

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 14, 2022

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

Editors

Connell Vaughan (Technological University Dublin)

Vitor Moura (University of Minho, Guimarães)

Editorial Board

Adam Andrzejewski (University of Warsaw)

Claire Anscomb (De Montfort University)

María José Alcaraz León (University of Murcia)

Pauline von Bonsdorff (University of Jyväskylä)

Tereza Hadravová (Charles University, Prague)

Regina-Nino Mion (Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn)

Jochen Schuff (Free University of Berlin)

Elena Tavani (University of Naples)

Iris Vidmar Jovanović (University of Rijeka)

Publisher

The European Society for Aesthetics



Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: secretary@eurosa.org

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 14, 2022

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan

Table of Contents

Hassan Ali <i>Rosebud: Exploring Deleuzian Temporality through the Wellesian Shot</i>	1
Sacha Behrend <i>On the Apparent Incompatibility of Perceptual and Conventional Accounts of Pictures</i>	14
Anu Besson <i>On Aesthetic Practices and Cultural Identity of Finnish Emigrants</i>	28
Pol Capdevila <i>Mood in Cinema. Towards a Unified Form of Time</i>	38
Jokob Deibl <i>From Infinite Rapprochement to the Open: From Kant to Hölderlin</i>	56
Viviana Galletta <i>The Laocoön and the Devil: A Path through the Franciscus Hemsterhuis' Letter on Sculpture</i>	68
Lorenzo Gineprini <i>The Uncanniness of the Ordinary: Rethinking the Uncanny within Aesthetics</i>	86
Jason Holt <i>Self-Referential Aesthetics in the Art of Leonard Cohen</i>	100
Mariliis Elizabeth Holzmann <i>An Alien Phenomenology of Object Oriented Aesthetics and Genderqueer Representations in Julia Ducournau's Titane (2021)</i>	112

Daniel Kuran <i>From Ethics to Aesthetics: On an Aesthetic Sense in Kant's Philosophy of Religion</i>	128
Salvador Rubio Marco <i>Can Poems do Philosophy?: the Philosopher as a Sportsman of the Mind</i>	141
Philip Mills <i>Wanting Austin Inside Out: Viral Poetics and Queer Theory</i>	151
Eva Schürmann <i>"A Real Fact is a Fact of Aesthetic Experience." On the Actuality of Whitehead's Aesthetics</i>	166
Thomas Symeonidis <i>Designing Worlds: Explorations of the Possible Structures of the Aesthetic in Jacques Rancière</i>	183
Asmus Trautsch <i>Transformation and Transcendence of the Tragic: Milo Rau's "Theatre of the Real"</i>	194
Elettra Villani <i>The Category of the Aesthetic: Considerations on Theodor W. Adorno's Reading of Kierkegaard</i>	218

The Laocoön and the Devil: A Path through the Franciscus Hemsterhuis' Letter on Sculpture

Viviana Galletta⁵⁰

DISUM University of Catania

ABSTRACT. This paper intends to show the key role of the Franciscus Hemsterhuis' *Letter on Sculpture* (1765) in the frame of the late eighteenth-century Aesthetics. More specifically, through the transition from a 'mimetic' to a 'relational' paradigm, according to which beauty emerges from the relationship between the subject and the art object, the Dutch philosopher theorizes two different – but equally valid – ways to represent beauty through art: the classical way, which is exemplified by the *Laocoön*, and the modern one, whose peculiar subject is the devil. The legitimation of these two ways of representation plays a crucial role in the context of the famous eighteenth-century *Querelle* between the Ancients and the Moderns, involving the thesis that the principles of their Aesthetics, even if different, are equally valid because equally linked to a metaphysical desire for unity. What I want to articulate is that the transition from a classical to a modern Aesthetics is based on the reconsideration of the system of arts under the aspect of the principles of representation and culminates with the elaboration of two Aesthetics categories – the *plastic* and the *picturesque* – which are strictly linked to the dialectic between the Ancients and the Moderns.

1. The Definition of Beauty in the Letter on Sculpture

In the eighteenth-century Aesthetics was still considered as a 'young' section of gnoseology. In this sense, the studies in the field of Aesthetics were closely associated with the ones on sensibility, such as in the Kant's first *Critique*. Indeed, the *Transcendental Aesthetic* configures the science of sensibility and its *a priori* forms (space and time). However, Kant himself

⁵⁰ Email: viviana.galletta@phd.unict.it

recognized the problematic nature of the word 'aesthetics' with the distinction between two different meanings, the transcendental one and the psychological one:

The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word "aesthetics" to designate that which others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed; [...] For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term [...]. Or else to share the term with speculative philosophy and take aesthetics partly in a transcendental meaning, partly in a psychological meaning. (Kant, 1998, p. 156)

We also find this oscillation of meaning in the Hemsterhuis' philosophical works, where the reasoning on beauty is closely associated with that one on the senses involved in the aesthetic experience, mainly touch and sight. However, it should be noted that the Dutch philosopher never uses the word 'aesthetics' to indicate his own reflections on beauty and arts, further confirming the fact that, at that time, this term was only used in Germany where moreover Aesthetics as a science was just born.

