2). Admittedly, Peter and Carole seem to disagree, but they do not *really*. They are just expressing different personal tastes and, as the famous maxim says, *De gustibus non disputandum est* ('in matters of taste, there can be no disputes'). Peter liked the movie, Carole did not. There is no contradiction here. If they are talking sincerely, as expressions of their personal tastes, both statements are true, if they are statements at all.

And there is a still different take on Peter and Carole's exchange. Admitting that in uttering (1) and (2) Peter and Carole disagree and contradict each other (i.e., that Peter asserts that  $p$ , and Carole that not  $p$ ), it may be maintained that both statements can be true (or false), because their truth (falsity) is relative to a perspective or a context assessment.

This last approach, usually presented under the label of "relativism", has been forcefully defended by Kölbel (2003), MacFarlane (2007), and Lassersohn (2005), among others, for dealing with cases of what they call "faultless disagreement".

The debate concerns various kinds of issues with impacts at different levels that are often entangled. First, there are the metaphysical issues as to whether there are any objective aesthetic facts out there, any real property called "beautiful", for instance, present or absent in the objects in the world. Aesthetic realists would reply affirmatively, but different types of subjectivism or inter-subjectivism seem to prevail among the participants in the debate about faultless disagreements. Perhaps David Hume's ambivalence on the topic has had its

influence here.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Kölbel's argument that realist approaches are incompatible with the existence of faultless disagreements has had a greater impact recently. I take a different route. I broadly adopt a realist approach on aesthetic properties, fundamentally inspired by Peter Kivy's work on aesthetics and the philosophy of art, and, especially, by his recent monograph *De Gustibus* (2015). I do not present an argument for aesthetic realism, but I hope that, at the end, this realist approach, though somewhat sketchy and programmatic, provides a reasonable account of what we are talking and disputing about when we talk and dispute about art.

The debate on faultless disagreements involves epistemological and normative issues about the concepts of truth, assertion and rejection, which, no doubt, have notable sophistication and interest in themselves, but which need not be dealt with from our perspective. We should note, anyhow, that much of the debate has been about so-called "predicates of personal taste" like "delicious" or "tasty", and that aesthetic predicates like "beautiful" have been included in the list without further argument, when not directly excluded (by Lasersohn 2005, for instance) to avoid entering into "fundamental issues" in aesthetics. My strategy is different. I adopt a clear position regarding some of those fundamental issues in aesthetics, trying to clarify what is at stake when people (philosophers of art, art-critics, and art lovers in general) make different claims about the beauty of an artwork.

The aim of this essay, then, is not to enter directly into the discussion of the best semantic and/or epistemological account of faultless disagreements about taste, but to discuss the meaning, content and use of utterances of the form "X is beautiful" when X denotes a particular work of art.

To do that, I draw, on the one hand, from aesthetics and the philosophy of art, broadly adopting Peter Kivy's aesthetic realism about aesthetic properties as well as his distinction between the analysis, the interpretation, and the evaluation of artworks as presented in his recent work *De Gustibus* (2015). And, on

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1 In "Of the Standard of Taste", Hume initially presents a radical subjective view on taste:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume 1987 [1757]: 230)

However, he immediately watered this extreme subjectivism down and pointed to inter-subjectivist standards when he claimed that "the joint verdict" of "the true judge[s] in the finer arts" – who are characterized by "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice – is the true standard of taste and beauty" (Hume [1987 [1757]: 241]).

the other hand, I also consider McNally and Stojanovic's (forthcoming) groundbreaking work on aesthetic adjectives and, in particular, on the term "beautiful" (see also Liao, McNally, and Meshin [2016] and Sundell [2016]).

I focus on utterances of declarative sentences of the form "X is beautiful" (when X is used to refer to an artwork), which, for convenience, I call "aesthetic assertions". Among aesthetic assertions, we should distinguish between aesthetic *judgments* and aesthetic or artistic *appraisals* (or *verdicts*). The former belongs to the *analysis* of the artwork and by "beautiful" we denote a certain aesthetic property of it. The latter belongs to the *evaluation* of the artwork and "beautiful" behaves as a purely evaluative term, roughly equivalent to "aesthetically or artistically good"; a property that all artworks share *qua* artworks, if they are aesthetically or artistically successful. In this essay, I clarify the difference between these two senses of "beautiful" and the corresponding difference between judgments and appraisals, and I show how these distinctions help us to understand the content of our disputes about artworks, and the extent to which our disagreements constitute cases of genuine or merely apparent disagreements or, perhaps, disagreements without fault. I also show that the meaning and content of aesthetic assertions involving the predicate "beautiful" and other aesthetic predicates, as employed by philosophers of art, art critics and art lovers in general, is even more complex than what current studies of the semantics and pragmatics of aesthetic adjectives may initially suggest.

