

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

O world, as God has made it! All is beauty. Robert Browning

Beauty can pierce one like a pain. Thomas Mann

The sign on the window on the second story of an old and fairly dingy five story building away from the commercial district of the city read “Esthetics Inc.” In smaller print were three names, Dr. Esther Laidler – Beautician, Dr. Paolo Pizzaro – Visual Arts, and Dr. Armody Harmon – Musical Arts. One would never guess at the ramifications this unknown trio would have for humanity.

Despite their titles, they were all bio-physicists, each with their unique specialty. Dr. Laidler was interested in how physical appearance affected one’s health and personality. Dr. Pizzaro’s area of expertise was how and why visual stimuli of varying aesthetic degrees affected the populace. Dr. Harmon was concerned with the impact on humans of so-called musical sounds. It was Dr. Laidler who initiated Esthetics Inc. by convincing the other two to join her. At first they were somewhat skeptical, but once she showed them what she had invented and what she had in mind, they agreed.

Dr. Laidler had long believed in the importance of self-image psychology, perhaps because she was a singularly unattractive woman who had never had any man pay the slightest attention to her feminine attributes, such as they were. Most psychologists considered it pop psychology with very little significance for any sort of psycho-therapy. She also had a fascination with holographic images.

Up to about two years prior to approaching Drs. Pizzaro and Harmon, she had considered her two interests as non-intersecting. Then, one morning during her ritual attempts at looking presentable, while watching her reflection in her bathroom mirror, she thought, “Wouldn’t it be great if I could make myself look beautiful to myself and to everyone? How could this be accomplished? What if I were able to project a holographic image of myself to all I come in contact with? This holograph would be the most sophisticated cosmetic technology ever invented. I am, after all a physicist. I know quite a bit about holographs. Let’s see what I can come up with.”

Thus motivated, she initiated a research project with a zeal she had never exhibited before. Suffice to say, and beyond her wildest expectations, she succeeded in innovating a holographic technology previously never dreamt of in an extraordinary short period of time. Essentially, it was a tiny device, implanted sub-cutaneously and powered by a cell fueled by plutonium whose radioactivity was the energy source. Because of plutonium’s very long half life, energy could be provided indefinitely. The device would project a holograph of the person using it. One’s physical appearance would be enhanced by retaining that person’s fundamental attractive traits and replacing or altering undesirable ones. Thus the individual in question would still be recognizable.

The first person she tried her device on was, obviously, herself. Since, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”, the result of this experiment was that she gave birth to a bouncing baby boy exactly nine and a half months later. It was then that she approached Drs. Pizzaro and Harmon with her idea which they hesitatingly endorsed. As she put it, “If I can enhance the appearance of relatively unattractive persons by this rather simplistic method, perhaps you can also augment an appreciation of the visual and

acoustical arts. I think it is worth a try. Don't you?" They agreed, but Dr. Pizzaro was heard to remark rather sardonically, "Thousands of years from now, someone's remains will have retained that person's good looks, thus giving bizarre credence to Ponce de Leon's search for the 'Fountain of Youth'."

Despite their misgivings, they immediately went to work on the problem. Dr. Pizzaro quickly realized that the answer did not lie with holographic imaging. That would be too obvious a ploy. However, he used the holograph as a starting point. After all, Dr. Laidler had been successful because of the brain's ability to conjure a perception of beauty. There must be some part of the brain whose function it is to instigate a pleasurable response to an external stimulus.

Dr. Harmon also reached the same conclusion. While holographic imaging might enhance sound, in the same manner that a piece of beautiful china enhances the food on it, it does so in some oblique fashion. In any case, pleasurable sound, on the surface, is quite different than pleasurable vision. He also sought that part of the brain responsible for pleasurable reactions to auricular stimuli.

Since Drs. Pizzaro and Harmon were in constant touch with each other, they decided to collaborate when they learned they were seeking the same thing. After many probes into the recesses of the brain they discovered a locus of activity which appeared to be responsive to external aesthetic stimuli. However the picture was far from simple. Simply put, this focal point was linked to other areas which played a major role in determining whether the experience was pleasing. For example, despite its apparent intrinsic beauty, a particular piece of music might invoke feelings of elation in some and sadness in others. It was nearly impossible to tell what the emotional response might be. This was equally true for visual stimuli. It was further complicated by linkages to the brain's critical and analytical nodes, which often served to internally and rationally justify the opinions of the observer.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the role of one's peers could not be overlooked. It has been asserted that truth is nothing but consensual reality and if, as the poet Keats once observed, beauty and truth are synonymous then it is equally true of beauty. Drs. Harmon and Pizzaro were quite disconcerted by the discovery that society, probably via the marketplace, determines whether something is beautiful. It is true that frequently there is a time lag. Notwithstanding this, it is most important to note this democratic approach to beauty as will become apparent.

Once this locus of aesthetic activity in the brain had been located and all its linkages mapped, the problem the three biophysicists tackled became quite clearer. How could the musical or visual example block all the linkages except those leading to unbounded and uncritical pleasure? Unfortunately, after a number of years of experimentation they discovered the answers. No matter its so called quality, any visual work of art with an imbedded microscopic device emitting certain combinations of electromagnetic frequencies would simultaneously stimulate the aforementioned locus and block all the interfering linkages except the one leading to vast pleasure. The same was true for a so-called piece of music. It required a device, fixed in an appropriate musical instrument such as a violin, piano and an electric guitar, that would discharge subliminally a combination of sound vibrations.

The rest is history. This technology caught on like wild fire. All works of art, no matter their quality and source became instantly popular. The common weal prevailed and artistic standards fell to an unimaginable, uncultured, low level. Everybody became an artist and their work received totally unacceptable plaudits. Critical acclaim was the norm while old fashioned artistic criticism disappeared completely.

In due course there might have been a movement of correction. After all, humanity has often exhibited a flexibility and an ability to rebound from apparent and impending self destruction. Unhappily, this did not occur for two reasons. First, the advertising industry got their hands on the technology. This was adding insult to injury. It was bad enough that artistic critical acumen was gone, but within a short period of time, the ability to evaluate commercial products critically also disappeared.

Again, this might not have been irreversible. However, the coup de grace occurred when an enterprising politician with scientific training reasoned that if art and commercial products could be made irresistible, why not ideas? He succeeded. Eventually, humanity lost its ability to see, hear and think. With those attributes gone, chaos reigned supreme leading to.....

POSTSCRIPT

Many eons later, two aliens from a distant galaxy, whose specialty was the historical study of extinct societies from various planetary solar systems, were quite mystified at what had transpired on this planet. Upon comparing the holographs that were still functioning with reconstructions of what the people must have looked like, they could not understand why the holographic images had been selected. They found them to be singularly unattractive, if not downright ugly, and nowhere near as beautiful as the people had been.

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