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A Return of Beauty?

In the aesthetic discourse of recent years, it has become the fashion to propagate a "return of beauty." Dave Hickey announced in 1993 that beauty would be the dominant issue of the next decade.¹ In 2005, an international festival "On Beauty" took place in Berlin's *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, culminating in a conference at which experts were invited to discuss "The Re-Turn of Beauty."

I am surprised at such talk of a return of beauty. Did beauty ever go away? Was it ever in exile such that it could, should or would need to return today? Wasn't beauty there all the time? The beauty of nature was, to be sure – in its entire splendor. And the beauty accumulated in the course of human history, the beauty of works of art, has for decades been more present than ever before – in museums, or exhibitions, and various other media. And what about the beauty of human beings? I find it hard to believe that we lived through a time of decreased human beauty where beautiful human beings were in short supply.

If anything, what we had less of in the past decades was the talk about beauty. That is all that has changed: After a long time during which aestheticians spoke little of beauty, they have now started talking about it again. That is the whole difference. It is not that the phenomenon of beauty has returned, but rather that a discourse on beauty is being produced on the intellectual stage. We should not, therefore, speak of a return of beauty as such, but only of a return of the *topic* "beauty." Mistakenly, however, the return of the issue of discourse is taken for that of the phenomenon itself. Discourse is obviously being made to serve as the measure for whether something (in this case, beauty) exists or not. To me, that seems rather arrogant and foolish.²

In what follows, I will put forward three claims. 1. The opposition to beauty that we find in art theory from mid-nineteenth century onward and especially in the twentieth century was not directed against beauty in general, but against *specific* conceptions of beauty whilst being in favor of others. 2. Contemporary pleas in favor of beauty have *dubious* reasons and effects. 3. Today there is much cause to talk about the attractiveness of the beautiful regardless of the many traditional and largely accepted theories, or: about the sublime, *breath-taking beauty* and its *universality* – yet talk of such beauty is conspicuously absent from current discourse.

1. The rejection of the beautiful often serves the appeal to another type of beauty

To get to my first claim: We must not overlook the fact that opponents of beauty have often made, on their part, positive use of the term "beauty." They did not intend to put an end to beauty altogether, but rather to proclaim a *new* beauty in place of the established ideal.

¹ Dave Hickey, "Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty," in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), pp. 11–25, here quoted from p. 11.

² For a general critique of this habit of prioritizing discourse over matter – symptom of the overall constructivism of modern thought – cp. my *Homo mundanus* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012).

Three examples. When Baudelaire proclaimed the figure of Satan as an ideal, he was treating Satan as a type of beauty, for he spoke of Satan as "the most perfect type of manly beauty"³ and "the most beautiful of Angels;"⁴ and when he praised "fugitive beauty,"⁵ he intended to recommend it as the specifically *modern* type of beauty uniting "mode" and "éternité."⁶ – When Marinetti pronounced a race car with its roaring motor to be superior to the classical ideal of beauty embodied in the Nike of Samothrace, it was in order to extol a new and specifically modern type of beauty: "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed."⁷ – The surrealist ideal, finally, was predicated on the new beauty of contingency and incendiary juxtaposition, whose model the surrealists described with Lautréamont as "the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."⁸

Those are three instances showing that beauty was not dismissed but redefined; that in place of the established, bourgeois, stale ideal a different, new, more captivating beauty was being sought – and how often mustn't just that already have happened in the history of beauty! While specific ideals of beauty age, the desire for beauty remains.

To be sure: Around the middle of the last century, those seeking to set art on a completely different path from that of beauty became more energetic in their protests. In 1948, Barnett Newman defined "the impulse of modern art" as the "desire to destroy beauty."⁹ A few years later, Dubuffet stated, "Beauty does not enter into the picture for me."¹⁰ Yet Newman painted exceptionally beautiful pictures,¹¹ and Dubuffet, too, created wonderful paintings and lithographs of almost celestial, cosmic beauty (titles such as *Cosmographie* or *Sol céleste* bespeak the fascination with which their beauty strikes the viewer).