Some of the main eighteenth-century European philosophers, such as Crousaz, Batteux and Hutcheson, defined beauty as the 'unity in variety' that is possible to observe in nature. This interpretation goes back to the ancient philosophical tradition to some extent: in particular, to Aristotle who, in the *Physics*, presents art as an imitation of natural processes and phenomena, and to the platonic reflection on the figure of the "μιμητικὸν". According to this ancient perspective, beauty is conceived in light of an external normativity, represented by the order and the proportion of nature or by classical canons (according to the Renaissance principle of imitation). Consequently, the artist should look to external rules to reproduce the characteristics of the 'beauty in itself'. From this point of view, beauty represents the result of a 'mimetic' process with respect to something objective and external to the artist which is considered as a model to draw on. That can be defined as a 'natural' conception of beauty, according to which the subjective and emotional aspects are secondary compared with the objective rules – such as, for example, the order, the proportion and the unity –. In a word, beauty has its own reality, regardless of the subject.

Hemsterhuisian thought on beauty is to a certain extent more unbalanced on the part of the subject. Beauty is not presented as an already given external reality but, on the contrary, it is considered as an achievement based on human abilities and desires. However, this theoretical approach does not merely configure an idealistic perspective, since beauty is not intended as an exclusive construction of the subject but as the result of a peculiar relationship between the subject and the external reality. Therefore, Hemsterhuis' conception about the beauty could be defined as 'relational'. Neither the external (natural) reality or the interior (ideal) reality can explain alone the aesthetic experience: beauty is, rather, the exceptional outcome of the relationship between these two realities, the subjective one, animated by the metaphysical desire for unity, and the objective one.

As many critical studies have already observed, the role of subjectivity – strictly linked to that of temporality – represents one of the most original aspects of the Hemsterhuisian reflection on beauty. One of the most relevant outcomes is precisely the fact that the 'unity in variety' or, in other words, the harmony between heterogeneous parts which properly configures the aesthetic experience is not a reality in itself, but it is the result of an effort made by the subject, whether he is the observer or the producer of a piece of art. As a result, Hemsterhuis argues that beauty should have no reality in itself:

Il y a encore une observation à faire, qui est assez humiliante à la vérité, mais qui prouve incontestablement que le beau n'a aucune réalité en soi-même. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 508)

From a 'relational' point of view, the mimetic paradigm, according to which beauty would be the imitation of the objective and real beauty of nature or, at most, the imitation of the classical canons, is inadequate. The incipit of the *Letter on Sculpture* (1769) documents the need to overcome the mimetic criterion for choosing a more adequate definition of artistic beauty:

Le premier but de tous les arts est d'imiter la nature ; le second de renchérir sur la nature en produisant des effets qu'elle ne produit pas aisément, ou qu'elle ne saurait produire. Il faut donc examiner premièrement comment se fait cette imitation de la nature, et ensuite ce que c'est que de renchérir sur elle et de la surpasser, ce qui nous mènera à la connaissance du beau. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 496)

This passage places the Hemsterhuisian reflection on beauty in an ambiguous relationship with

respect to tradition. Indeed, if in the first instance art is traditionally defined as an imitation of nature, in the end it is the overcoming of the natural norm that properly leads us to the knowledge of beauty. The weakening of the mimetic criterion, according to which the artistic production is subordinate to a natural and external normativity, emphasizes the role of the ‘effects’, that is, the relational and emotional dynamic that properly defines art and differentiates it from the productions of nature. But in what terms does Hemsterhuis illustrate this transition from imitation to the overcoming of nature? And what does it mean, in the context of the Hemsterhuisian reflection, to overcome nature?

In the first part of the *Letter on Sculpture* Hemsterhuis presents these two passages distinctly. The mimetic paradigm, on which all the arts are based in the first instance, is illustrated through the example of the cone, with the following conclusion: «[...] *Il s’ensuivra que pour l’imitation parfaite du cône il faut l’imitation de tous les contours, ce qui n’appartient qu’à la sculpture*» (Hemsterhuis 2001, p. 498). The imitation is here assumed as a realistic reproduction of the external object. To the extent that the success of the imitation is given by the representation of all the contours of the object, the sculpture is the most perfect of the arts. The artifice of imitation is based on the axiom by virtue of which, thanks to multisensory perception, the subject is able to get a clear and distinct idea of visible objects and to classify them due to their contours. Therefore, the imitation of all contours, presented as the “first aim of all the arts”, would not be feasible without the subject’s capacity to use the senses in order to define and categorize objects. This connection between perception and imitation obviously draws from the Empiricism leading to a full reevaluation of the sensibility, now considered as a source of clear and distinct knowledge:

