

The Beauty of John Calcutt

/ Yeo Chee Kiong

The sparkling goblet contains a handful of instant noodles and hot soup brewed with a little condiment bag from an instant noodle's pack, decorated with a small portion of foie gras matched with a wine-stained cherry. Roses are placed on the dining table, with their thorns filed down with a manicure implement. The decorative video on the wall is a silent, intense pyrotechnic image. From the sound box comes Beethoven's *Für Elise* on repeat, a solo version of the classical guitar. The clean tone is more delicate than the electronic one that is broadcast every evening. The only dessert is a moderate amount of red wine contained in a light anaesthetic lozenge. On the black satin menu is a line in shiny black font, "Three Minutes for Andy Warhol."

Vague Vogue has a special column on sharing aesthetics, inviting John Calcutt, an aesthetics master from Scotland, who writes to comb the past, present, and future of beauty for you. With a delicate style and subtle descriptions, through detailed observation, he will lead readers into a beautiful world of the mind.

Introduction

/ John Calcutt

I am interested in the complexity of our relation to and understanding of works of art. Conventional writing about art tends to prioritise an objective approach, whereas – in reality – subjective responses play a crucial role in our experience of art, not to mention the world at large. Whilst I do not underestimate the power of objectivity, I believe it offers only an incomplete picture. I harbour similar thoughts in relation to linear narrative structures, which offer only an illusion of control and mastery over their content. The world is not as neat, tidy, progressive and logically unfolding as the structure of the linear narrative proposes, or as objective arguments imply. I am therefore interested in exploring montage techniques in relation to the structuring of a text. The fragmentary, discontinuous nature of montage offers, it seems to me, a more accurate model of the way the world is experienced by the human mind and senses (a fact picked up on by western visual artists, such as the Cubists and Dadaists, and Russian film-makers such as Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, more than a century ago). What we know about the world arises from our exposure to multiple viewpoints, a host of different, often conflicting, voices.

In my essay "The Beautiful and Damned" I try to develop some of these ideas. The topic of beauty is ideally suited to such an investigation because in the history of (western) ideas, it has been the site of a struggle between objectivity and subjectivity. Is beauty a matter of indisputable fact, or of personal opinion? Such binary oppositions – such either/or choices – are false. The identity of anything, it seems to me, is in part determined by all those things to which it is opposed. The sacred necessarily entails the profane. The law would mean nothing without criminals. Thus I was interested in trying to unsettle some of our more conventional ideas about beauty (i.e. that it is an unquestionably "good" thing) by introducing a darker side. Beauty can be both positive and negative, "good" and "bad"; it is locked in an eternal embrace with that which it would seemingly deny.

Although the structure of the essay is fragmentary and episodic, I have tried to introduce a degree of continuity by means of the recurrent imagery: mountains and apples, in particular. At opposite ends of the scale in terms of physical size, mountains and apples are recurrent symbols throughout the myths and cultural practices of the world, indicating – like beauty itself, perhaps - a universal and fundamental human desire to seek meaning and significance behind the everyday world of material existence. The worlds of

myth and legend allow freedom to the imagination, and often speak to our deepest desires and fears. I begin the essay in the realms of myth, and I end in a similarly “unreal” scenario. (Needless to say, I hesitate to present the “unreal” as the simple opposite or alternative to the “real”: they inhabit each other. Our understanding of both depends to a great extent on the ways in which they are represented, either through words or images, for example. Real/Unreal: Truth/Untruth: Fake News.)

Finally, I hope that I have managed to write an essay that engages the imagination of the reader, turning her from a passive “consumer” of meaning into an active “producer” of meaning – someone who fills in the “gaps” through their own knowledge, experience and imagination. In this sense I hope to achieve some of the success of Yeo Chee Kiong’s *A Beauty Centre*, the work which inspires this writing. In formal terms, the essay has a similar structural composition to Yeo’s installations in so far as they are all composed of separate elements that the viewer/reader is invited to “connect” in ways that are not predetermined by the artist/writer. (The various vignettes that appear in my essay could, in fact, be read in any order.) Much of the imagery and aesthetic “mood” that I try to convey (especially in the final sections of the essay – such as, shiny surfaces, controlled lighting, and luxury retailing, etc.) is also derived from Yeo’s work. But most important of all, perhaps, is the way in which Yeo’s work inspired the conceptual aspects of the essay. *A Beauty Centre* encouraged me to think about beauty from a variety of perspectives, including the historical, mythological, philosophical, socio-political and commercial. Yeo’s work is a timely reminder that the very idea of beauty is dynamic, changing, and in need of re-conceptualising in our age of personal computers, digital technology, mobile phones, virtual reality and mass consumerism.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED

/ John Calcutt

In The Garden

With each new word: a blinding wonder, a stupefying revelation. Every such word a blossom within this freshly minted world. Their sounds rustle like dead leaves, or trill like a bright stream. And sometimes, increasingly, they prick and scratch like the thorns of a rose. Above me and beyond: I will say, blue. Beneath me: I shall say, green. Before me: a stirring, an excitation, an event. Something is forming, detaching itself from the general ambience. It advances towards me, although it does not move. Words continued to arrive, but still too few. I felt a new quickness, an unaccountable pleasure.

It is you, yet far greater. Your form is more than my eyes can contain, or words can yet catch. The orchid and kingfisher lend their grace to this garden, but neither has your power to command new words. There are only two of us, right? Are you sure? I dare not reach out to touch you in case you are not there. Worse still, perhaps, to find that you are really there. If I touched you, would it feel the same as when I touch myself? Are you the missing part of me?

More newborn words continued to fizz and pop, each startling explosion revealing new forms, sharpening edges, uncloaking textures and inventing colours. Many of these words brought forth beings and things to be touched, smelled, held, heard or consumed: flowers, horses, mountains, serpents, trees, fish, apples. Others, in contrast, spoke to the eye of qualities: large, round, red, angular, transparent, smooth, symmetrical. Yet none of these words could capture the insistent sensations arising within me. Why this need to mount the shining horse, climb the shimmering mountain, shrink from the glittering serpent, or eat the gleaming apple? What was the power that lay *between* these things, connecting me to

them, and them to each other? More urgently: what was this irresistible force that drew my eyes to you, enlarging your presence so much that everything else submitted to the indistinct background?

It felt as if all words should point only to you, but even in the clamor of their rising number they were insufficient to fix the particularity of the sensation you produced. This was something stronger than words, a singularity more powerful than a thousand bits and pieces. Shall I compare it to the radiance of the sun? Shall I compare it to the surge of the ocean? Shall I call it the lovely blue of the sky's limitless blueness? Dare I name it? No: To name it is to imprison; to compare it serves only to belittle. It is you, but it is more than you: it amplifies and unfolds you. It is you transfigured into an aura, a cloud of splendor, a shower of glory.

Before you, this garden was merely an encyclopaedia of things, an illustrated catalogue of possibilities. It was simply an accumulation. But now it is alive, radiant, responsive, purposeful. You coax meaning into existence. You bring joyful light, but also solemn shadow. The world is now sculpted, a multi-faceted interplay of light and dark, good and bad, right and wrong, truth and deception. The miracle of your appearance has also awoken time from its careless sleep. Your striking presence slices through the innocent lull, splitting it into 'before' and 'after'. New words are called for, words to seize things I cannot see or measure, but which grasp me with force. I am learning how to feel. The taste of sorrow rises as I realize that each new beginning entails an end, and every gain incurs a loss. And yet an irresistible secret feeling drives me on. I am captured, enslaved. What I do, I do because of you and for you. We face the infinite future entwined. Let us share this gleaming apple. I will be Adam. You will be Eve. The final word is beauty. And this feeling, I sense, will be our long and endless fall.

In Egypt and Troy.

In far Troy the war is relentless: they fight because of her. The heroes will be annihilated in the name of her beauty. But the raging sounds of death and glory do not disturb the land of the Nile where she now endures her captivity. This silence is of no comfort. No comfort because there is no catharsis: she cannot be 'beside herself' with anger, anxiety, grief, regret - or any other grand emotion, for that matter. Only by travelling to Troy could she be 'beside herself'. It is left to the others to find and lose themselves in ecstasy¹ and suffering. Her name is Helen.