To motivate the discussion, I start, in the next section, by showing a real example of a public disagreement on a recent movie between a film critic for *The Guardian* and a writer and regular contributor for *The Observer* – Peter Bradshaw and Carole Cadwalladr, respectively. They did not utter anything as explicit as (1) and (2), but it is fair to attribute that sort of exchange to them. Then, in section 3, I summarize the results of McNally and Stojanovic's (forthcoming) analysis of "beautiful" that, as we shall see, fall short of explaining the two main senses or uses of the predicate in aesthetic or artistic discourse: its sense or use in aesthetic analysis (where the assertions constitute judgments), on the one hand, and its sense or use in aesthetic or artistic evaluation (where they constitute aesthetic or artistic appraisals), on the other. These uses or senses are introduced in section 4. As the careful reader may have surely noticed, I use a systematic disjunction when talking about aesthetic or artistic appraisals. Section 5, which deals with the *interpretation* of artworks, explains why. I also keep using a cautious disjunction between "sense" and "use" of "beautiful". The reason for that tedious "or" is my current agnosticism as to what is the best way to linguistically deal with the distinction. Although I consider various options in the seventh and last section, more investigation is needed, I think, to reach more solid conclusions.

As I have said, the characters in our initial example, Peter and Carole, are based on real people: Peter Bradshaw, a film critic, and Carole Cadwalladr, a writer. They both wrote in *The Guardian* about the same movie, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant*, shortly after its opening in Europe. They seemed to disagree. Judge for yourself.

## 2 Reviewing *The Revenant*

González Iñárritu's film is based on the true story of Hugh Glass, a fur trapper of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American West (portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio) who is attacked by a bear and undergoes an incredible story of survival and revenge.

Of course, Bradshaw (2015) and Cadwalladr (2016) did not write anything as simple as (1) or (2).<sup>2</sup> The titles of their pieces, however, make clear their difference of opinion:

Bradshaw: "The Revenant review – gut-churningly brutal, beautiful storytelling".

Cadwalladr: "The Revenant is meaningless pain porn".

It is clear that Bradshaw thinks it is a beautiful movie. After summarizing the plot, he describes his experience watching the movie:

I clenched into a whimperingly foetal ball so tight that afterwards I practically had to be rolled out of the cinema auditorium. (...) I also felt every droplet of bear spittle, every serration of tooth, and I understood what it feels like when parts of your ribcage are exposed to fresh air and light rain.

Not everybody would take those experiences as exactly positive, but Bradshaw clearly does so. He not only talks about his experiences but especially about the features of the movie itself, using a variety of adjectives. It is quite clear, for instance, that he has a very positive view on Iñárritu's direction and Lubezki's cinematography:

The images that the movie conjures are ones of staggering, crystalline beauty: gasp-inducing landscapes and beautifully wrought closeups, such as the leaves in bulbous freezing mounds, and a tiny crescent moon, all unsentimentally rendered. But there is

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Stojanovic claims that "[i]n aesthetics, art critics hardly ever use adjectives like 'beautiful' to express a positive evaluation of a work of art" (Stojanovic, forthcoming: 5). I'm not that sure. In his review, Bradshaw uses the adjective twice, the adverb "beautifully" once, and even the noun "beauty". In her op-ed, Cadwalladr uses none of these.

also something hallucinatory and unwholesome about these images, as if hunger and pain has brought Glass to the secularised state of a medieval saint tormented with visions. (...) what is so distinctive about this Iñárritu picture is its unitary control and its fluency: no matter how extended, the film's tense story is under the director's complete control and he unspools great meandering, bravura travelling shots to tell it.

So, it seems fair to attribute to Bradshaw an utterance like (1). He believes that *The Revenant* is a beautiful movie.

On the other hand, Cadwalladr, who has read Bradshaw's review, makes it clear she thinks it's not. The first paragraph announces the severity of Cadwalladr's opinion:

Ritualised brutality. Vengeful blood lust. Vicious savagery justified by medieval notions of retribution. We all know how dark the world can be these days. A world where men are garrotted and impaled. Where they're speared and disembowelled and have their necks slashed and their genitals sliced off. Where they're killed for no other reason than revenge. This isn't Raqqa, though, it's *The Revenant*.

The summary of her experience as a viewer is no less blunt:

I saw it at a press screening (...) to spend what felt like several weeks in a dark room waiting – oh dear God, do you wait – for Leo [DiCaprio] to just get on and hack the other man to death so I could finally go home.

She really saw little value in the movie:

Director Alejandro González Iñárritu's idea was for it to look as *real* as possible. Which would have been magnificent if there was something in the way of a story or any meditation on the nature of retribution or anyone – *anyone* – that you could give one toss about, but there's not. So the landscape is chilling and the violence is pointless and the whole thing is meaningless. A vacuous revenge tale that is simply pain as spectacle.

It is clear enough that Bradshaw and Cadwalladr disagree and they do it blatantly. But what do they disagree about? It is quite obvious that the former liked the movie, the latter did not; she disliked it. But their differences amount to more than that. They refer to various aspects of the movie to make their point. It seems fair to say that they intend to describe the film's virtues (or vices), merits (or demerits). And that, if pressed, they would be willing to give further arguments for the truth of (1) and falsity of (2), and vice versa.

