

Dan Eugen RAȚIU\*

## Exploring the Paradox of Beauty: Aesthetics and Metaphysics in the Work of Ștefan Afloroaei

**Abstract:** This article aims to contribute to the intercultural dialogue by discussing and sharing some recent developments in aesthetics in the (untranslated) work of the Romanian philosopher Ștefan Afloroaei (b. 1952). From the impressive thematic corpus of his writings, I will discuss here the exploration of the sense and metaphysical meaning of beauty, which is congruent with the metaphysical questions about the “meaning and sense of life” (Afloroaei 2021). I will show how, by exploring the “paradox of beauty” (Afloroaei 2008; Afloroaei 2008b; Afloroaei 2018; Afloroaei 2018b), such as the often mysterious or strange beauty present both in the familiar world of everyday life and in art, Afloroaei successfully gives fresh answers to longstanding questions in aesthetics, as well as another, more charming face to metaphysics. The focus here is on questions regarding *beauty* and *truth in painting* (Heidegger 1971, Derrida 1987), which are explored starting from a painting by Vincent van Gogh, *Vincent’s Chair* (1888).

**Keywords:** beauty, everyday life, painting, paradox, Vincent van Gogh.

### 1. Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> discusses the untranslated<sup>2</sup> work of the Romanian philosopher Ștefan Afloroaei on the topic of beauty, which brings together successfully the fields of metaphysics and aesthetics. By re-reading some of the key interpretations of beauty, Afloroaei offers valuable insights on how beauty may open up and let us see “a completely different world” and, this way, he also manages to give another, more charming face to metaphysics. Because his philosophy still has a rare virtue, that of transforming the act of its reading into a living and transformative experience, ready to inspire and give wings to the reader’s thinking or imagination. The stakes of Afloroaei’s explorations lie, of course, beyond the field of aesthetics. All these inquiries are part of his long and broad effort to rehabilitate the genuine “speculative thought” and to assert and defend the “inevitable presence of the metaphysical” even nowadays or, in other words, the metaphysics in its natural exercise and from the world of everyday life.

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\* Dan Eugen Rațiu, PhD, Professor, PhD, Departement of Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: [dan.ratiu@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:dan.ratiu@ubbcluj.ro)

The path he followed in doing this is similar to that opened by the artistic images that lead our gaze where it cannot reach on its own: he chose to show us and *make visible* – with the help of beauty – what we would not otherwise be able to see. In other words, to open our eyes to what beauty finally allows us to see. The aim of this article is to render the philosopher's enduring endeavour to unveil what *beauty* allows us to see – be it the beauty of “our everyday world” (Afloroaei 2008) or that of the “ethereal world of the word” as an expression of the poetic act, or the beauty of the world of “what is not seen” without the sensible mediation of the pictorial image (Afloroaei 2018).

The metaphysical reinterpretation of beauty proposed by Afloroaei is a task he constantly handled since the essay „Frumusețea ca atare - contingentă și totuși atemporală” (“Beauty as such - contingent and yet timeless”) (Afloroaei 2008b), passing through the ASPLF Congress in Iași dedicated to the *Beautiful* in 2016 (Afloroaei 2018b), up to the most recent book (Afloroaei 2021). This reinterpretation is set up in a fertile dialogue with authors belonging to longstanding and diverse philosophical traditions. It starts with Plato and passes through medieval thought and the paradoxes of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, up to contemporary authors such as Borges, Danto, Deleuze, Eco, Eliade, Ferry, Gadamer, and Heidegger. The topic of *paradox* is central in his writings, such as *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele* (Our Everyday Metaphysics), 2008, *Privind altfel lumea celor absurde* (Viewing Differently the World of the Absurd), 2013, *Fabula existențială* (The Existential Fable), 2018, and *Despre simțul vieții* (On the Sense of Life), 2021. The paradox is also the key to re-reading the mysterious capacity of beauty to open up and letting us see “a completely different world”, within the very content of the everyday world. The access to understanding beauty is offered precisely by the exploration of its inevitable and defining *paradox*: beauty is “immediately perceptible and yet intangible as such”, “sensible and yet timeless” or, at the ultimate limit of the paradox, “both pure and sensible, simple and contingent” or “something singular, thrilling in the usual air of states of affairs”, “the strangeness of something which is, in the first instance, familiar.” (Afloroaei 2008, 232–243; Afloroaei 2018, 127–128, 131)