We must remember that this was long before our time: it was an age when the world was still magical, fluid and unfixed. Reason and logic will not help us here. We are in a world where appearances count for everything, and the greater their seductive appeal, the greater their capacity for treachery and deception. Long before our own anxious days of social media and fake news, truth was always unwillingly promised to doubt and uncertainty. If our story seems complicated and confusing, take comfort in the fact that nothing is ever as it first appears.

It must be understood from the outset: Helen is not like you or me. A miraculous beauty - sacred and profane - stamped her existence, and complications marked her life from the outset. Unlike us, her birth was enmeshed within a multiplicity of conflicting narratives. Thus Nemesis, the ancient Greek goddess of revenge and retribution, was reputedly one of her mothers – a reluctant mother. Pursued by Zeus, king of the gods, Nemesis rejected her inflamed suitor's unwanted advances. In order to escape his lust, she turned herself into a fish and "sped over the waves of the loud-roaring sea". But still Zeus chased.

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The English word ecstasy is derived from the Greek ekstasis, meaning 'standing outside oneself'.

Adamant, she continued to transform herself into various other creatures to evade the relentless hounding. Finally, she took the form of a goose, but wily Zeus tricked her by transforming himself into a swan. Zeus the swan then mated with Nemesis the goose as she slept and, as a result, Nemesis later laid an egg. Ashamed, she hid this egg among trees, but it was found by a shepherd who gave it to Leda, an Aetolian princess. Leda kept the egg in a casket until it hatched, producing two pairs of twins. One of these pairs was the brothers, Castor and Pollux. Helen, along with her sister Clytemnestra, formed the other pair.

Yet many accounts of her origins still refuse to settle and agree. Did Zeus the swan actually mate with Leda, not Nemesis? To further complicate matters, Leda was married to Tyndareus, the king of Sparta, and the two, it is said, had made love on the very night when Zeus reportedly raped Leda. Did Helen thus have two fathers as well as two mothers? Or was it that Zeus fathered Helen and Pollux with Nemesis, whilst Tyndareus fathered Castor and Clytemnestra with Leda? And, to add another twist, was Nemesis herself the daughter of Zeus?

Our search for a singular origin of Helen's beauty may be condemned to failure, but the power of this beauty was nevertheless indisputable, and apparent from her earliest days. When still a child (some accounts say she was seven years old, others suggest ten) she was kidnapped from her homeland in Sparta by Theseus, who was only the first to be driven to reckless crime by her irresistible charm. Theseus abducted her to his home in Athens, but from there she was forcibly rescued by her incensed brothers, Castor and Pollux. The die was now cast: her beauty would forever hereafter be inseparable from discord and strife. Thus, several years later, when it came time for her to marry, her mortal father (King Tyndareus) was keen not to antagonise any of her desperate noble suitors by rejecting them. So it was arranged that all would swear an oath to support the successful suitor against jealous attack from any of those who had been rejected. After much deliberation, Menelaus was finally chosen as Helen's husband, and together they ruled Sparta.

Watching events from the sacred heights of Mount Olympus, Zeus, however, was unhappy. Relations between the gods and the mortals were becoming increasingly difficult, and he wanted to destroy the mortals – especially the heroes. He therefore arranged for Paris, a Trojan prince, to judge a beauty competition between three goddesses: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. To the winner Paris would award a golden apple from Garden of Hesperides, engraved with the words "To the fairest". Wishing to sway his judgement, each goddess offered Paris a bribe. Hera offered power, Athena offered wisdom, whilst Aphrodite offered the most beautiful woman in the world. Choosing beauty above power and wisdom, Paris willingly accepted Aphrodite's offer. Foolish Paris: as a consequence of losing the contest, Hera and Athena came to hate him, and – as Zeus had anticipated - vowed revenge. In choosing beauty, Paris had turned his back on power and wisdom, and the world would pay a heavy price.