[...] et cette réflexion me servira d’axiome : c’est que, par un long usage et le secours de tous nos sens à la fois, nous sommes parvenus en quelque façon à distinguer essentiellement les objets les uns des autres, en n’employant qu’un seul de nos sens. [...] De là a résulté que nous avons divisé tacitement par classes bien déterminées tous les objets visibles, aussi bien ceux qui sont productions de l’art que ceux qui ont été produits par la nature. (F. Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 498)

This first passage only analyzes the notion of imitation, although it is not sufficient to define beauty. Indeed, it is not negligible that the example introduced is based on the geometric figure

of the cone and does not take into consideration an object of art, since the mimetic criterion does not properly lead to the knowledge of beauty: “in his discussion of imitation, for instance, he took as his model the cone. This is significant: imitation as such does not give rise to beauty” (Sonderen, 1996, p. 329).

To illustrate the second step, namely the one in which is outlined the overcoming of nature and therefore of the mimetic criterion, Hemsterhuis introduces the experiment of the two vases. It is significant that he now refers to two objects of art. The experiment is conducted through the design of two vases, respectively called “vase A” and “vase B”. Then, Hemsterhuis asks various subjects to express their opinion on which one is the most beautiful. This procedure follows the methodology of modern science, assuming a varied and heterogeneous sample consisting not only of competent subjects but also of inexperienced ones, “*qui n’avait pas même une connaissance médiocre des arts*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 500). This variety of the subjects questioned serves to some extent as a support for the validity of the experiment itself, since all the subjects questioned unanimously indicate “vase A” as the most beautiful motivating this choice with the greatest “*effet*” that it arouses on their soul. From a comparative observation, it is not a formal characteristic of the object that determines its beauty but the relationship that is established between the object and the soul of the subject.

Hemsterhuis continues with a clarification of the experiment specifying the relationship between the quantity of ideas represented by the object – in this case the two vases – and the time needed to grasp them, through the notions of “*intensité*” and “*durée*”: since both vases have the same “*intensité*”, that is the same visible quantity, the discriminant for which “vase A” has a greater effect than “vase B” is attributable to the “*durée*”, that is the time the soul employs in connecting all the visible points of the figure to obtain an idea of its totality. This reasoning would lead to a conception of beauty focused on the moment of synthesis, that is, on the speed of vision that allows the soul to grasp the object (in the multiplicity of its parts) in its entirety (in the unity of the idea). Therefore, following this approach, it is logical to conclude that the subject should prefer “*un seul point noir sur un fond blanc au plus beau et au plus riche de groups*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 500), because it would be quicker to see. As a consequence, it would result the senselessness of the work of art and its “*ornements*”. For this reason, Hemsterhuis introduces a second fundamental parameter in order to acquire an adequate knowledge of beauty, namely that of the multiplicity or quantity of ideas that the object should provide to the soul. This parameter is based on the invariability of the principle

according to which “*l’âme veut donc naturellement avoir un grand nombre d’idées dans le plus petit espace de temps possible ; et c’est de là que nous viennent les ornements*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, pp. 501-502). Therefore, beauty is defined as the result of the relationship between a synthetic instance (*minimum*) and a multiple quantity on which this synthesis is exercised (*maximum*), a relationship from which we derive not a mere knowledge of physical reality, but the *optimum* that the soul, by its nature, always desires: “*le beau dans tous les arts nous doit donner le plus grand nombre d’idées possible, dans le plus petit espace de temps possible*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 504). This definition shifts the focus from the object to what ‘the soul considers beautiful’, highlighting the role of the subject and of his desires in the dynamic of overcoming nature by art:

Il me semble qu’il est aisé à comprendre [...] qu’il est très possible pour ce qui regarde le beau, de surpasser la nature ; car ce serait un hazard bien singulier qui mettrait un certain nombre de parties tellement ensemble, qu’il en résultât cet *optimum* que je desire, et qui est analogue, non à l’essence des choses, mais à l’effet du rapport qu’il y a entre les choses et la construction de mes organes. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 508)

2. “*La contradiction dans un tout*”

In the previous paragraph it was concluded that beauty is related to the metaphysical desire for unity of the subject. Therefore, the object ‘becomes’ beautiful, and does not remain a mere object of knowledge, to the extent that it satisfies this desire. However, the unity the art provides is only a sort of substitute for that metaphysical unity-truth which is accessible only to the “infinite Being”, who receive every idea intuitively. Faced with two art objects, as in the case of the experiment of the two vases, we are therefore able to indicate which is the most beautiful on the basis of the greater effect – the greater sense of unity – which it is able to provide us in the shortest possible time, although this unity is mediated by senses and not grasped in the immediacy of an intuition.