The rhetoric of beauty's dismissal is therefore, to put it mildly, exaggerated. In reality, what we find are either arguments for a beauty other than the established one, or wholesale rejections of the popular rhetoric of beauty in favor of devotion to a higher beauty.

³ Charles Baudelaire, "Squibs" [1887], in *Intimate Journals* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), pp. 3–23, here p. 12 [XVI].

⁴ Baudelaire, "The Litanies to Satan," in: *The Flowers of Evil* [1857], no. CXX.

⁵ Baudelaire, "To a Woman Passing By," *ibid.*, no. XCIII.

⁶ Cp. the key passage on Baudelaire's concept of "modernité": "Il [le peintre de la vie moderne = Constantin Guys] cherche ce quelque chose qu'on nous permettra d'appeler la *modernité*, car il ne se présente pas de meilleur mot pour exprimer l'idée en question. Il s'agit, pour lui, de dégager de la mode ce qu'elle peut contenir de poétique dans l'historique, de tirer l'éternel du transitoire" (Baudelaire, "Le peintre de la vie moderne" [1863], in *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Seuil, 1968, pp. 546–565, here p. 553).

⁷ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifesto of Futurisme* (*Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, p. 1).

⁸ Lautréamont, *The Lay of Maldoror* [1868–69] (London: The Casanova Society, 1924), p. 279 resp. André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* [1932], in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 101–209, here p. 140.

⁹ Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now" [1948], in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 170–173, here p. 172.

¹⁰ Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions," in *Beauty is nowhere: ethical issues in art and design*, eds. Richard Roth and Susan King Roth (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998), pp. 9–15, here p. 12.

¹¹ One could speak of sublimity in this context – but that is just another, the larger than life version of the beautiful.

On closer inspection, such changes in ideals are the most normal thing in the world. Beauty ages, ideals of beauty are replaced by others. Nor must we forget that it only took hundred years for what critics of the time castigated for having "declared war on beauty,"¹² to become the very epitome of the beautiful, even for mass tastes – I am, of course, referring to impressionists art.¹³

2. Dubious aspects in current demands for beauty

Or am I making things too easy for myself? Were there not more violent objections in the twentieth century than those I have mentioned: artistic strategies which not merely rejected the rhetoric of beauty but from which in fact nothing of beauty emerged – where the new quality of artworks was only to be had at the price of beauty? So that we would be missing the crucial point of such artworks and even pervert them if we tried to put them back on the leash of beauty?

a. Danto, *The abuse of beauty* – against Dave Hickey

Before I go on to discuss some examples in more detail, I would like to draw attention to Arthur Danto's book, *The abuse of beauty*. Danto wrote this book in response to Dave Hickey's claim that the coming decade would be a decade of beauty. Danto, by contrast, reminds us that it has always been a fatal error of aestheticians to believe that art is essentially about beauty: "It is not and it never was the destiny of all art ultimately to be seen as beautiful."¹⁴ "Most of the world's art is not beautiful, nor was the production of beauty part of its purpose."¹⁵ Artistic quality, Danto argues, can go along with beauty, but by no means must it be bound up with beauty in every case: "it is extremely important to distinguish between *aesthetic* beauty and a wider sense of artistic excellence where aesthetic beauty may not be relevant at all."¹⁶

Taken generally, the common stipulation attacked by Danto that art must be beautiful is indeed misguided. It is a product of the eighteenth century. The Greek concept *kalón* could refer to all sorts of things – for instance, to actions, to science, to a way of life. By no means did it apply exclusively to art. Even in 1750, when Baumgarten was founding aesthetics as a discipline, art was still far from being the center of interest. Baumgarten defined aesthetics as *ars pulchre cogitandi*. Although the terms "art" and "beautiful" both occur in that definition, Baumgarten was not at all concerned with a theory of art, but rather with an epistemological revision and with the novel task of *thinking beautifully*¹⁷. That is something very different from what later generations made of it.¹⁸ Nobody in his right mind would limit beauty to art and normatively constrain art to

¹² After seeing the Impressionists' first exhibit in 1874, the Parisian art critic J. Claretie wrote, "Monet [...], Pissarro, Miss Morisot and the others seem to have declared war on beauty" (cp. John Rewald, *Die Geschichte des Impressionismus*, Cologne: DuMont 2001, p. 195).