Stranded and alone in Egypt, Helen recalls the events that had led to her current plight: for it was she whom Aphrodite had given to Paris as his reward. When presented with his prize, impetuous Paris swept her back to Troy with him. But she was not free: she was the queen of Sparta, already married to Menelaus. On discovering the loss of his wife, Menelaus immediately called upon the oath of her former suitors, and they vowed to wage war on Troy and return Helen to Sparta. It is this war, the Trojan War, engineered by Zeus and lasting for ten years, which will bring about the death of the heroes, Hector, Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Patroclus, Aeneas – and Paris himself - among their number. The vengeful gods and goddesses, including Hera and Athena, will also play their part, aiding victories and concocting defeats.

But there are further snakes and coils in this tale. On their way from Sparta to Troy, the fleeing couple stopped in Egypt (perhaps because their ship was blown off course). However, Proteus, the king of Egypt, was appalled by the fact that Paris had betrayed his host Menelaus's hospitality by eloping with his wife, and refused to let Helen continue the journey to Troy. Thus, according to Euripedes, Zeus – as conniving as ever - commanded the goddess Hera to make a replica of Helen from clouds. It is this replica that will accompany Paris to Troy, whilst the 'original' will remain in Egypt. Helen is therefore doubled. The brutal war will be fought over a replica, a facsimile, a fake.

Her beauty, the wellspring of deadly conflict, has been abstracted and turned into a mirage. It is false, yet it harbours a compelling truth. It is an illusion, yet it has the force of reality. It is both absent and present at the same time. The heroes do battle in the name of this paradoxical beauty, and it will wipe them from the face of the earth for all eternity. Helen's origin is splintered, her life is splintered, her beauty is splintered - and now the world of gods, heroes and mortals is splintered. Born of Zeus the deceiver and Nemesis the vengeful, her disastrous beauty is a prize and a curse.



We often speak of beauty as "charming" and "disarming". In so doing, let us not forget the original meaning of these terms. To charm is to "control or achieve by, or as if by, magic". To disarm is to "take a weapon away from someone" and "deprive of the power to hurt".

Returning from the catastrophic war in Troy, Menelaus finds himself shipwrecked in Egypt, where he encounters the phantom form of Helen. He is confused and alarmed by this apparition, but her cloud-formed replica soon evaporates and is replaced by the 'real' Helen. The reunited couple return to Sparta, but Menelaus harbours lingering doubts and decides to murder Helen for her past treachery. However, as he approaches for the kill she removes her clothes and, overcome by her naked beauty, he drops his sword. Helen's beauty is as ambivalent and incomprehensible as ever. It is a "charm", a magical illusion that had driven heroes and gods to join in slaughter, but now it shows its other side as it literally "disarms" the murderous Menelaus.

The legend of Helen's beauty is complex and troubling, yet it demands our attention. Ancient Greek mythology, combined with ancient Greek philosophy, has left a powerful mark on western consciousness. Let us finally, then, view the mythology through the lens of the philosophy. It was the ancient philosopher Plato who, in *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE), first discussed the idea of the *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon*, says Plato, has a double identity: it is simultaneously a cure and a poison. With the idea of Helen's beauty as *pharmakon* let us then abandon the seductive idea, proposed in more recent times by Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1869), that "beauty will save the world". The legend of Helen's beauty teaches us that it has the power both to save and destroy: it is a cure and a poison, a reality and an illusion, a truth and a deception. It offers both salvation and damnation.

In The Study

The window of her study in Yokohama framed a view across the bay. In the distance – calm, majestic, serene – the sovereign geometry of Mount Fuji.

Almost every day since August 7, 1945 she had risen at seven o'clock in the morning, washed, dressed, eaten a modest breakfast, and then entered the study. This large room was neatly lined with books, carefully organised in conformity with a classificatory system that she herself had devised. None of these books, however, had been disturbed for the last thirty or so years. Her desk was relatively sparse and uncluttered: two neat piles of A4 paper; a tray with pencils, pencil sharpener and eraser; and a small Tiffany lead crystal paperweight in the shape of an apple. On the wall: a framed reproduction of René Magritte's *The Son of Man*.

Barring illness, the routine was always the same. Once settled at the desk, she would first put on her reading spectacles. The years of study had weakened her eyes, and the spectacles were necessary in order for her to focus upon those objects gathered on the desktop. Should she, however, raise her eyes from the desktop to the surrounding world, it would appear from behind those spectacles as not much more than a hazy blur. She would then remove a clean sheet of paper from one of the piles and place it directly in front of her on the desktop. Selecting a pencil from the tray, she would check the sharpness of

its point. Finally, she would draw her chair slightly closer to the desk and, from habit, briefly touch the coolness of the paperweight with a finger. And so began each daily engagement.