As Hemsterhuis will later clarify in the *Letter on Desires*, the metaphysical desire for unity belongs to the whole reality as an asymptotic and infinite tension. The metaphysical impossibility to reach the unity depends on the “*état force*” in which the nature of finite entities (including man) is found. This condition expresses the contradiction between the absoluteness

of the objective towards which everything tends (the unity) and the relativity of the means to reach it. For this reason, the unity provided by arts represents something precarious and fleeting, which quickly turns into a sense of ‘disgust’. This emotional reaction signals to the subject the unsuccessful outcome of the aesthetic enterprise in order to achieve metaphysical unity, directing the soul, within a sort of *scala amoris*, towards objects that are more ‘homogeneous’ and with which the possibility of union is greater: “*Par exemple, on aimera moins une belle statue que son ami, son ami que sa maîtresse, et sa maîtresse que l’Être Suprême*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 540). Therefore, art is one of the attempts (actually the lowest) made by the subject to approach the metaphysical unity. But, due to the division of the whole into individual and separate parts, unity can only manifest itself in terms of a coexistence of different and heterogeneous parts – and not as a totality *tout court* –, both in nature (which acquires, in this case, the meaning of totality of finite entities) as in art: “*Ce qui est l’ouvrage de l’art, n’est que le résultat des rapports désirés dans un assemblage de choses avec nos organes, ou avec nos façon d’apercevoir ou de sentir. Ce qui est l’ouvrage de la nature, est le résultat de son αὐταρκεία, c’est-à-dire de sa suffisance à exister*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 556). Unlike nature, which appears as a coexistence of heterogeneous parts autonomous and independent from the subject, in art this agreement of parts is achieved by the subject and is related to his ways of knowing and feeling. The ‘relational’ and ‘artificial’ character of beauty is therefore confirmed by the fact that it does not have any reality independently from the desires and the perception of the subject.

Let’s now move this analysis from the consideration of the cognitive act involved in the fruition of the work of art to the study of the practical-operational moment related to its production.

The process of artistic fruition is essentially presented in terms of a cognitive process governed by the laws of optics and perception. In the sphere of the artistic production, however, the cognitive-productive process towards the desired unity moves in the opposite direction: not from the multiplicity of the parts to the unity of the idea (from the perception of the multiple parts to the intuition of the idea) but from unity to multiplicity, that is, from the intuition of the idea to its sensible representation in the work of art:

Celle-ci naît de la succession continuelle de parties intégrantes de l’objet, là où l’autre se crée à l’instant sous la forme d’un tout et sans succession de parties, tellement que si je

veux réaliser cette idée reproduite par le moyen de la peinture, de la sculpture ou de la poésie, je dois la diviser dans ses parties, lesquelles se doivent succéder ensuite les unes aux autres pour représenter ce total. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 502)

The role of the artist is that to produce a whole through the construction of an agreement among heterogeneous parts. This whole corresponds to the *optimum* the soul desires and it should be something easy to grasp in the totality of its parts: “*Le rôle de l'artiste se réduit en effet à faciliter au spectateur de parcourir l'objet des ses yeux of him, et à créer an optimum qui ne se trouve pas dans la nature*” (Verbeek, 1995, p. 243). The production of a piece of art must therefore take into account not only the *minimum* of time that the subject takes to grasp the object in its entirety but also the *maximum* of ideas that this object conveys. The beauty is presented, in fact, to the extent that the object is not only a totality easy to grasp but, at the same time, something rich and multiple. From the point of view of the subject, the knowledge of beauty rests on the laws of optics that govern visual perception, but also on the ability to use it and on the moral condition compared to what is depicted:

Le jugement des hommes ne différera qu'à proportion de leur situation morale par rapport à la chose représentée ; par exemple: lorsqu'un homme échappé du naufrage voit le tableau d'un naufrage, il sera plus affecté quel les autres. (Hemsterhuis 2001, p. 502)

And, conversely, the point of view of the production shifts the focus to the object of art and to its formal characteristics (the outline) and content (actions and passions). These characteristics should correspond in any case to the desires of the subject.

The Hemsterhusian analysis identifies two different ways to represent beauty: decrease the *minimum* so as to allow the subject a more rapid perception of the totality expressed by the art object through the simplicity of the outline or increase the *maximum* in order to provide a greater number of ideas through the representation of actions and passions. In the first case, that is, in the case in which the artist works to reduce the *minimum* of time, it is emphasized the unity of the work of art, while in the second case the multiplicity has an advantage (in terms of actions and passions). Both solutions, if are not adequately balanced in the *optimum*, present the risk of not having the effect desired by the soul, to the extent that the unity of the work could invalidate its “*intensité*” or, on the contrary, its multiplicity could prevent the speed of the vision, that is, the “*durée*”:

Je veux bien croire que toute passion exprimée dans une figure quelconque doit diminuer un peu cette qualité déliée du contour, qui le rend si facile à parcourir pour nos yeux ; mais au moins en mettant de l'action et de la passion dans une figure, on aura plus de moyens pour concentrer un plus grand nombre d'idées dans le même temps. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 506)