## 2. The Paradox of Beauty

The main stake of this exploration is to understand the living tension that inhabits beauty, the *pathos* and the paradoxical nature of both beauty and its experiencing, already glimpsed by Plato in the dialogues *Hippias Major* and *Symposium*. To distinguish them, Afloroaei ingeniously uses the double meaning of the term “sense”: both a sensory faculty or

feeling and meaning. Thus, unlike the usual sharp contrast between the classical/metaphysical attitude about beauty and the modern or current relational attitudes, such as the one exposed by Luc Ferry in *Le sens du beau* (1990), for Afloroaei the metaphysical *meaning* of beauty – in itself, pure, absolute –, did not exclude the human *sense* of beauty, understood as “a sensible experience, a way of perception and understanding”. On the contrary, beauty always affords and meet with such a sense of contemplation, which is “itself paradoxical, both sensibility and simple vision of the pure.” (Afloroaei 2018, 137–138, 143–145) Starting from here, Afloroaei advances a refined and subtle interpretation of the dialogue between Socrates and Hippias, which gives the latter a belated part of justice, because Hippias’ question (“who” versus “what is beautiful?”) and the subsequent answers are not considered naive and frivolous. On the contrary, he “refers to something extremely concrete and alive, naming a thing that can become truly beautiful”, thus letting us understand that the idea of “simple and pure” beauty “does not come with the claim of self-sufficiency, it does not mean something separate and withdrawn entirely into itself.” Moreover, capitalizing on the relevance of the motif of Eros as a mediator in *Symposium*, Afloroaei further illuminates the presenting of sensitive beauty as something of the nature of inter-mediation: it announces and names “that which attracts to be loved” and thus opens up the way to that something “pure” or “timeless”. Even in the Platonic dialogues, sensible beauty is not radically separated from unconditional beauty, timeless, intelligible, but intangible without the first mediation of its sensible face, through which it is shown “as such” in a lived, concrete experience.” (Afloroaei 2008, 235–236, 241; Afloroaei 2018, 133–135)

Hence, in Afloroaei’s view, it is not a question of establishing a rigid opposition like that one between the metaphysics of the unconditional and relativism or perspectivism or a steep chasm between two faces of beauty, outlined either by a single “eternal meaning” or by the contingency of everyday life, which would state a constitutive “dualism” of beauty. He rejects both the old schematic oppositions of “abstractions empty of meaning” and the dualism that constituted a good part of the legacy of ‘school’ metaphysics, as well as the dominant way today of naming or delimiting almost everything in a relational manner. For Afloroaei, beauty “as such” holds precisely that wonderful paradox as “sensible ideality”, which has been explored by him in a fruitful dialogue with the metaphysical tradition. His reading, however, shows a significant difference from metaphysical tradition. Beauty and its experience presuppose the antinomial correlation between the sensible – “beauty as a physical sensation” felt immediately (scrutinized by Borges), which is offered by itself – and the pure, intangible: “to find beauty ‘in itself’ means to encounter it sensibly and yet in the way of something unconditional,

completely free”. (Afloroaei 2008, 98, 232–239; Afloroaei 2018, 146–149, 151–152)

Through this paradoxical characteristic, beauty appears as an image of the humankind itself, notably of the constitutive paradox that defines the human mode of existence: to be both conditioned and truly free (as Kierkegaard stated). In this way, beauty expresses “that living tension hidden in [human’s] very being. The terms that seem to definitively exclude each other [...] recreate in fact a perfectly antinomic conjunction. What comes into being in this way, in a pure, yet sensitive form, really manifests a very unusual tension.” (Afloroaei 2008, 358) These characteristics also do not allow for explanations by simple answers to questions like “why?” or “for what?”, since beauty “accomplishes itself without any relation of purpose, without any utility,” just like life from which it is not at all separate and which is desired in itself, for itself. Hence the pure and elevated gratuity of beauty and desire for beauty. It is precisely this particular gratuitousness that allows beauty to open beyond itself and offer “an opening to what is ordinarily inaccessible.” (Afloroaei 2018, 139–143)