¹³ In the meantime, of course, one might suspect that Monet's poppy fields, too, have been somewhat tainted by this universal applause.

¹⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *The abuse of beauty: aesthetics and the concept of art* (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 2003), p. 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁷ Baumgarten's foil was the modern definition of logic as the "art de penser" set out in the Port Royal Logic. This project was to be superseded by the "art of thinking beautifully."

¹⁸ For a critique of this development in philosophical aesthetics see my "Philosophie und Kunst – eine wechselhafte Beziehung," in: Wolfgang Welsch, *Blickwechsel: Ästhetik auf neuen Wegen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012), 13-51.

be beautiful – that Danto is right about. Just think of how scandalously that would restrict the concept of art. Talk of beauty might at best cover a fair portion of the fine arts, but what about literature? Would anyone seriously want to argue that tragedy is about beauty? That would just be grotesque. And it would be equally ridiculous to think that beauty is decisive in music.

b. Duchamp – contingency instead of beauty

The twentieth century's paradigm example for the disjoining of art and beauty Danto talks about is the work of Duchamp. Their *raison d'être* is not aesthetic, but anaesthetic. Duchamp said of his ready-mades "that the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by an esthetic delectation," but rather "was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anesthesia."¹⁹ And if one is nevertheless inclined to think that there is still plenty to find beautiful in Duchamp's works, the story of his *Large Glass* is evidence that, in his own thinking, Duchamp definitively surpassed that horizon by recognizing "perfection" in a contingency destructive of beauty. In 1923, Duchamp had proclaimed that the *Large Glass* was "definitively unfinished." Yet four years later, when the work was accidentally broken during transportation, Duchamp called this contingent event "the happy completion of the piece." When the damaged work was repaired, he did not seal the cracks but welcomed them as wholly valid compositional elements. – The art world, by contrast, has often preferred uncracked replicas of the work. One plays at modernity while in fact adhering to the traditional ideals of beauty and the purity of the artwork thus perverting Duchamp's embrace of contingency.

c. Aleatory – and its perversion by the dictate of beauty

Contingency, when taken seriously, is the motif that definitively leads beyond aspirations to beauty. It was especially in mid-twentieth century music that this motif entered the scene. I will now consider the dire effects of recent partiality to beauty on the performance of such works today.

Contingency is the elixir of aleatoric compositions. Their scores are written in such a way that the combination of musicians, the sequence of the parts, the duration of the pieces and the sounds produced are largely left to chance, determined by contingent parameters. This renunciation of the western ideal of the *opus perfectum* in favor of open forms was a thoroughly radical move.

One of the most important aleatoric compositions is Stockhausen's *Piano Piece XI*, composed in 1956 and first performed in Darmstadt in 1957. On one of the oversized pages of the score (they are 50 x 100 cm), fourteen groups of notes are irregularly distributed in such a way as to avoid having any one group stand out more than any other. The beginning of Stockhausen's "Performing Directions" reads: "The performer looks at random at the sheet of music and begins with any group, the first that catches his eye; this he plays, choosing for himself tempo [...], dynamic level and type of attack. At the end of the first group, he reads the tempo, dynamic and

¹⁹ Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," in *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 1966), p. 47. The scene in Buñuels *Andalusian Dog* (1928) in which a razor cuts through an eyeball is the well-known counterpart to this tendency. On the relationship between aesthetic and anaesthetic in general see my *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990; 7th, expanded edition 2010).

attack indications that follow, and looks at random to any other group, which he then plays in accordance with the latter indications." Further details follow, as well as the rule that a given realization of the piece concludes as soon as one of the groups has been reached for the third time. Thus, the various performances will contain very different numbers and sequences of parts and differ in length depending on where the musician begins and how he chooses to go on. Stockhausen concludes with the recommendation: "This Piano Piece should if possible be performed twice or more in the course of a programme."²⁰