Between the two solutions Hemsterhuis tends towards the first, due to the laws of optics and visual perception: if observed at a certain distance, the work simple in the outline, although rich in parts, will be easier to perceive in its totality while the one in which the expression of actions and passions is greater, to the detriment of the fluidity of the contour, will be more difficult to perceive. The examples reported in this regard are Michelangelo's *Hercules and Antaeus* and Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabines*:

Lorsqu'on voit ces deux pièces à une grande distance, celle d'Hercule et d'Antée est fort au-dessous de l'autre, puisque la magie de l'expression ne saurait atteindre à une grande distance, et qu'alors il ne reste que la quantité d'idées que peuvent donner quelques membres médiocrement contrastés : l'Enlèvement des Sabines aura un effet exactement contraire. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 506)

The formulation of a judgment of taste on the two works of art – in both cases two sculptural groups –, is introduced here as an example of the two different paths that lead the artist to the production of beauty and anticipates, as we will see later, the discourse on the differences between the sculpture of the Ancients and the sculpture of the Moderns.

Admitting both ways as valid in the field of artistic production, what destroys beauty lies in the “contradiction” of the totality, a contradiction that can concern both the outline and the expression of actions and passions, invalidating the sense of unity of the work of art and, consequently, the ease of its fruition. That is: an ambiguous outline as well as the contradiction in the expressions can likewise prevent even the most trained eye from grasping the unity. In other words, the contradiction implies a loss of coexistence or harmony between the heterogeneous parts, a coexistence that properly configures the beauty.

3. “*Une route bien différente*”

Now let's see in what terms the choice of one way over the other, that is the choice of unity or

expressiveness, determines the boundaries between the arts (sculpture and painting) and to what extent the comparison between the Ancients and the Moderns is involved in identifying such differences.

The second part of the *Letter on Sculpture* presents a historical excursus on the arts, starting from the problem of their origins. The hierarchy between the senses, which recognizes an anteriority in the development of touch with respect to that of sight, leads to the recognition of the greater antiquity of sculpture compared to painting and other arts. Having ascertained the greater antiquity of sculpture, the excursus proceeds with the discussion of the historical development of this form of art, placing the relationship between the Greeks and other cultures and, ultimately, between the Greeks and the Moderns. The movement of ‘return to antiquity’ implied in reference to the history of sculpture is a sort of art history in which antiquity is not assumed as something homogeneous but, more realistically, as a concatenation of peoples in history, each marked by a “spirit” that radiates on all its cultural expressions – including art – and each in a relationship of continuity with the others.

Despite the historical perspective, the excursus identifies the excellence and perfection of sculpture among the Greeks, such that “we can consider them as if the arts were really born among them”. In other words, while recognizing sculpture as one of the expressions of the “spirit” of the different peoples in history, Hemsterhuis embraces the thesis of the uniqueness and perfection of the Greeks in the field of this art and of art in general. The Hemsterhuisian position with respect to the problem of the excellence of sculpture presents however, upon a more careful analysis of its developments, some strong ambiguities, since the adhesion to the Winckelmannian instance, and therefore the affirmation of the superiority of the ancients (of the Greeks) compared to the Moderns, is counterbalanced by the awareness of the historical dimension of the artistic phenomenon. This awareness leads the Dutch author to a more complex elaboration of the relationship between the Ancients and the Moderns.

Let us now retrace the fundamental passages of this complex hermeneutics of the relationships between the Ancients and the Moderns with an argument that will develop through the following moments: a) the historical excursus on sculpture, carried out through the binomen of art-nature, highlights the excellence and perfection of art among the Greeks; b) having ascertained the perfection of sculpture among the Greeks, the author moves on to consider this form of art under a more general profile, identifying the fundamental principles that regulate its production and that differentiate it from painting. On the basis of these two

argumentative passages, it will be possible to derive the following conclusive reflection: c) if the sculpture has reached its excellence among the Greeks, since among them the moral dimension and the desire for unity are expressed with the utmost perfection, as we move towards modernity the artistic productions are unbalanced in the direction of the *maximum*, that is towards a greater expression of actions and passions. This *maximum*, in order to constitute itself as an *optimum*, and therefore as something harmonious and unitary despite the multiplicity represented, must express itself in a new form of art that can be traced back to the principles that govern painting. Therefore, the following relationship is established: sculpture: ancient = painting: modern. This relationship can be read in this sense otherwise: sculpture = first way of artistic production (diminution of the *minimum*); painting = second way of artistic production (increase of the *maximum*).