In this context, it is worth recalling a precious lesson offered by Afloroaei, which joins that offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (1987): the idea of encountering *immediately* beauty itself is not just an “old metaphysical story” or a “mere narrative” even in today’s world of everyday life. Although the presence of beauty itself is ineffable, it can still be perceived “in the way of a simple and pure fact, absolutely natural.” Beauty, as Afloroaei shows, does not appear abstractly, but “fundamentally depends on an extremely concrete experience that one makes, something like a living and personal test. Its existential incidence is never purely subjective or arbitrary. On the contrary, it presupposes an elevated sensitivity, a time of initiation and an effort that is not without uncertainty and doubts.” (Afloroaei 2008, 237–241) This re-reading of beauty has the merit of *situating* beauty – along with metaphysics – in our everyday concerns or “life problems”, those experiences that compel us to facing our own life or put it to the test, such as “the problem of loneliness, the way of perceiving time and the imminence of death, the joy of few moments” – and finally, the question of the meaning of life (Afloroaei 2013, 13–115; Afloroaei 2021, 73–78).

### **3. Beauty in art: “What is not seen”**

Just as the proper description of beauty can only be accomplished by antinomial expressions, so its meanings belong not only to “the spectacle of metaphysics,” but are to be found in everyday life as well as in the art concerned with it, which lets us glimpse its paradoxical structure. The

Chapter V in *Fabula existențială* (*The Existential Fable*) entitled „Ceea ce nu se vede” (“What is not seen”), dedicated to Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Vincent’s Chair* (1888), offers a relevant example of a refined interpretation of painting in the horizon of the question “how can the ineffable be expressed?” and of the natural imminence of paradox in our daily lives.



Vincent van Gogh, *Vincent's chair* (1888), National Gallery, London

A simple description of the painting *Vincent's chair* can retain the image of an equally simple, even dull, greyish reality: an ordinary room with a few banal things – a chair, a pipe, a door, a chest. But a closer look, like that of Afloroaei, also notices the loneliness of the artist's gaze, which attracts the viewer to participate in the solitary and empty gaze with which those few simple, ordinary things are seen, and due to which they suddenly become strangers to that place and uncanny. The subtle, multi-layered and open interpretation of what Van Gogh's painting – with its strange image that disquiets the gaze – makes possible beyond his style, is another lesson offered by Afloroaei.

### **3.1. *Absence and loneliness***

First, in the section “Absență și însingurare” (“Absence and Loneliness”), he helps us to see that *Vincent's Chair* is “to some extent, the very testimony of this way in which one sees oneself. The empty chair in this painting lets us see what, in fact, is not visible: the absence as such and the loneliness of the gaze. It brings into presence – if we accept a *paradox* – the absence itself”. Loneliness, here indistinct from solitude, shows the absence as such, the lack of a proper place, of a “home”, outside of familiar life. In other words, in the metaphysical register, Van Gogh's painting “gives a glimpse of a way of being in the world, at the limit, a way of being”. (Afloroaei 2018, 115–118)

### **3.2. *Camouflaging the real in the unreal***

Then, in the section “Camuflarea realului în cele ireale” (“Camouflaging the real in the unreal”), Afloroaei touches on an essential topic in the history of painting – the desire to make the invisible visible. Because painters did not wait for the modern age to express the desire to “make visible”, not to render the visible (Paul Klee); the purpose to “make the invisible visible” or to “express the inexpressible” (by other means) was already manifested with Apelles, then found in Leonardo da Vinci and Nicolas Poussin works and writings, among others. Van Gogh was concerned, in his own way, with how “something unseen shows itself in part through what is seen.” Again, Afloroaei's interpretation of the painter's effort “to glimpse what, as such, cannot be seen” lies beyond rigid oppositions of the either/or type. Because the painting *Vincent's Chair* allows us to see the “deeply ambiguous structure of everyday life”, as a mixture of prosaic and uncanny, familiar and strange, insignificant and significant. The paradoxical phenomenon of camouflaging the uncanny or strange in the ordinary or familiar, exemplified by this painting – or, more broadly, of camouflaging the fantastic, the wonderful,

the extraordinary in the everyday, the common, the ordinary –, is rightfully compared to the dialectic of the camouflage of the sacred in the profane, explored by Mircea Eliade (1963). Yet, once again, Afloroaei's subtle interpretation goes "beyond the classical scheme of binary oppositions, such as seen/unseen, revealed/hidden", to highlight the double movement of meaning in the insignificant and of the absurd in meaning (Afloroaei 2018, 118–121).