Sunlight anoints the crown of Mount Fuji.

Her delicate body was clasped by space. The sheet of paper before her on the desk remained blank. To the idle observer it may have appeared as if she had slid into a stupor, but subtle tensions through the forehead and nostrils, and around the eyes and mouth, told otherwise. Occasionally, her breathing would quicken, and once in a while a sigh would escape. It would be difficult to describe this sound precisely: haunted.

Mount Fuji absorbs the stillness of eternity.

Few of her neighbours knew her name. To them, she was a distant and somewhat curious figure. They occasionally saw her on the streets or in the local shops, but they did not speak. She, in turn, paid little attention to them. Her only regular social contact was with one of her granddaughters – a computer science student – who would visit on most Thursday evenings. The two would then sit together for an hour or so in the kitchen, the one immersed in social media, the other lost in thought. But the essence of her life unfolded in the study. It was in the solitude of the study that she worked to perfect the equation. Every molecule of her mind and body was focused exclusively on this life-consuming challenge. Once perfected, the equation would finally reveal the ultimate mystery: the invisible and indivisible law of beauty in all of its manifestations. But it would not be enough for the equation simply to formulate beauty; it would also have to embody beauty. Once purged of all redundancy and inelegance, the beauty of its expression would be the guarantee of its proof.

Mount Fuji exceeds the tourists' photographs. Destined for social media, these images wither in the shadow of its being. This does not detract from the number of idle 'likes' they attract.

We can only guess what thoughts may have filled her mind. The books in her study give an indication of the range of her research: alchemy, anthropology, archaeology, architecture, art, astrology, astronomy, biology, botany, cartography, comedy, criminology, dance, electronics, engineering, ethnography, film studies, geography, geometry, history, iridology, jazz, kinetics, linguistics, literature, mathematics, metallurgy, music, mythology, neurology, ornithology, philosophy, photography, physics, politics, pomology, pornography, psychoanalysis, quantum mechanics, religion, sexuality, sociology, sport, theatre, urban studies, volcanology, weaving, xylography, zoology.

Mount Fuji, Mount Olympus and Mount Zion whisper to each other across the sky, creating the winds that will carry us home or wreck all our hopes.

She was found by her granddaughter one warm evening in early June. Her pale and brittle body was seated in a chair facing the study window. The eyes, now dull and vacant, seemed locked upon the distant mountain. Across the room her spectacles lay on the desktop, alongside a single sheet of paper bearing two sentences. She left no will, so a contractor was engaged to dispose of her belongings. Who knows what finally happened to her furniture, her books, her clothes and other possessions? Charity shops? Landfill? No one wants old stuff; it's too depressing, too unfashionable. Few traces survive of this life consumed by the analysis of beauty. But her granddaughter kept the sheet of paper from the study desk. She read it only once: "I have finally discovered the law of beauty. It is absolutely paradoxical; I cannot understand it, and I do not know what it means, but I have proved it, and therefore I know it must be the truth". She also took the paperweight, which now sits among the ornaments beside her make-up mirror.

Night descends, but Fuji-san joins the stars in a refusal of darkness. They have no need for laws.

In The Studio

- You know you have to trust me.
- I do trust you.
- But when I shot you yesterday you didn't. You are blocking yourself. I feel there is something else when I shoot you. I think there is a fear about... about someone else. You are not totally here. You're thinking about being judged.
- Maybe

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I had shot nude before, but never worked with somebody who was going to push me like that physically. He was like, "This is what I want you to do, and I'm just going to do it because it'll take way too long for you to get yourself into that position." He was putting my body in positions I didn't know I could be in. I was like telling him, "I am so uncomfortable". And he was like, "This is how I need it to be to look good".