I think it is just too simplistic to take this as a case of faultless disagreement, and say that, even if they contradict each other, they can both be perfectly right. We need to clarify, first, what exactly they are talking about to be able to determine whether they contradict each other and/or whether they can simul-

taneously be making true assertions about the beauty (or lack thereof) of *The Revenant*. Looking at the meaning of the adjective “beautiful” seems a good start in the inquiry.

### 3 McNally and Stojanovic on “beautiful”

McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming) characterize the adjective “beautiful” as gradable, multidimensional, and non-measurable (because it is evaluative). Let us see what they mean.

#### 3.1 Gradability

Gradable adjectives allow us to compare two objects according to the degree to which they show the property denoted by the adjectives. So, it is perfectly right to claim of any two objects *X* and *Y* that “*X* is more beautiful than *Y*”. On the other hand, for the correct application of the adjective, “it is typically not enough that the property in question be held just to any degree; rather it must be held to a degree that passes a *threshold* or meets a *standard*. For example, if something is long, it has a certain, usually substantial length” (p. 2).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, “beautiful” passes the two linguistic tests used for gradable adjectives: it is compatible with “very” (e.g., “*X* is very beautiful”) and allows a *for*-phrase (“*X* is beautiful for a three-star hotel”).

McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming) hypothesize that most aesthetic adjectives are gradable, though they leave it open whether all of them are. Of course, this depends on what we take aesthetic adjectives to be, but, since we are mainly concerned with “beautiful”, whose status as an aesthetic predicate is not questioned, we need not deal with it.

#### 3.2 Multidimensionality

Unidimensional adjectives are those for which there is only one criterion by which to order the individuals according to the property in question. They include adjectives like “long”, “tall”, “slow”, and “old” that order objects accord-

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<sup>3</sup> It is not clear to me whether the same works with “beautiful”. It’s odd to say that we do not call an object “beautiful” unless it is “substantially beautiful”. The distinction between the two senses or uses of the adjective that I introduce in section 4 may be relevant here, but I will leave this issue aside.

ing to length, height, speed, and age, respectively. Multidimensional adjectives, on the other hand, are those for which there is more than one criterion used to order the objects bearing the property. “Deciding whether an adjective describing a multidimensional property holds of some individual involves not only determining a threshold of applicability but also determining the relative weight of each of the dimensions that contribute to the property in question” (p. 4). The tests for multidimensionality include compatibility with phrases like “in some/every way/respect” or “except for A”, which “beautiful” seems to pass: “X is beautiful in every respect”, “X is beautiful except for the color”.

McNally and Stojanovic’s (forthcoming) hypothesis is strong concerning this aspect. They venture that all aesthetic adjectives are multidimensional. Again, this depends on the delimitation of aesthetic adjectives, but, regarding “beautiful”, we need to make further considerations about its multidimensionality.

### 3.3 Measurability

According to McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming), most unidimensional adjectives are measurable. We can order the objects to which we attribute the property in question. Some multidimensional adjectives are also measurable. Among the latter, they include “intelligent” and “simple” along with “big”, “large” and “small”. In the case of intelligence, they allude to IQ tests but, admitting that they are questionable, they observe that “intelligence can be measured non-numerically, for example, by checking which sorts of problems an individual is capable of solving or how quickly they can be solved” (p. 5).

One might think that if “intelligent” is taken as measurable (in this last non-numerical sense), “beautiful” could also be regarded as measurable in an analogous way.<sup>4</sup> But McNally and Stojanovic do not, their main reason being that while “[m]easurability, as [they] understand it, allows in principle for the objective use of an adjective”, non-measurable adjectives introduce subjectiv-

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<sup>4</sup> When discussing aesthetic terms Sibley (1959) contrasts aesthetic terms which, according to him, are *non-condition-governed*, with “intelligent”, which is *condition-governed*. Briefly put, in the relevant sense here, I take it that Sibley’s “condition-governed” terms are those which denote complex qualities analyzable as an “open-ended” set of component properties, which, taken separately, are neither necessary nor sufficient, but which jointly are sufficient for the complex quality to occur. According to Sibley, “intelligent” denotes such a quality; “beautiful” does not. This is extensively discussed by Kivy (1979) who, *pace* Sibley, takes aesthetic terms like “unified”, “delicate” and “beautiful” to be analogous to “intelligent”: either “intelligent” is non-condition-governed or they are all condition-governed. Analogously, I contend that either “intelligent” is non-measurable or “beautiful” is also measurable.

ity, because they either involve properties entailing an experiencer or “imply a positive or negative evaluation on the part of the speaker” (p. 5). They think that “beautiful” does not entail an experiencer, but that, being evaluative, introduces subjectivity, and, therefore, is non-measurable.<sup>5</sup>

Their hypothesis is that all aesthetic adjectives are non-measurable, and that “the entailment of an experiencer is neither sufficient nor necessary for an adjective to be properly aesthetic” (p. 9). They leave open the question of whether all aesthetic predicates are evaluative.

