On the Ugly

On the Ugly:

Aesthetic Exchanges

Edited by

Jane Forsey and Lars Aagaard-Mogensen

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PREFACE

The Challenge of the Ugly

Ugliness has long been seen as a spoiler of aesthetic welfare. The ugly is an unwelcome phenomenon that, like a weed in a garden, should be avoided in—or eradicated from—landscapes, artworks, quotidian objects and even human beings, to be replaced by its purported converse, beauty. To assert that an object, a vista or a people is rich because it has much ugliness seems absurd; the ugly cannot be said in praise of anything, nor is it praised. To admire a thing because it is ugly would baffle most: "Why did you pick that? Because it is so ugly!" must be said in jest. "I must aim to make this as ugly as possible;" "this is nearly finished, I only need to add some ugliness"—comes off as manifest nonsense. Umberto Eco, in his compilation of synonyms of the ugly, attests to its unwelcome nature: it is "repellent, horrible, horrendous, disgusting, disagreeable, grotesque, abominable, repulsive, odious, indecent, foul, dirty, obscene, repugnant, frightening, abject, monstrous, horrid, horrifying, unpleasant, terrible, terrifying, frightful, nightmarish, revolting, sickening, fetid, fearsome, ignoble, ungainly, displeasing, tiresome, offensive, deformed, and disfigured."[1] In short, the ugly hardly seems a notion upon which one would like to, or should prefer to, dwell, in practice or in theory, especially in the area of aesthetics, given its main occupations with the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque, the tasteful and the pleasurable.

Indeed, in the first treatise on ugliness, by nineteenth-century philosopher Karl Rosenkranz, attention to the ugly appeared as necessary for systematic completion: an investigation of ugliness was an inseparable part of a complete aesthetic study of beauty. "[B]iology also concerns itself with the concept of illness, ethics with that of evil, legal science with injustice, [and] theology with the concept of sin"—the ugly was given place as a distasteful but necessary part of the dialectic of human experience that, like cancer and murder, must nevertheless be understood.[2]

Yet such dismissals, or grudging considerations, are too quick. Aesthetic experience, as the attention to, or contemplation of, sensory

[1] Umberto Eco, Ed. *On Ugliness* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011), "Introduction," p. 16.
[2] Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 25.

appearances, must surely include phenomena that do not immediately delight or please us. To exclude the ugly from the realm of the aesthetic is to ignore a great number of our experiences on the one hand, and to valorise a greater few of them on the other. The ugly is ubiquitous: we are all familiar with, have spotted, have remarked upon: ugly behaviour, ugly animals, cars, plants, artworks, buildings, designs, fashions; we have all had experiences of, as Eco noted, the tasteless, the distasteful, the grotesque and the deformed. A science of sensory experience should surely have room for these as well: the question is just *how*.

What is the ugly? Is it a mere negation of beauty, a lack of, or a deficit in, aesthetic value? Or is it, somewhat paradoxically, an aesthetic property or value of its own, albeit a negative one? That is, are ugly things *actually* ugly in some real sense, or do they just fail to have even minimal characteristics or properties of beauty? Certainly that was the general view in medieval philosophy, where ugliness did not merit philosophical attention because there was, in fact, nothing to attend *to*, but merely a regrettable absence that failed our attempts at aesthetic contemplation, or, worse, led us astray from the divinity of the beautiful.

Post Rosenkranz, the ugly was no longer seen as a lack of beauty, or its opposite: something that was "not beautiful" was not thereby ugly: it could be aesthetically neutral, or at the zero point on some aesthetic scale of value, as Robert Stecker has argued, being without aesthetic interest, and therefore that to which we would be aesthetically indifferent.[3] Equally, a thing that is "not ugly" is not thereby beautiful: it could be simply unobtrusive, as Verschaffel has argued in this volume, or somehow beneath our notice. The dichotomy of the beautiful and the ugly has, in recent years, been reconceptualised, and the starting premise for the contributors to this collection is that an aesthetic experience of ugliness is indeed possible, although they differ in how they seek to characterise it. Parret, for instance, places the ugly as being beyond the sublime, as does Bradfield, while Verschaffel conceives of it as the "aestheticisation" of the monstrous or the disgusting. Naivin, by contrast, understands the ugly in terms of the superficiality of post-modern society, where the tragic and disastrous become the decorative or the entertaining, as exemplified in the works of Andy Warhol. Silverbloom argues instead, through Adorno, that ugliness has moral power—that it is more primordial than beauty, and that

[3] Robert Stecker here implicitly echoes Frank Sibley's characterisation in "Some Notes on Ugliness," in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, Ed. John Benson *et al.*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 190-206. See Stecker's "Carroll's Bones," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46 (2006): 282-286, p. 284.

its role is to reflect the suffering and pain of our culture in order to denounce it: the force of art in all its ugliness, she suggests, is to function as critique.

But to separate ugliness from beauty as being ontologically distinct, or on a different scale of value altogether, is often to then bind it to other phenomena, like the sublime and the monstrous, or to other values, like the moral or the political. The difficulty in tackling the metaphysical question of the nature of ugliness lies in part in how to approach it: on its own, as an independent phenomenon or form of experience; as somehow indelibly bound up with beauty, as its opposite (or its complement); or, again, as related to some other aesthetic category, from which it emerges, or which it perverts. These difficulties form one thread of consideration that runs through the present collection.