How is this piece performed today? In autumn of 2004 Stockhausen's complete piano works, among them No. XI, were presented over the course of several evenings in Berlin. The pianist played impressively. It was music fit to be charmed by. Afterwards, a colleague came over to me in a state of some excitement: "Was he cheating?" Evidently, my colleague suspected that, contrary to Stockhausen's instructions, the pianist had chosen a particularly affecting sequence prior to performing it. In our uncertainty, we turned to a prominent music critic especially familiar with the period. "Of course he worked out his plan in advance," he answered; "that's what everybody does today." And the critic considered that quite all right.

But if it can be said to be alright at all, then at best only on today's false premises. However, it utterly contradicts the principle and the sense of this music. Nothing could be more against the spirit of a piece of aleatoric music than to pick out an affecting, a beautiful version and then present it as the work. It is essential that the work be performed not once, but *several* times in succession, as Stockhausen's instructions demand. For that is the key to experiencing what the music is about, namely how, owing to built-in random parameters, very different things can emerge from a predetermined matrix (the given notes).²¹ There was a time when different successive realizations were presented as a matter of course. Today, even in the most highly cultivated venues, we are offered only one – next to other pieces before and after it. Thus, the work is surrendered over to the conventionalist logic of the closed work of art and the traditional logic of the concert as a sequence of such crystalline formations. Yet it was precisely this conventional idea of a work and its performance that Stockhausen was trying to combat when he introduced his aleatoric techniques.

²⁰ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Nr. 7, Klavierstück XI* [1957] (London: Universal Edition ⁸1998).

²¹ This aleatoric procedure corresponds to a deeply evolutionary principle. It is likely that the transition to random composition was inspired not only by the encounter with compositional techniques and ways of thought from the Far East, as has so often been emphasized, but that the publicization of the synthetic theory of evolution (which united the classical theory of evolution with the new genetics) at the end of the 1940s also played a role. Presumably, Stephen J. Gould gave the first consistently aleatoric and hence consistently evolutionary description of evolution. According to him, in order to understand evolution we have to play "life's tape" several times over, taking random effects into account. Then we see that life could have taken quite different courses than the one we are familiar with and which has led to us. "I call this experiment 'replaying life's tape.' You press the rewind button and, making sure you thoroughly erase everything that actually happened, go back to any time and place in the past [...]. Then let the tape run again and see if the repetitions looks at all like the original (Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, New York: Norton & Company, 1989, p. 48). This is the modern, aleatoric view of evolution, freed of teleological remnants. – Just as this evolutionary law only becomes manifest when we "re-play life's tape" several times over, so too we can perceive the effects of contingency in aleatoric music only when several versions of the piece are performed.

In short, what we have is a perversion of the aleatoric type of art, its re-adaptation to the old schema. I can hardly think of a greater disproportion, a greater betrayal, one that is committed today in the name of the new idol of the marketplace called beauty. This is an extreme example of the dire consequences of thoughtless adherence to the perspective of beauty. Evidently, though, most people today are so drunk with beauty that instead of recognizing such a scandal for what it is, they applaud it.

d. More dubious things in the "Return of Beauty"

The reasons for the current rekindling of interest in beauty are for the most part, it seems to me, superficial and external to art. It is the aestheticization of the everyday world that is at the basis of this interest. One thinks that art has to keep up with this hyper-aestheticization or to compete with the easy palatability of the media. As though art had to be at least as attractive as these other beautiful realities of our life. In either case, art comes to be valued only for its animation value – useful for stimulating attention and for increasing the number of the public.

I think this is false for a number of reasons. I cannot see that it is the task of art to chase after an aestheticization already in place and to duplicate it. The current aestheticization cannot be outdone in any case. In advertising, fashion, everyday life and in the media, bellism has long since been celebrating its highly persuasive and sophisticated triumphs.