McNally and Stojanovic’s (forthcoming) thorough analysis of “beautiful” seems quite compatible with a realist account like Kivy’s. Gradability and multidimensionality might need some further clarification, but I do not attempt to discuss that here. From Kivy’s realist point of view, there are at least two objections to the non-measurability of “beautiful”, even before we distinguish between its two senses or uses. First, if “measurable” means to be “condition-governed” à la Sibley, and “intelligent” is measurable, then “beautiful” is measurable too.<sup>6</sup> If measurability is what allows the objective use of an adjective, then “beautiful” is measurable, because “beautiful” can be and is objectively used. I leave the discussion here – though I will discuss evaluativity later in sections four and seven – to turn to the main theme of the essay: the two senses or uses of “beautiful”.

## 4 Two senses or uses of “beautiful”

From our point of view, the first and most important distinction has to do with two uses or senses of the predicate “beautiful” that are well rooted in the history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. They are present in artistic contexts at least from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is, on the one hand, the general artistic or aesthetic sense or use in which “any great work of art ... calls forth the appellation ‘beautiful’, regardless of its specific features ... (Thus the eighteenth century called the fine arts “beaux arts”, indicating that their essential feature, at least when they are well-executed, is beauty)” (Kivy 2015: 37).

In this sense or use of the predicate, to use Kivy’s own examples, both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* are beautiful; Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* and Grünwald’s

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<sup>5</sup> McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming), on the other hand, admit that numbers can be assigned to the beauty of a woman or an exercise in a figure skating contest, but they take these cases not “to involve some sort of external criterion” but “to express an ordinal ranked preference” (p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 5.



*Christ on the Cross* are both beautiful as well. Hume would be using the word in this general evaluative sense in his essays on taste. And perhaps this is the main sense or use of the adjective by non-specialized art lovers when talking about telling *good* and *bad* artworks apart. “Beautiful” in this use can be paraphrased as “artistically or aesthetically good, or successful”. Let’s call this use or sense of the adjective “beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>”; an assertion of the form “X is beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>”, then, constitutes an aesthetic or artistic appraisal, and belongs to the evaluation of the artwork.

There is a second, more specific, use or sense of “beautiful” with more descriptive content, which helps us in contrasting “a pretty face with a beautiful one, a sublime composition with a beautiful one” (Kivy 2015: 37). In this use or sense of the adjective, the *Iliad* is not beautiful but sublime; the *Aeneid* is not sublime but beautiful; Beethoven’s *Gross Fuge* and Grünwald’s *Christ on the Cross* are both ugly.

This second use or sense (let’s call it “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>”) is strictly aesthetic and situates “beautiful” among the aesthetic predicates along with “unified”, “balanced”, “integrated”, “lifeless”, “serene”, “somber”, “dynamic”, “powerful”, “vivid”, “delicate”, “moving”, “trite”, “sentimental”, “tragic” and the like.<sup>7</sup> The properties they denote are aesthetic properties absent or present in the artwork. I call them “second-level” aesthetic properties, since they are distinguished from purely “technical” – musical, literary, pictorial, cinematographic, ... which, naturally, I call “first-level” – like the number of characters in a plot, the use of pale colors in a painting, the inversed theme in a fugue, that there is a stretto at some point, that the plot of a story takes place in the span of one day or that there is a reconciliation scene at the end.<sup>8</sup> According to Kivy (2015), second-level aesthetic properties such as serenity, balance, and being tightly-knit emerge from, or supervene on, first-order aesthetic properties such as a stretto or inversion in a fugue, and a reconciliation scene in a plot. Thus, the presence of second-order properties is dependent upon the presence of first-order properties. But Kivy points to another important difference between the two: first-order properties are non-evaluative; second-order properties are evaluative; and among the latter, he distinguishes those that are both descriptive and evaluative (or thick) features such as being balanced or graceful, and purely evaluative (thin) ones such as being good.

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<sup>7</sup> The list is taken from Sibley’s initial examples. As he observes, there are many more, of many types that can be grouped in “various kinds of sub-species” (Sibley 1959: 127).

<sup>8</sup> Again, this list is Sibley’s (1959). He takes these to be non-aesthetic “concepts”. I follow Kivy (2015), and take them as aesthetic too. (See also Kivy 1973, 1975, 1979).

Regarding the predicate “beautiful” in its specific use or sense, by “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” we denote the thick (second-order) property *beautiful*, which, of course, has a positive value<sup>9</sup> and also describes some perceptible or experiential feature of the artwork, which is describable in purely descriptive first-order terms, the stretto in the fugue at that point or the melodic inversion at that other point, and so on. All the aesthetic features pertain to the analysis of the artwork.