### 3.3. *The Names of truth*

Finally, the section "Nume ale adevărului" ("Names of truth") opens up a new way of understanding the idea of the plurality of modes of truth, inscribed in the contemporary tendency to rethink the truth as specific to each genre of expression, other than the "epistemological meanings of truth". Moreover, in Afloroaei's view, the very truth of the pictorial image is plural, because each interpretation "opens up a way in the comprehension of the work as such", as it offers itself to the gaze, and the gaze itself "allows to be led where it has no way of reaching on its own". With such a careful gaze, receptive to the call for the "truth of the painting", Afloroaei manages to discern it differently than other famous declinations of *truth in painting* (Heidegger 1971, and his opponent, Derrida 1987).

His interpretation shows that, in the case of *Vincent's Chair*, its truth can be recognized in its very paradox. Thus, its truth is: 1) a form of eloquence and suggestion, which "consists here in the very self-discovery of this absence", in the "lonely condition of the beholder's gaze," through which the ordinary becomes strange; 2) a mode of expressiveness, the one by which "the absence of expression becomes unnaturally expressive"; 3) a mode of presence, which consists in the total captivating of the gaze by simple paint brushes, lines and colours; and 4) a way to open the space of an unusual form of possibility: the "transfiguration of the ordinary", which "let us see another face of this world, another world eventually". In the particular case of this painting, which lets us see "the strangeness of something which is, in the first instance, familiar", its truth might reside precisely "in the fact that such strangeness is felt as such." (Afloroaei 2018, 121–128)

A final remark on the exploration of the paradox of beauty by Ștefan Afloroaei regards Chapter VII „Lumea eterată a cuvântului” (“The Ethereal World of the Word”) in *The Existential Fable*, where he brings back to our attention, in a fresh way, the affinity of metaphysics with poetry in the exploration of what is ineffable, incomprehensible in itself, foreign to ordinary meaning. On the one hand, the poetic act shows us the

vulnerability of the act of understanding itself; but, on the other hand, it lets us glimpse that which, in itself, has no way of showing itself, and thus exceeds the common sphere of meaning. For the characteristic of poetic speech consists in the freedom from meaning, the freedom of expression without limits, which also opens up the appetite of metaphysics to look at the “absurd” not only or not so negatively as something illogical, aberrant, meaningless, but also as something mysterious, hidden, strange, incomprehensible in itself. The latter can ultimately be touched and expressed by poetic language in a “form of plenitude inexhaustible as such and incomprehensible in any other language” (as Gadamer 1987 already maintained). Another valuable lesson offered here by Afloroaei concerns the paradox of the poetic utterance which, placing us “beyond the logic of non-contradiction, in the very ambiguous temporality of concrete life”, also expresses “an infinite tension in relationship with oneself”, since in the poetic utterance both “the distance from common sense and ordinary speech” and the dependence on them and on our common world arise. Through its paradoxical capacity – as “absolute language” – to be “both inside and outside a world that becomes real thanks to words”, the poetic utterance manages to “touch what seems intangible as such”, and “the strangest things are thus discovered in the familiar space of our lives”. (Afloroaei 2018, 155–164)

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this way, Afloroaei masterfully reaffirms a comprehensive, creative and edifying attitude in our encounters both with art and everyday life. For, in his interpretation, not only the art works paradoxicalize the ordinary and signify “transfigurations of the commonplace” (as Danto 1981 noted), but also the world of everyday life affords such transfigurations. This idea is also of great interest to the Aesthetics of Everyday Life, which explores both the everydayness of the everyday, as Yuriko Saito did in *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), and the relationships between the familiar and the strange, the ordinary and the extraordinary in our everyday aesthetic life, as Thomas Leddy did in *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (2012), both authors being mentioned in *Fabula existențială* (*The Existential Fable*) (Afloroaei 2018, 125–127, 145). As someone involved in the research area of everyday aesthetics, I would like to record as well Afloroaei’s merit in offering a subtle and complex understanding of the interaction between the ordinary and the extraordinary. He conceives it not as a linear relationship between two opposite poles, between which somehow the distance would be gradually reduced through a discrete succession of categories (from pretty to beautiful and then to sublime or



miraculous), but as an antinomian conjunction or a dialectical interaction, similar to the camouflage or the fulgurating eruption of the sacred into profane explored by Eliade (1963).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The writings by Ștefan Afloroaei mentioned here are not translated in English. The English translations of the quotes belong to me.

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- Illustration: Vincent Van Gogh, *Vincent's Chair* (1888), National Gallery, London.  
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