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Try to stay low and keep low. Let's do it! Let's do it! Let's do it! Stay like that. Beautiful. That's good! That's good! Keep moving! Keep moving! Keep moving your legs! Lie on your stomach. Come over this way. Come, come, come, come! That's nice. Stay like that. No, no ... just relax. Put your hair back. That's nice. Do I scare you? Look at me. Look at me. Feel good? Go down on your elbow. That's good. Very good. Beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful! Stay like this. Stay like this. Keep it. When I say stay like this you really need to stay like this. Are you OK? You can relax a little bit. Don't move the legs, just relax the top. Beautiful. Beautiful. I like that mood. Stay like that. Beautiful. Beautiful. Stay like that. Stay like that. Look at me. Stay like that. You're really very beautiful. Turn to me. That's good. That's very good. You look amazing. That's cool. That's great. This is beautiful. Beautiful. Slowly – really move slowly now. That's quite beautiful. I like that. I like it. Close your eyes. You OK? Twist. Twist. Do it! Do it! Do it! Come over here.

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I'm looking for a way to shatter beauty. I try to create something different, to create a new shape – to fragment somebody. I feel like it's a little step-up from just posing the girl. It's weird. It can look awful, very awful, but if I can find something beautiful there, I am happy. When I shoot nudes I let myself go with the impression, and I don't even know who I am. I forget my name. I just do it. This is the moment I love. I'm so lucky to have beautiful women wanting to do this kind of picture with me. It's a good feeling for the woman to see herself beautifully shot. When I see the body, I see the shape I love. But the rest sometimes is disturbing. So, when I find something that's not really beautiful, what do I do? It's so simple: I just correct - remove the things I don't like.

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- Do you think all the models around are beautiful, or is there some difference between a top model and an average model? Do you think it's something in the picture?
- I think it's their personality.
- Their personality?
- Yeah.
- What makes you different from the others?
- I think it's hard for me to share it a lot in pictures. I don't... I get nervous...
- You get nervous?
- ... exposing myself. Especially on Instagram I like to create a sort of persona of myself.
- So you're turning away from yourself?
- No! It's still like a piece of me...
- It's a piece of you...

- ... but it's more put together than I maybe am in person.
- I'm a bit worried about that because I think everybody does that. We all show the best of ourselves. I think you should show a bit of your dark side in your Instagram. It's normal, you know. I mean people are not gonna... I mean people are gonna... You're gonna be loved much more.

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This is a character. And then I go home and I'm different: I take it off. I try not to look at myself in the mirror when I'm home. I don't like being in that "pretty model" mode all the time. I like to forget a little bit. I felt like I had to straighten my hair all the time, act a certain way, talk a certain way in order to get a following in the [Instagram] likes. Even with jobs, you know, 'cos you can't even book a job without having at least 10k followers. So now you're forcing people to delete and erase parts of themselves, who they really are. I don't want to do it, but I have to do it. I mean, I know it's really important nowadays, but it's not a real world.

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He literally puts them in all sorts of positions, forces them to do things, takes them out of their comfort zone. They start feeling what he wants, and they are an extension – their body is an extension - of what he's doing. They give in. It's basically a submission process. Don't for one minute think that he's not thought of this whole process, of manipulation, psychology, physicality, and literally breaking them and fixing them again. And they become putty in his hands. The way he moves somebody like a rag doll... I didn't know he worked that way; I don't think these girls have ever worked with someone like him. In all the years I've worked with other photographers I've never seen anyone do that. He falls in love with each one of these girls, and they are his muses. Look at Picasso: Picasso had eight muses, he had eight models that he fell in love with, and he needed that, and he tortured them all.

Based on excerpts from the soundtrack of *Nude* (Dir. Tony Sacco, STARZ, 2017). Original contributors include: David Bellemere, Jessica Clements, Ebonee Davis, Steve Shaw, Janine Tugonon.

In A Beauty Centre.

Alan Turing (1912-1954) is credited with laying the foundations for the modern-day computer, pioneering research into artificial intelligence, and unlocking German wartime codes. Turing was also a homosexual at a time when homosexuality was a criminal offence in Britain, and in 1952 he was convicted of gross indecency. In 1954 Turing committed suicide by cyanide poisoning. When his body was discovered, a half-eaten apple lay beside his bed. "If beauty is indeed truth, as John Keats claimed, then this story ought to be true: the [Apple] logo on the back of your iPhone or Mac is a tribute to Alan Turing". (Holden Frith, CNN website, October 7, 2011)

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Please enter. Relax. Enjoy. Everything gleams and everything beams. The ambient light is pure and it cleanses. The eye is aroused: it craves silky surfaces. Immaculate. There is purring, humming; honey in the ear. Time released from gravity's fist. It's razor thin, feather light, and even faster and more powerful than before.* Push the button. Click. Instant connection.