I take it that all aesthetic features of artworks, both the non-value and the value features, are, to put it one way, art-relevant structural and phenomenological features of them. And these features are, of course, the subject of “analysis”. (Kivy 2015: 124)

“Beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>”, then, is a thick aesthetic term with both descriptive and evaluative (positive) contents, denoting a thick aesthetic property of artworks, which depends on the presence or absence of first-order aesthetic features in the artworks. An assertion of the form “X is beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” constitutes an aesthetic judgment,<sup>10</sup> which belongs to the analysis of the artwork, that is, to “an explication of how the artwork ‘works’, what makes it tick.” (Kivy 2015: 124)

To recapitulate, an assertion of the form “X is beautiful”, when X is used to refer to an artwork, is either an aesthetic judgment (“beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>”) or an aesthetic or artistic appraisal (“beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>”). If the former, “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” denotes a second-level thick aesthetic property of the artwork which emerges from certain first-level or technical features of it. If the latter, “beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>” provides a fully evaluative general property of the artwork that is based on the aesthetic or art-relevant properties of the artwork.

A note of caution might be in order here. I am not claiming that *beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>* and *beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>* are totally independent properties, as I am not claiming that the analysis and the evaluation of an artwork are independent tasks, or that an aesthetic judgment of a particular artwork is irrelevant to its aesthetic (or artistic) appraisal. If we find an artwork to be *beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>*, that depends on first-level technical properties which make it beautiful and not just pretty, and not sublime. Since being *beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>* is *prima facie* a positive property, in general, it counts for a positive evaluation as a good artwork, but it is neither sufficient nor necessary for it. Given the presence or absence of other aesthetic (and other non-aesthetic but art-relevant) properties, a *beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>* artwork, might not be *beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>* – as in the case of *Gone with the Wind*, discussed below –

<sup>9</sup> Following Kivy (2015: 122–123), I take the valence of thick aesthetic predicates like “beautiful” to be positive *prima facie*. In general, being *beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>* is an artistic merit of and artwork, but that valence is defeasible. In particular instances, it can have a neutral or even a negative valence.

<sup>10</sup> See also Kivy (1975).

or an *ugly*<sub>DESCR</sub> artwork might be *beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub> – as in the cases of Beethoven’s *Gross Fuge* and Grünwald’s *Christ on the Cross* mentioned above. To put it short, the presence of absence *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub> is relevant to the presence or absence of *beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>, but it is just one property among many properties that are jointly relevant.

As I have said, McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming) do not distinguish between “*beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>” and “*beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub>”, and I do not discuss how their analysis could be recast in terms of this distinction. A couple of remarks seem relevant, though. When they talk about the evaluativity of “*beautiful*” and compare it to “*good*” and “*bad*” as “[p]erhaps the most basic examples of evaluative adjectives” (p. 9), they seem to point to “*beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>”, i.e., the thin, purely evaluative sense or use, proper to the artwork’s evaluation. But, when they immediately include “*beautiful*” along with “*pretty*”, “*gorgeous*”, “*handsome*” and “*ugly*”, they are pointing to our “*beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub>”, that is, the adjective’s thick (evaluative and descriptive) use or sense. Actually, they acknowledge that there are not any strictly evaluative readings of “*beautiful*” when, for instance, it is embedded under “*find*” or *look* (p. 12, fn 11). So, implicitly at least, they are also pointing to two different uses or senses of the adjective.

I want now to say a bit more about “*beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>” or the sense or use of the predicate “*beautiful*” in aesthetic and artistic appraisals. It is about time to clarify, in particular, why I keep systematically using a disjunction when talking about aesthetic or artistic appraisals.

In many art forms, the aesthetic appraisal of the artwork, based on its aesthetic properties, is all there is to its artistic appraisal. So, in this case, the disjunction would amount to the mutual interchangeability of “*aesthetic*” and “*artistic*”. If we hold an autonomist conception of art, an *art for the art’s sake* kind of view, this generalizes to all arts disciplines and works. All that matters when evaluating a work of art is to consider its aesthetic properties.

But, if we go with an anti-autonomist view like Kivy’s, there is more to the evaluation of an artwork *qua* artwork than the analysis of its aesthetic properties, because some artworks have meanings, and an *interpretation* of the meaning of the artwork is also part of its evaluation *qua* artwork. Given the interpretation of an artwork, the aesthetic appraisal of the work (let’s say, “*beautiful*”) can be different from its artistic appraisal (“*not beautiful*”). To understand this, we need to clarify the notion of the meaning of an artwork.

## 5 The meaning of an artwork

The artistic appraisal of an artwork involves all the *art-relevant* properties of the artwork:

The art-relevant properties of a work I take to be those properties of the work that are the ones we appreciate in it qua artwork. They are the properties that are relevant to its merit or demerit as an artwork; the properties we mention as contributing to its merit or demerit as an artwork. (Kivy 2015: 59)

And the propositional or representational content of an art-work, if it has one, is, according to Kivy, art-relevant: it is relevant for its overall evaluation as an artwork, as constituting a beautiful, that is, an artistically good or successful work of art.