a) The discussion of the historical development of sculpture among different peoples, from aegyptians to moderns, is based on the notion of beauty introduced in the first part of the *Letter on Sculpture*. The artistic representation of beauty is analyzed in connection with the relationship between art and nature. According to the Hemsterhuisian thesis, beauty is not properly configured as an imitation of nature, that is, as a mere realistic reproduction of the external object, but as an overcoming of it, aimed at making the transition from the sensible to the intelligible plane. Only in this passage does beauty emerge properly. The desire of the soul is to move from the multiplicity of perceptions to the unity of the idea, thus attempting to pursue its own natural metaphysical destination. This procedure connotes both the production of beauty (the artist tries to bring together the multiple parts in the whole-unity of the work of art) as well as its fruition which, as we have seen, is aimed at grasping the unity of the work (his idea, based on the multiplicity of its parts). Based on this specific idea of the experience of production and artistic fruition, the Greeks are the first to have properly produced beauty: “[...] *les Grecs, après avoir épuisé les beautés de la nature, sont parvenus à trouver ce beau idéal, suivant lequel ils ont produit tant de chefs-d’oeuvres inimitables*” (Hemsterhuis 2001, p. 514). What is decisive, for the purpose of identifying the excellence of the Greeks in the arts and, specifically, in sculpture, is the analysis of the “political condition” (“*l’état politique*”), to the extent that it affects the relationship that every population establishes with nature, considering it either as a term of perfection or as an obstacle to be overcome. The first case configures the “spirit” of the slave peoples, where artistic production stops at the imitation of nature or, at most, of the peoples who preceded them. The second case, on the other hand, introduces the

profile of an active people marked by the independence of the productions of the spirit from nature.

The Egyptians, with whom Hemsterhuis began the excursus, just imitate the nature, applying to the artistic production the same disposition that connotes them on the level of the political condition, namely that of a slave and submissive people. Taking as a model the immensity of the territory on which the power of their despot is extended, they identified the beauty with the ‘immense’, orienting the artistic production on the basis of this criterion: “*Ainsi ce fut le merveilleux qui devint l’esprit général de leurs arts*” (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 510). The problem of the ‘marvelous’ is translated, therefore, in terms of a production of the spirit in which beauty, understood as the unity of multiple parts accorded to each other to the point of resulting in a totality, does not find a place. In its place the marvelous realizes something immense and great but devoid of harmony and composition between the parts.

On the contrary, among the Greeks, that are an active people because politically organized in small states in constant war with each other, each citizen actively participates in the defense and organization of the city-state. This pushed the Greek people to progress from the point of view of knowledge, which expanded mainly in the field of morality, with great advantage for arts. Rather than the physical and natural dimension, they preferred to investigate the moral and metaphysical one going from the imitation of nature to the ideal beauty. In other words, among the Greeks Hemsterhuis identifies a greater perfection of the moral dimension of each individual and, consequently, a greater effectiveness of the desire for unity that connotes, or should connote, artistic productions. The same theoretical perspective based on the relationship between art and nature guides the Hemsterhuisian analysis of other peoples, the Etruscans, the Romans and the Goths. In all three cases, the aesthetic experience is marked by imitation – of nature or of a previous people –. It is interesting to dwell on the discourse relating to the Goths, whose artistic productions fail its objective because it does not properly create beauty but an “assembly of parts”, without any regard for the sense of agreement and of units:

[...] On peut dire qu’ils ont considéré un total seulement comme un assemblage de parties, qu’ils ont orné autant qu’il leur a été possible ces parties, et qu’ils se sont imaginés d’avoir orné par là le total. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 516)

b) Having identified the excellence of art among the Greeks, the Hemsterhuisian discourse moves to consider sculpture and its specific difference from the other arts. This transition from the historical excursus to the analysis of art under a more general and normative profile plays a decisive function in delineating the relationship between the artistic productions of the Ancients (the Greeks) and those of the Moderns.

Tracing the difference between the arts means, first of all, distinguishing their boundaries and identifying the specific characteristics of each. The “necessary principle” that regulates the production of the sculpture is identified with unity or simplicity, which is associated with the “easy quality” of the outline. These fundamental principles, the unity of the representation and the fluidity of the outline, are obtained on the basis of the cost and hardness of the material used in the production of a sculptural work. These factors necessarily limit this production – which among other things represents the subject in all its solidity and entirety – to the representation of a simple figure or, at most, a composition of a few figures. Therefore, in order to make the sculptural productions appreciated even from a great distance, it is necessary that the sculptor works on the simplicity of the contours to reduce the *minimum*, rather than on the representation of actions and passions. For these reasons, sculpture puts the “stillness” and “majesty” of the represented figure before the expression of actions and passions. It is evident that in the discourse relating to the production of the sculpture Hemsterhuis takes up the first of the two ways accepted in the production of artistic beauty, namely the one that works on reducing the *minimum*.