The task of art, however, is not to celebrate what is already in existence anyway. And therein lies its chance of survival. Incorporating the aestheticization of the everyday in an alienated, distanced form in order to provoke critical reflection might perhaps be one alternative for art, and many are pursuing it. At bottom, however, I think art should be a realm of alterity. Faced with the overly stimulated sensitivity of an aestheticized society, it is rather anaesthetic that we need.²²

3. Sublime beauty – breathtaking and universal

In the end, though, I would like to change my tune. (I hope I do not have to be consistent. Today everybody talks about the inner plurality of modern subjects. And then they turn around and demand that they be consistent. How inconsistent of them! If it is right to enforce consistency, then talk of inner plurality was nothing but talk, indeed a lie.²³)

On the topic of beauty, we must not omit to speak of the phenomenon of sublime, breathtaking beauty. Time and again, such beauty has been a part of art, and with it is associated a fact that I believe is undeniable and worth thinking through. I mean the fascination that great art is capable of holding for human beings of all backgrounds and cultures. The fascination is not conditioned by membership in a particular culture nor is it restricted to any one culture. Undoubtedly, much of what we find beautiful, is culturally conditioned. Sublime, breathtaking beauty, however, is not. Its attractiveness arises from sources that are deeper than could be attributed to specific cultures. That is why such beauty is able to speak to members of quite different cultural groups. –

²² On this point cp. Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997).

²³ On this problem cp. Wolfgang Welsch, "Wie wir auf Konsistenz aus sind – und warum", in: *Contradictions: Logic, History, Actuality*", edited by Elena Ficara (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012).

How is this fascination to be explained?²⁴

a. Mea res agitur

We are all familiar with the sense of a *mea res agitur*. Although these works were obviously not made for us, they nevertheless seem to concern us. As distant as the origin of these works may be in space and time, we have the feeling that it is *we* who are at stake. As though these works held a promise or a challenge (and a potential) to widen and improve our sensibility, our understanding and perhaps also our life.

When we experience such works in this way, we do not lock them within their original cultural context. We take them as relevant to our orientation and as transculturally effective. As a phenomenon, I think, this is undeniable.

b. Transcultural effectiveness contradicts the modern dogma of complete contextual determination

Theoretical reflection tends to overlook this transcultural effectiveness. In the modern age, we have grown accustomed to thinking that everything is strictly bound to its cultural context. We have come to believe that all experience, creation and cognition are determined by their cultural framework and hence also restricted to it. That is the modern axiom par excellence. It lies at the root of all the varieties of relativism, contextualism and culturalism that dominate the contemporary scene in the human sciences and cultural studies.²⁵

Without a doubt, *some* aspects are indeed context-dependent. But *not all* are. Yet the modern axiom blinds us to the culturally undetermined, transcultural potential of semantic formations, of which works of art are a prominent example. Instead of obeying the modern decree and burying this potential or making it vanish, we should try to give it adequate conceptual articulation. We need a theory that can do justice to the transcultural power of semantic formations. Such a theory, it seems to me, does not yet exist.

The fascination I am speaking of works independently of familiarity with the respective culture. When you come to Japan for the first time and visit the Ginkakuji Temple in Kyoto, you are captivated by the magnetism of the place. You might know nothing of Japanese culture in the fifteenth century, much less about the specific conditions under which the Shogun Yoshimasa created the temple complex. Even so, you feel irresistibly drawn to it – and after a short time you might even sense how the place changes your gait, your demeanor, the way you think.

It is as though a hitherto unknown chord in our existence had been struck – a side of us about

²⁴ I presented reflections of the following kind for the first time in my paper "Rethinking identity in the age of globalization – a transcultural perspective" (in *Symposium of Beauty and Art. Festschrift für Tsunemichi Kamabayashi*, edited by Hiroshi Okabayashi et al., Tokyo: Keiso, 2002, pp. 333–346). Cp. also "Transkulturalität – neue und alte Gemeinsamkeiten" in: Wolfgang Welsch, *Immer nur der Mensch? Entwürfe zu einer anderen Anthropologie* (Berlin: Akademie, 2011), 294–322.