It is commonplace to admit that artworks can have a meaning, that is, that they can assert, convey or suggest propositions purported to be true. Absolute music (i.e. music alone, without program and without text) asserts or conveys nothing. Literary artworks such as novels, poems and plays often make assertions and suggestions, and music with text, visual representational arts and movies can also do so. They often have propositional and representational content. These contents, though not aesthetic, are art-relevant properties of the work.<sup>11</sup>

Kivy gives an example that illustrates his view on the contribution of the non-aesthetic art-relevant properties to the evaluation of the artwork, which helps us with the discussion of our motivating example about *The Revenant*: the movie *Gone with the Wind*. On the one hand, at the level of analysis it is quite obvious that it has positive aesthetic qualities:

With its stunning cinematic technique, its narrative sweep, spectacular special effects, and performances by some of the most talented movie actors and actresses of its day, it is on every cinema buffs list of cinema greats, at least of the Hollywood variety. (Kivy 2015: 60–61)

From the point of view of its aesthetic appraisal, then, Kivy agrees—with everybody else, I think—that *Gone with the Wind* is a beautiful (“beautiful<sub>EVAL</sub>”) movie.

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<sup>11</sup> If one takes meaning-properties to be aesthetic properties of the artwork, like, for instance, Gaut (2007) does when he equates aesthetic properties with art-relevant properties, then there would be no difference between aesthetic and artistic appraisals. But, of course, meaning-properties would always be relevant for the aesthetic appraisals of artworks with meaning. Both Kivy’s and Gaut’s views deny the *autonomy* of art posed by *art for the art’s sake* views that see meaning properties irrelevant for the artistic appraisal. I follow Kivy’s anti-autonomist view here.

But there are other art-relevant properties, non-aesthetic properties having to do with the movie's meaning that affect the final artistic verdict:

It advances an idealized picture of the ante-bellum, slave-supported Southern culture; and the depiction of the African-American slave as a dithering incompetent ... the depiction of the South's "noble" struggle against Northern oppression, during the Civil War, ... leaves out the fact that the South's "noble struggle" was a struggle to preserve one of the most morally depraved institutions in human history, namely the chattel-slavery of a race. (Kivy 2015: 61)

Kivy's artistic appraisal is clear. He thinks that *Gone with Wind* is not good as an artwork, it is not *beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>, after all; it is not artistically good. Here is why:

I find *Gone with Wind* an utterly repellent work of cinematic art, *on moral grounds*. All its aesthetic merits, which are in abundance, are not enough, for my taste, to weigh the balance of artistic merit in its favor, against its moral defects. (Kivy 2015: 61)<sup>12</sup>

In other words, from an exclusively aesthetic point of view, the movie is *beautiful*<sub>EVAL</sub>, but, from an artistic point of view, it is not. Thus, for artworks with meaning, we should distinguish two further uses or senses of "beautiful"<sub>EVAL</sub>: one that only evaluates the aesthetic merits of the artwork ("beautiful"<sub>EVAL-AES</sub>, for short); another that also includes in the evaluation the art-relevant non-aesthetic meaning properties belonging to the artwork's interpretation ("beautiful"<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>).

Of course, there is room for disagreement in the determination of the precise meaning of a particular artwork and its weight vis a vis its aesthetic merits. For instance, Handel's *Messiah* has been interpreted as anti-semitic; and so has Wagner's *Meistersinger*.<sup>13</sup> But, whatever their meaning, the point is that they have one, and that it is relevant for the artistic appraisal as an artwork. To take another well-known case, Picasso's *Guernica* has abundant aesthetic merits (though we can hardly say that it is *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub>), but, no doubt, the fact that it represents the bombing of Gernika, one of the first raids on a defenseless civilian population, adds to its artistic appraisal as one of the most beautiful (*beautiful*<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>) paintings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With all these distinctions at hand, let us turn to assess Peter Bradshaw's and Carole Cadwalladr's conflicting views about *The Revenant*.

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<sup>12</sup> Kivy's qualification "for my taste" should not be taken as a sign that he takes appraisals to be subjective. From his realistic point of view, aesthetic and artistic appraisals are true (or false) according to matters of fact, i.e., the presence (or absence) of a positive aesthetic or artistic value in the artwork.

<sup>13</sup> Kivy rejects those interpretations in Kivy (2012) and (2007), respectively.

## 6 Back to *The Revenant*

Bradshaw thinks that *The Revenant* is beautiful (“gut-churningly brutal, beautiful storytelling” he says in the title), and Cadwalladr thinks it’s not (“[it] is meaningless pain porn”). An immediate conclusion is that the consideration of the movie’s meaning plays a very different role in each case.

Bradshaw has no substantial claim to make about the interpretation of the movie. He is almost exclusively focused on its aesthetic properties, both first-level and second-level: the images are “ones of staggering, crystalline beauty: gasp-inducing landscapes and beautifully wrought closeups, such as the leaves in bulbous freezing mounds, and a tiny crescent moon, all unsentimentally rendered”. Or again: “what is so distinctive about this Iñárritu picture is its unitary control and its fluency: no matter how extended, the film’s tense story is under the director’s complete control and he unspools great meandering, bravura travelling shots to tell it.”

We can safely say that, if we asked him, all the aesthetic merits emphasized by Bradshaw would lead him to assent that “*The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub>”.