Having identified the principles of sculpture – unity and ease of outline –, Hemsterhuis proceeds to consider it in relation to painting. The discriminating element between the two arts is significantly traced back to the problem of the expression of actions and passions. In fact, while sculpture, for the reasons just explained, must be limited to the stillness and unity of the represented action (*minimum*), painting can instead accommodate, in conditional terms, a multiplicity of actions and passions (*maximum*) without the general sense of wholeness and harmony is invalidated. The compositions of the painting are, in fact, more extensive than those of the sculpture and allow, therefore, to compensate for any representation of the “disgusting”. In other words, the “disgusting” is now introduced to indicate an excess of the actions and passions represented, an excess that could imply a loss of the unity and, consequently, the emergence of the “contradiction” in the totality of the work. However, the principles of painting allow the artist to compensate for the *maximum* represented due to the greater space of

representation available to him: “Painting can sometimes use disgusting to increase horror, since its compositions, being very extensive, can mitigate it elsewhere”. The creation of a pictorial work can therefore be traced back to the second way of artistic production of beauty, namely the one that works to increase the *maximum* through the representation of actions and passions, provided they are harmonized in the overall unity-totality of the work.

c) To try to obtain a conclusive reflection on the relationship between the Ancients and the Moderns in the field of artistic productions, we consider the following passages:

Nous verrons bientôt que les nations, qui commencent par être copistes des autres, arrivent à leur perfection par une route bien différente de celle qu’ont tenue les Grecs. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 512)

Il ne faut pas chercher à mon avis ce degré de plus chez les Grecs dans l’expression des actions et des passions, puisqu’en cela les modernes ne cèdent rien à leurs maîtres, mais dans cette qualité déliée et facile du contour. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 518)

[...] Que l’artiste soit peintre autant qu’il veut dans l’expression de l’action, mais qu’il soit sculpteur pour enrichir également, autant qu’il est possible, tous les profils. [...] D’ailleurs on ne peut guère accuser les Grecs de ce défaut; mais on peut dire que nos sculpteurs modernes sont trop peintres, comme apparemment les peintres grecs étaient trop sculpteurs. (Hemsterhuis, 2001, p. 522)

The first consideration introduces the thesis of a different way to gain beauty (“*une route bien différente*”), compared to the one followed by the Greek artists. Now, it seems legitimate to hypothesize that here we are referring precisely to the path followed by the moderns, that is, to an artistic modality different from that of the ancients, although very valid for the purposes of the production of beauty and the achievement of some form of perfection (“*à leur perfection*”) in the field of aesthetics.

This hypothesis finds further confirmation if we consider the following quotation, since it to some extent undermines the idea of an absolute perfection of the Greeks with respect to the moderns, introducing for both the possibility of a form of perfection in the arts, albeit on the basis of differential principles. In the case of the Greeks, it is the way of the *minimum* that leads them to the representation of beauty, which is characterized by the “delicate and simple quality of the outline”, for the moderns it is that of the *maximum*, that is a form of representation

centered on the “artistic expression of actions and passions”. The result of this theoretical solution is clearly that of identifying and legitimizing two different manifestations of artistic beauty, both acceptable as long as they satisfy the metaphysical and meta-historical desires of the subject. These considerations overturn the idea, of Winckelmann ancestry, of the uniqueness of the Greeks and that, consequent to it, of the principle of imitation of the Greeks as the only way to reach beauty and achieve aesthetic perfection on the level of artistic productions.

To further underline these differences (“*Pour finir le parallèle des artistes grecs et modernes*”), Hemsterhuis introduces an interesting consideration: the devil, as a representation of the “repugnant” and “ridiculous”, is the only subject belonging to modernity. The representation of the devil on the artistic level requires, in fact, the application of principles very different from the simplicity of the outline and the stillness of the figure and such as to render, through the expression of the actions, all its monstrosity. The Greeks, following a production way of representation and artistic outline based on its essential characters, quiet and simplicity of the outline, could not carry out principles to represent it or, if they had done so, deprived it of its essential characters, attributing to it a “constant figure”, and therefore connoting it according to regularity, order and quiet, characters that are not representative of a figure as peculiar and irregular as that of the devil. Following this reasoning, logically the *Laocoön*, considered the plastic work *par excellence*, should figure as the highest expression of the art of the Ancients. The Hemsterhuisian position is, however, quite different: “[...] I dare to add that the two Rhodesian masterpieces, the *Laocoön* and the *Amphion*, belong much more to painting than to sculpture”. This consideration appears anything but provocative, if we consider the note introduced by Hemsterhuis himself. The author specifies that, although the *Laocoön* indisputably belongs to sculpture, the fact that its original location placed it at a great distance from the subject, thus offering “a single point of view”, would bring it closer to painting and its principles of representation.

The crux of the question is ultimately traced back to the differences between the Ancients (the Greeks) and the Moderns. In fact, the reflection on the *Laocoön* is inserted within a broader reasoning that involves, precisely, two different ways of representing artistic beauty – “[...] that the artist is a painter as much as he wants to express the action, but that he is a sculptor to equally enrich all the profiles as much as possible” –, attributable respectively to the Greeks (“*trop sculpteurs*”) and to the Moderns (“*trop peintres*”). What is at stake are,

therefore, not only the two ways of representing beauty on an artistic level, the one that can be traced back to the *minimum*, therefore to the principles that regulate sculpture, and that of the *maximum*, that is, typical of painting, but the same relationship, read in the light of the different “spirit” that distinguishes them, between the ancients and the moderns. In others, having ascertained that beauty, to be defined as such, must correspond to the wishes of the subject and in terms of representing a means, the lowest among other things, to approximate the metaphysical unity sought, the ways it is achieved can be different, providing they provide the soul with the maximum number of ideas (*maximum*) in the shortest possible time (*minimum*).