The ugly engenders a second and equally problematic dichotomy, when we turn to consider its value in our experiences of it, a dichotomy between pleasure and displeasure, or pain. Almost without exception, aesthetic experience has been linked to pleasure: the beautiful has been seen as that which pleases us in our response to sensory stimuli, and the ugly, as displeasing, has on this account been dismissed as having no aesthetic value for us. The question of whether the aesthetic has to do with beauty only is equally the question of whether it has to do with pleasure, and with pleasure of a particular kind. And the problem that the ugly poses in this regard is whether it is intrinsically dis-pleasurable—if so, can it be considered a bona fide form of aesthetic experience? This question cuts to the core of presumptions about the nature of aesthetic experience in general, and indeed threatens the historical complacency of the discipline.

Silverbloom suggests that the import of the ugly as cultural critique is to cause displeasure, and with it self-realisation. Bradfield similarly suggests that the disharmony and displeasure of experiences of the ugly can expand the bounds of our faculties, and even engender the formation of community. Johnson takes on the problem of displeasure in the growing body of Kantian scholarship, where the debate surrounds the possibility of experiences of the ugly within Kant's aesthetics. If judgements of the beautiful involve the harmonious and purposive free play of the cognitive faculties—that is pleasing to us—must the ugly thereby be disharmonious, contra-purposive and displeasurable? Or is it a case of the malfunction of the faculties and thus beyond the aesthetic altogether? Johnson concludes that there must be a place for ugliness in aesthetic experience, and suggests, with Verschaffel, that it can be both offensive and fascinating at once, providing a form of pleasure of a particular kind. Forsey, in a discussion of a related Kantian notion of the unpleasant, argues that while

we do not enjoy it, the unpleasant is uniquely motivational in a way that disinterested judgements of beauty are not. Chen addresses what has been called the paradox of pleasure, or the paradox of negative emotion, most directly, in a Nietzschean analysis of our attraction to horror films, ugliness, and even public torture. What he calls the "seductive allure to life" in negatively pleasurable experiences is in fact a mirror of human nature, if not an example of the human condition as the will to power.

The eight papers collected here, unique as each is in its approach to the ugly, all share in seeking to expand the scope of aesthetic theory, and to prise it away from its traditional pre-occupation with beauty and with aesthetic pleasure. While focusing on the puzzle that ugliness presents, the authors' responses to it nevertheless delve into some of the deepest concerns of philosophical aesthetics broadly understood, and suggest that, in different ways, the ugly provides an intensification of our sensory experience that is equally deserving of theoretical attention. While in recent years the ugly has been gaining some philosophical attention, this has largely been in the context of Kantian scholarship. What we offer here is the first collection of papers that explore the ontological and axiological problems of the ugly, from a rich diversity of perspectives.

THE IDEA OF UGLINESS

CHAPTER I

ON THE AESTHETIC GAZE, BEAUTY AND THE TWO SOURCES OF UGLINESS

BART VERSCHAFFEL

Do you know any means of suppressing
what arises from the things you see?
Paul Valéry[1]

Beauty, in all its myriad forms, was a central topic in literature and philosophy until the end of the eighteenth century. Ugliness, by contrast, was seldom written about, or only incidentally and indirectly. The puzzling thing about ugliness, as Aristotle had already noted, was that even the banal or ugly could be rendered interesting or beautiful through artful depiction. There is "beautiful" and "beautiful-ugly," but the artfully-ugly is not the same as ugly art. When it came to the philosophy of art, this insight fostered an appreciation of beauty's magical and, above all, deceptive power. Comparatively little thought, however, was devoted to a precise formulation of what "ugliness" might signify. The theories of the sublime, the picturesque and the fantastic, which originated in the eighteenth century, generally follow the same trajectory: they analyse how something initially perceived (or sensed) as possessing a "negative" aesthetic value can nevertheless, quite unexpectedly, be experienced as "positive." Everything that is menacing and dangerous, with the power to annihilate our very existence, seems to send a pleasant shiver down our spines. The irregular, rough or weathered, incomplete, immature or anecdotal might also—contrary to all classical standards of beauty—be regarded as charming. And the forced, whimsical and bizarre can prove strangely entertaining. The (theoretical) interest in ugliness first emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, mainly amongst the German

[1] *Œuvres, I* (ed. Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 328, trans. from the French: "*Sais-tu quelque moyen de réprimer ce qui surgit de la vue des choses?"*

"idealist" thinkers and literati, and reached an early pinnacle in *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853) by Karl Rosenkranz.[2] But these authors also looked more deeply, in a Hegelian sense, into the way in which ugliness—understood as the opposite or negation of the various forms of beauty—could be aestheticised and "idealised" through artistic representation. Moreover, they assessed how variants of ugliness could be integrated into a broader and more complex notion of beauty: "[Art] must show us ugliness in the full compass of its mischief, but it must do this nevertheless with the ideality with which it handles the beautiful …".[3]