"Beholder" is an uncommon word: it is rarely used in everyday English, except in phrases such as, "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder". Why does beauty lie in the eye of the beholder, rather than that of the viewer, or spectator (which are far more frequently used words)? Perhaps "behold" implies a particular

kind of thoughtful, reflective engagement, rather than the slightly more passive sense of “witnessing” or “onlooking” that is implied by casual viewing or spectating. Perhaps the beholder is arrested - stopped - by what she “sees”, whereas viewers and spectators merely “look” or “glance” as they pass by.

The body condenses to a point, a quantum of collapsed space and time. No more here and now. Instead, a soaring sensation of transcendent bliss. Light and information fuse in the fire of ecstasy. Brilliant. White. No centre. Total integration. Everything feels utterly smooth, fast and immersive. A desktop experience that draws you in and keeps you there.* We hope you will be satisfied.

Ways of seeing – and ways of looking – are determined to a large extent by the technologies of image production and circulation that are in operation at any given time. For many centuries, to “behold” something would be to push beyond the allure of surface appearance in order to penetrate to a hidden meaning, buried within invisible depths. Painting, for example, has been (traditionally) a “slow” medium: the slowness of a painting’s production inviting a slowness in its reception, an act of measured contemplation by the viewer. Movies, on the other hand, demand a different mode of attention from their audience – a mode characterised by Walter Benjamin as “distraction”. Today, however, we encounter different conditions.

The ancient world of toil and suffering has vanished. Here there is no conflict, no failure, no weight of disappointment. Your pleasure and convenience are our sole mission. Here, you can forget. Everything you have lost will be restored. The universe will be reunited, and it will take the shape of your desires. You will bathe in peace, harmony and beauty, floating without care in their undemanding warmth. Say hello to the future.*

*Digital technologies have changed the fundamental characteristics of image (and object) production, circulation and reception. Many of the images we encounter on our devices today are digital reproductions whose quality is often degraded (highly compressed, low resolution, pixellated jpeg files and AVI streams, for example: “poor images”, the “wretched of the screen”, in the words of Hito Steyrl). They multiply exponentially (their ubiquity rendering them “weak” and “transient” in the words of Boris Groys). They are also fast: Speedy to access; rapid to consume. Swipe left. Swipe right. Fast, it turns out, is incredibly beautiful.**

Money is the abstract language of beauty today. Money alone breeds the perfection you seek. But do not approach if you cannot pay. It will come to you if you have the means. No need for superfluous words. The attraction is unspoken. Familiar gestures make navigation natural and intuitive. Our vision has always been to create a device that is entirely screen. One so immersive the device itself disappears into the experience. And so intelligent it can respond to a tap, your voice, and even a glance.* Payment will be easy, remote, contactless.

*Viewed on the screen of a computer, television or mobile phone, these images glow in a manner that is, shall we say, preternatural. They lack the materiality and physical dimensions of other things in the world. Increasingly, however, we judge “reality” by the standard of these electronic images, rather than vice versa. Paradox: the simulation appears more real than the real itself. It improves upon the real. It substitutes for the real. The world is full of spectacular colors, and iMac brings more of them to your screen. The Retina display show[s] off real-world color with more balance and precision. iMac features powerful new Radeon Pro 500 series graphics that make a spectacle of everything you see. Vega graphics. The beast behind the beauty.**

The world is now a screen, a borderless zone open to your refugee desires. It is a glowing screen that fabricates multiple realities. It is a protective screen that shields you from the crisis of belief and the trauma of truth. It is a beautiful, irresistible and seamless surface that annihilates the anxiety of depth. Immersed in this screen, you will no longer inhabit space. You will no longer be the origin of co-ordinates, but merely one point among others: a pixel. You will no longer be able to place yourself. You will be like

water within water, or fire within fire. Augmented Reality. A new world all around you. Transform the way you work, learn, play, and connect with the world around you.*