²⁵ I have developed a critical account of this axiom in my books *Mensch und Welt* (Munich: Beck, 2012) and *Homo mundanus – Jenseits der anthropischen Denkform der Moderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012).

which we previously knew nothing and which now suddenly begins to resonate. In our culture, it had never been brought to bear; now it blossoms. As though up until now we had realized only part of our human potential. As if the possibilities were richer than what had been hitherto developed. – How is that to be explained?

c. Insufficiency of the hermeneutic explanation

The standard explanation, the hermeneutic one, will not do. According to it, all our understanding is ultimately determined by our specific cultural context. But that is highly implausible. Neither the initial fascination nor later, more elaborate interpretation is culturally dependent to such an extent. Someone who grew up in Paris and studied at Paris VIII St. Denis is not by virtue of that fact gifted with a deeper understanding of the St. Denis Cathedral. For this, he must – like anyone else – acquire a lot of additional knowledge. Likewise, his Parisian childhood does not put him in any better position to gain that knowledge than someone who grew up in Boston or Shanghai. None of these childhoods either facilitates or rules out a thorough understanding.²⁶

Clearly, the fascination is independent of membership in any particular culture. Visitors of *every* cultural background feel the magnetism of the Ginkakuji Temple. None of them, neither a visitor from "old Europe" nor a Japanese visitor, was alive when the temple complex was erected. Neither being an historical contemporary nor belonging to an "effective history" really plays any role here. Rather, there must be something in the human constitution as such that makes us receptive to the attraction of the place – something deeper than our culturally specific formation, something transcultural that is bound up with human potential as such.

d. The Underlying Transcultural Dimension

Even if it were true that we inevitably approach the unfamiliar through the filter of a culturally conditioned perspective (as hermeneuticians contend), that would still not change the fact that we can only experience the transcultural force of works like the Ginkakuji Temple because there is a dimension immanent within our cultural formation that transcends the cultural framework. In the midst of our cultural molding paths open up to even the most "exotic" works of art.²⁷ Our cultural formation obviously contains something that opens the way to other cultures – and I do not mean just the dead-end of a self-modeled otherness that leaves us stuck within ourselves, but paths that really lead to the other.²⁸

Put differently, culture seems to contain two layers, one cultural, one transcultural. The

²⁶ Today it is American scholars who write the best books on European art.

²⁷ Speaking somewhat emphatically of the "divine grace of cosmopolitanism," Baudelaire expressed this thought by saying that that grace is given only to few men in its entirety, but that "all can acquire it in different degrees" (Charles Baudelaire, "The Exposition Universelle, 1855" [1868], in: *Art in Paris 1845–1862. Salons and Other Exhibitions* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1965), pp. 121–143, here p. 122 [from: "I. Critical Method – On the Modern Idea of Progress as Applied to the Fine Arts – On the Shift of Vitality"]).

²⁸ Cp. Tugendhat: "I think the idea that our possibilities for understanding are primarily bound by the western tradition is a prejudice" (Ernst Tugendhat, *Egozentrismus und Mystik. Eine anthropologische Studie*, München: Beck, 2003, p. 135).

culture with which we are familiar is itself a particular shape taken by a more general structure. And because the latter still inheres in the specific shape of our culture, we as culturally molded beings are able to gain access to semantic formations that have no direct relation to the shape of our own culture. It is a bit like in Chomsky's theory, according to which every language one learns is a particular shape taken by universal grammar, so that we can go on to learn further languages by accessing that universal structure.

We should direct our attention to this attractiveness of exceptional cultural achievements – particularly those of exceptional beauty. That attractiveness is a fact. But it is also a conceptual challenge. It is still the case that nobody really knows how to explain it. To develop a theory that can, would be a genuinely worthwhile task in the current discourse on beauty.²⁹

²⁹ Cp. for a first attempt my "On the Universal Appreciation of Beauty," *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Vol. 12 (2008), pp. 6–32.