The Hemsterhuisian reasoning developed in the second part of the *Letter on Sculpture* stops on this point, without deepening the question. The difference between sculpture and painting from the point of view of the principles that regulate its production, becomes a complete theory in the romantic context, where, strictly following the Hemsterhuisian indication, August Schlegel formulates the distinction between 'plastic' and 'picturesque', also formulated on the basis of a comparison between the Ancients and the Moderns. It should be pointed out, however, that the Hemsterhuisian distinction between the principles of sculpture and those of painting, although it is elaborated within the framework of a “*parallèle*” between the artistic productions of the Ancients and those of the Moderns, sometimes takes on the characteristics of a more typological than historical distinction: for example, the *Laocoön*, apparently belongs to the productions of the Ancients, is traced back to the principles of painting (the way of *maximum*), while Michelangelo's *Hercules and Antaeus*, which belongs, instead, to the artistic productions of modernity, is qualified as a representation that can be traced back to the principles of sculpture (the way of *minimum*).

In conclusion, the overcoming of the mimetic paradigm entails the emergence of the problem of the expression of actions and passions and, therefore, the possibility of a representation of beauty not attributable to the criteria of classicism – the simplicity of the outline, the unity of the figure, the stillness –, but open to the representation of the disgusting, the irregular, the repugnant and the ridiculous, whether they are finally converted, for the subject, into an experience of unity. Modernity, which also benefits from the imitation of the Ancients, elaborates, in the context of the production of artistic beauty, its own principles which, compared to the perfection of the Ancients, do not connote it as a moment of decadence but as a different and equally asymptotic path through which the individual tries to recompose the original unity with the whole.

References

- Dierick, A. P. (1997), 'Pre-Romantic Elements in the Aesthetic and Moral Theories of François Hemsterhuis (1721-1790)', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, vol. 26, pp. 247-271.
- Falcioni, Daniela (1997), 'Il bello è eusynopton? Sulla recente edizione italiana della lettera sulla scultura di Frans Hemsterhuis', *Paradigmi*, vol. 15, pp. 169-182.
- Hemsterhuis, Frans (2001), *Wijzgerige Werken*, ed. M. J. Petry, Leeuwarden: Fryske, Academy.
- Levine, Joseph M. (1981), 'Ancients and Moderns Reconsidered', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. XV (1), pp. 72-89.
- Matassi, Elio (1983), *Hemsterhuis. Istanza critica e filosofia della storia*, Napoli: Guida Editori.
- (1995), 'Intuizione' e 'génie' in Hemsterhuis, in: P. Montani (ed.), *Senso e storia dell'estetica. Studi offerti a Emilio Garroni per il suo settantesimo compleanno*, Parma: Pratiche, pp. 348-360.
- Mazzocut-Mis, Maddalena (2001), 'Figlia bastarda di un dio. La concezione dell'arte di Frans Hemsterhuis', *Materiali di Estetica*, vol. 5, pp. 145-157.
- Melica, Claudia (2005), 'Alle origini dell'estetica romantica. La fortuna delle idee di Hemsterhuis nella Germania di fine Settecento', *Intersezioni*, vol. 25, pp. 5-32.
- (2005) a cura di, *Hemsterhuis: a European philosopher rediscovered*, Napoli: Vivarium.
- (2002), 'Hemsterhuis filosofo europeo', *Paradigmi. Rivista di critica filosofica*, vol. 20, pp. 347-360.
- (2007), 'Longing for Unity: Hemsterhuis and Hegel', *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, vols. 55-56, pp. 143-163.
- Moenkemeyer, Heinz (1977), 'François Hemsterhuis. Admirers, Critics, Scholars', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. LI, pp. 502-525.
- Morpurgo-Tagliabue, Guido (1994), 'La crisi estetica del Settecento. Winkelmann, Hemsterhuis, Herder', *Rivista di Estetica*, vol. 34, pp. 77-92.
- Parigi, Riccardo (1985), 'Frans Hemsterhuis nella storiografia del Novecento', *Cultura e scuola*, vol. XXIV, pp. 113-119.

- Petry, Michael John, (2003), 'Hemsterhuis Frans', in: W. van Bunge, H. Krop, B. Leewenburgh (eds.), *The dictionary of seventeenth and eighteenth century dutch philosophers*, General Editors, Bristol, vol. 1, pp. 417-424.
- Sonderen, Peter C. (1996), 'Beauty and Desire: Frans Hemsterhuis' Aesthetic Experiments', *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 4, pp. 317-345.
- (2004), 'The return of beauty. Purity and the neo-classical foundation of modern art', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, vol. XXXIII, 415-435.