*In parallel fashion, many of today's commodities are "readable" only in terms of their carefully styled surfaces: we have little understanding of the micro-circuitry sealed within their hidden "depth". Aesthetic preferences, rather than practical considerations, tend to motivate our purchases. As Jean Baudrillard suggested several decades ago, in a consumer culture our relation with commodities displaces our relationships with other humans. Product design thus becomes our new source of beauty and object of our passing desires. The commodity strives to be less a thing, more an experience. It aspires to the condition of art. No longer accepting that beauty demands and compels, we settle instead for that tasteful accumulation of desirable things known as "lifestyle". Iconic design. Advanced engineering. Talk about modern art.**

You call on beauty to save you, but it does not answer: it merely echoes your words in a mocking tone. What does beauty care for your charmless vanity, your narcissistic indolence? You have reduced beauty to a shadow, an insubstantial ghost, a lifeless image in a mirror. You craved beauty, but were unwilling to fight for it. You chose, instead, to add it to your shopping trolley. You hoped to borrow its power and glory by possessing it. Your mistake was to think of it as a thing, an object, a commodity. Your error was in confusing it with style, with fashion, with gadgets and cosmetics. You were beguiled by the idea of beauty, but you fell for the salesman's pitch. You thought you were capturing beauty when in fact you were only buying time.

A shaft of light glints off the polished surface, producing an alarming disruption in the field of vision, a burning pinprick to the eye. In this moment the object seems to return your gaze with vengeance. "If you pursue beauty", it seems to say, "you must accept the consequences". The needle of glinting light pierces like a laser beam through the screen, leaving behind a smouldering laceration. Prepare to behold the sublime catastrophe that waits behind the ruined screen. Immersive technologies, virtual realities and tasteful lifestyles will no longer protect you. Accept this fate with fear and with joy. "If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn."(Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*, 2013)

[All quotations in this section marked * are taken from Apple.com website.]

In the Future

"A group of researchers from The Alan Turing Institute and Data Science Lab at Warwick Business School have trained a computer to recognise beautiful scenery using "deep learning". (The Alan Turing Institute website, July 19, 2017)

Soaring, swooping, gliding around Fenghuangshan: effortless speed and giddy height make the heart race and the stomach flutter. Flying like a bird, seeing the world's beauty through other innocent eyes. West Lake shimmers like a pearl below. Diving earthwards, towards the green, curling around the elegant pagodas, skimming the islands of lotus. Wheeling west, towards the Shangcheng district of Hangzhou. Weightless and silent, into the sacred iTemple at 100 Ping Hai Lu. Passing magically through the glass facade, effortlessly climbing the glass staircase, hovering gracefully above the floating mezzanine. It's hard to imagine the distant lives of those who lived before the coming of The New Global Order of Oculus. How was it possible to live in a world where light, noise, movement, vibration and colour were not thoroughly processed and controlled?² Tap. And now racing through the sky above the Andes, clear and

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'Apple reveals new gorgeous West Lake store in China.' Buster Hein. cultofmac.com. February 18, 2015.

crisp, blue and wide. It is as if one's spirit is inseparable from nature itself. There is peace: the glory of unfettered freedom and transcendent joy. Tap. An image of indescribable perfection fills the field of vision. To see it in such detail is overwhelming, its sheer...+//of harmony..+//.../++/..and pure//+..+//.....
•••.... Angry and frustrated, he hurls the broken headset across his small cell in the complex. The Ministry automatically registers the problem and will replace the faulty item immediately.

John Calcutt (1951-2018), the former head of the MFA and MLitt Fine Art Practice programmes at Glasgow School of Art. Alongside his teaching activity he was also the art critic for several national newspapers in the UK including Scotland On Sunday, The Observer and The Guardian. He was an Associate Curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Glasgow, a member of the Scottish Arts Council exhibitions panel (1995-99), and a selector for the Beck's Futures Prize (2006). He wrote numerous articles and catalogue essays on contemporary art and gave lectures in many universities and museums. He had a longstanding interest in experimental approaches to critical writing about contemporary art.