It is quite clear, on the other hand, that Cadwalladr’s main focus is on the interpretation of *The Revenant*, its meaning. She is mainly discussing what the movie represents, which she summarizes as “Ritualised brutality. Vengeful blood lust. Vicious savagery justified by medieval notions of retribution.”

She does not deny the movie’s aesthetic merits. She describes the cinematography not as beautiful, but as gorgeous: “Emmanuel Lubezki’s cinematography – all shot in just a few hours of natural light each day – really is gorgeous.” It is true that she shows some skepticism about the seemingly positive valence carried by Bradshaw’s description, when she says that “It’s ..., according to the *Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw, ‘as thrilling and painful as a sheet of ice held to the skin’. This is praise, by the way.” But we have no reason to think she would deny that “*The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub>”. We have strong reasons, however, to suspect that things are very different when it comes to the movie’s artistic evaluation.

Cadwalladr, when it comes to the artistic appraisal of *The Revenant*, believes that the demerits of its interpretation outbalance its aesthetic merits. In her own words, the director’s “idea ... for it to look as *real* as possible would have been magnificent if there was something in the way of a story or any meditation on the nature of retribution or anyone – *anyone* – that you could give one toss about, but there’s not”.

Cadwalladr thinks that the violence of the movie, its pointlessness, is immoral and that it weighs more than the cinematography, the landscapes or the acting. Like Peter Kivy with *Gone with the Wind*, Cadwalladr thinks that, given its moral defects, *The Revenant* is not beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>: “So the landscape

is chilling and the violence is pointless and the whole thing is meaningless. A vacuous revenge tale that is simply pain as spectacle.”

To sum up, Bradshaw and Calwalladr do not seem to disagree about its first-level aesthetic properties. They pretty much agree as well about the second-level properties (the cinematography is “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” for Bradshaw, “gorgeous” for Cadwalladr). We can also take them to agree pretty much on the film’s aesthetic appraisal. Even if Calwalladr would not take “thrilling and painful as a sheet of ice held to the skin” to provide a positive value, we may venture that they both agree that *The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub>. Their disagreement must be about the artistic appraisal; that is, Bradshaw, perhaps, believes that *The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>; Cadwalladr clearly believes it is not.

Cadwalladr’s position is clear; her reasons too. We have to speculate about Bradshaw’s position and his reasons. If he indeed believes that *The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>, he may have three reasons for disagreeing with Cadwalladr: a) he thinks that *The Revenant* does not have the meaning that Cadwalladr attributes to it, so he sees no reason for the artistic merit to be affected by it; or b) he agrees that it has that meaning, but he does not take it to outweigh its indubitable aesthetic merits; or, finally, c) whatever his beliefs about the meaning of the film, he is an autonomist, and believes that non-aesthetic properties are irrelevant for artistic evaluation, and therefore being beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub> and being beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub> are equivalent.

Whatever Bradshaw actually believes, it is clear now what he and Cadwalladr agree and disagree about, if they agree or disagree, when they each (virtually) claim about *The Revenant* that it is beautiful (1), and it is not (2). Cadwalladr claims that

- (3) *The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>
- (4) *The Revenant* is beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub>
- (5) *The Revenant* is not beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>

and Bradshaw agrees on (3) and (4). If there is any disagreement between them, it is about (5), and, as we just said, there can be at least three different reasons having to do with the interpretation of the film and the place of that interpretation in the overall artistic appraisal of it. If they disagree, however, the disagreement is real and somebody is at fault. Either Bradshaw is right about the interpretation of *The Revenant* and Cadwalladr wrong, or viceversa. No doubt, it may difficult to decide one way or the other (and I am not going to pursue the issue here) but at least we have a better understanding about what the disagreement is about.

In general, then, when two people assert about an artwork that it is or it is not beautiful, there is much to clarify before concluding that they just faultlessly disagree. The aesthetic assertion can be an aesthetic judgment describing a second-level aesthetic property of the artwork, or an appraisal. If the former, the judgment is about the presence or absence of *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub>, and pointing to the first-level technical properties is the way to clarify its content. Making this dimension explicit, that is, its multi-dimensional properties (the cinematography, the landscapes, the plot...), will help in clarifying the truth-conditions of the judgments and determining whether their apparent disagreement is genuine or not. Being a matter of degree, the dispute might be about whether the right property is *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub> rather than pretty or sublime; a case that can be difficult to resolve. Or it can be a bold genuine opposition, with dimensions fixed, to the effect that one judges it to be *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub> the other considers it *ugly*<sub>DESCR</sub>. An aesthetic realist claims that in this case one would be right, the other wrong.

If the latter, if the assertion is an appraisal, it can be an aesthetic appraisal or an artistic one. If the artwork has no meaning, there will no difference between the last two. If the artwork has a meaning, the artwork's interpretation plays a role in its artistic evaluation. And this opens various sources of possible disagreement and contradiction.

Exchanges like (1) and (2) may simply be taken as expressions of personal taste. But often they are not. When talking about artworks, they are just the beginning of complex arguments about their aesthetic properties and their non-aesthetic but art-relevant properties. I hope to have shown that this is at least a reasonable enough account of what is going on in our aesthetic and artistic disputes about the beauty of an artwork.

## 7 Semantics or pragmatics?

Throughout this essay, the systematic use of both “sense” and “use” when talking about “*beautiful*<sub>EVAL-AES/ART</sub>” and “*beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub>” has been deliberate. I wanted to avoid a premature decision about whether this difference should be assimilated to the semantics or the pragmatics of the adjective. Or, perhaps, the distinction is better handled as a difference in the practices of analyzing (i.e. producing aesthetic judgments) versus evaluating (producing aesthetic or artistic appraisals about) works of art, than by assigning special semantic or pragmatic features to “*beautiful*”. More research is of course needed to argue in one direction or the other, but I will dare to venture some general hypotheses that could accord with the general realistic account of aesthetic and artistic properties and values sketched here.



First of all, a negative semantic hypothesis: the meaning of “beautiful” does not include the expression of personal taste or preference on the part of the speaker. It is an element that the speaker often conveys without asserting. More precisely, in uttering (1) Peter does not state that he likes *The Revenant*, but he implicates it, in the sense of Grice (1967a, b). That he likes the movie is not a component of the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered, but something that arises from the fact that Peter utters (1). We can venture that it constitutes what Grice called a “generalized conversational implicature” – generalized because it is identified without reference to a particular context. In normal circumstances, we infer that the statement “X is beautiful” typically conveys that “the speaker likes X”. The inference is cancellable explicitly, since there is no contradiction, or even oddness, in claiming “X is beautiful, but I don’t like it”.<sup>14</sup>

Now, the positive hypothesis: what does “beautiful” (semantically) mean? We have said that it can denote either a thick second-level aesthetic property or a thin purely evaluative one. That might make us think that the predicate is systematically ambiguous with two general meanings (“beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” and “beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES/ART</sub>”), which need to be contextually determined (recognizing the speaker’s intention when using the term). That’s probably the most obvious direction to take. The two senses have various aspects in common. I agree with McNally and Stojanovic (forthcoming) that gradability, multidimensionality and evaluativity may well be semantic features of “beautiful”, that is to say, that they are encoded as its lexical conventional meaning, though I have some qualms with non-measurability, as I have said above. I will not pursue the matter here. But I want to make a couple of remarks about the evaluativity of “beautiful” and other aesthetic terms.

It might well be the case that genuine aesthetic adjectives like “beautiful”, in contrast with predicates that have aesthetic and non-aesthetic uses like “dynamic”, “somber” or “moving”, have it built into their lexical meaning that their role is to assign a certain aesthetic value to the object of which we predicate it. But we should note that an aesthetic/artistic positive evaluation is all there is to the meaning of “beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES/ART</sub>”, while in the case of “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” there is both description and (positive) evaluation involved. This situates “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” closer to “dynamic”, “somber”, and “moving”, because all describe and evaluate different properties of the artwork. “Somber” usually denotes a negative property of an artwork, “dynamic” typically a positive one, and “moving” and “beautiful<sub>DESCR</sub>” always positive ones. But none of them is either necessary or sufficient for the artwork to be evaluated as “beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES/ART</sub>”.

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<sup>14</sup> Grice’s test of non-detachability also applies. In relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995 [1986]; Carston 2002), it would possibly be regarded as a higher-order explicature.

Once again, the evaluative aspect of “beautiful” that describes a second-level aesthetic property of the artwork, and that is part of our aesthetic judgments, is one thing; the evaluative aspect of the “beautiful” we employ in our aesthetic or artistic appraisals is a different thing. Admitting in the analysis that an artwork has (or has not) the property *beautiful*<sub>DESCR</sub> does not imply admitting in its evaluation that it is (or it is not) beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES/ART</sub>; and admitting from a purely aesthetic evaluative point of view that an artwork is (not) beautiful<sub>EVAL-AES</sub> does not imply admitting that it is (not) beautiful<sub>EVAL-ART</sub>.

Now, does evaluativity involve subjectivity? Not necessarily. If aesthetic realism is a viable option, as I think it is, aesthetic and artistic appraisals, that is, our claims about the aesthetic or artistic value of an artwork, state matters of fact. So, there is no direct and inevitable route from evaluativity to subjectivity.

Finally, concerning the semantics and pragmatics of aesthetic assertions, there are other options to explore. One may contend that all these differences between our aesthetic judgments and appraisals come, not from the encoded semantic meaning of an ambiguous adjective, but from the fact that when asserting the beauty of an artwork we can be making different speech acts—aesthetically describing and aesthetically or artistically evaluating. Or one could maintain that it is the conversational context or background that determines whether we are talking about one aesthetic property of the object or we are talking about the object’s aesthetic or artistic value, or about both. Current semantic and pragmatic theories offer a variety of possible answers to these issues, but moving further along any of these courses exceeds my current limits of time and competence, and I have no choice but to leave it for a future occasion.

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