The great Enlightenment thinkers analysed the concept of beauty from the perspective of aesthetic *judgement*, which they considered to be statements about an object's inherent nature. At the heart of all subsequent discussions lay the question of whether "beauty" was intrinsic—either because of an object's appearance, and/or method of manufacture, and/or how well form follows function—or a matter of taste. Either the *Bestimmungsgrund* (ground of determination) of aesthetic judgement lies in the object itself, or in the subject. Despite the infinite range of indeterminate positions that can exist between the extremes of "objectivist" and "subjectivist" aesthetics, the debate is unresolvable. Yet this question is based on the premise that an aesthetic experience bears a "natural" correlation to reality. In other words, it is assumed that the aesthetic gaze is perpetually and universally accessible to mankind, and that "aesthetic judgement" is simply a special form of general human cognition. Now, the appearance of things—for example, form, pattern, colour and luminosity—undoubtedly influences everything that we perceive and experience, feel and do. We are all responsive to shapes and can recognise rhythms and colour combinations. The awareness of form can, however, be discounted in many practices and modes of experience. It has no independent existence, per se, as "the aesthetic experience." The aesthetic gaze implies an appreciation of "pure appearances," whereby the aspect of an object is somewhat disconnected from its function, value, and meaning. The aesthetic experience presupposes that an object's appearance is isolated and given independent consideration. This bears an extraordinary, sophisticated, and profoundly artificial relationship to reality. In any case,

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[2] K. Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (Ditseingen: Reclam, 2007). For the German language development of the theory of ugliness I have used Werner Jung *Schöner Schein der Hässlichkeit oder Hässlichkeit des schönen Scheins. Ästhetik und Geschichtsphilosophie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Athenäum, 1987).

[3] Rosenkranz, *op. cit.*, p. 47, trans. from the German: "[*Die Kunst*] *muss uns das Hässliche in der ganzen Schärfe seines Unwesens vorführen, aber sie muss dies dennoch mit derjenigen Idealität tun, mit der sie auch das Schöne behandelt.*"

the locus and importance of the aesthetic experience, and more fundamentally its availability, is far from evident. A society/culture must permit and tolerate this abstraction: focusing exclusively on appearances while disregarding an object's value and function is often inappropriate and can, on occasion, be downright disrespectful or outrageous. An aesthetically-abstracting attitude can offend multiple kinds of political, moral, or religious engagement with the subject matter. Isolating and appreciating appearances, regardless of their moral value or usefulness, is therefore a cultural issue. And even when aesthetic detachment is developed as a "possibility" within a culture, it inevitably remains a question of individual attainment. It is also a social or class issue. The concrete manner through which this disinterested gaze is made possible and accessible—the codes and *settings* that people use, in various contexts, to look with a disinterested and dispassionate eye—varies. But this does not mean that the logic and conditions of the aesthetic gaze and experience cannot be discussed in general terms.

The aesthetic gaze or approach is related to, and supported by, the specific way in which the object presents itself: the circumstances pertaining to its perceptual presence. It implies that the "tenebrous" senses of smell, taste and touch are circumvented by physical distance, attitude or obstacles, and that the perception and attention are channelled towards "pure visuality" or sound. An object will often be coded as "spectacle" or "performance", thus as something enacted or played, which implies that it is somehow "not real," or belongs to an alternative reality. The apparatus of showing and exhibiting focuses the attention, and both frames and isolates an object, thereby making it independent of the world. This has the effect of neutralising the involvement that would automatically be engendered by physical proximity. "Showing" or "exhibiting" might range from simply pointing at something to christening it as "art". The codes and/or physical distance can be communicated and imposed by a wide range of devices, including shop windows, plinths, dishes, frames or windows, glass plates and viewpoints; or, in the theatre, the proscenium that separates the audience from the "unreal" space of the performance. The most important means of establishing aesthetic distance—so that we are confronted with pure visuality and, at the same time, a form of "unreality"—is, and always will be, *the image*: representation by similitude. Both performances and images readily lend themselves to aesthetic appreciation. Anyone who has internalised the aesthetic approach will find themselves able to look at almost anything as they might a performance or picture—just as one can listen to ambient noise as to a kind of music. The distance that allows one to see something "aesthetically"

might only be a question of attitude and perspective, therefore, which makes it unique to *the eye of the beholder.* Taken to a logical conclusion, one might, in principle, assess *everything* from an "aesthetic" perspective. But it would still seem that this form of appreciation, whether rightly or wrongly, presents too many "technical" conditions; and we tend to concur that it is both wrong and inappropriate to treat everything as an aesthetic object.

"This is beautiful" and "that is ugly" are not opposites and nor are they the two extremes of a continuum. To say that something is "not beautiful" does not automatically mean it is ugly, and to pronounce something as "not ugly" does not equate to it being beautiful. To declare something "beautiful" or "ugly" is to deploy one of two distinct forms of aesthetic appreciation, each of which similarly privileges and isolates an object, thereby setting it at an "aesthetic distance". It becomes an opposite, therefore, of all that is "normal". Or, in other words, it differs from the myriad of aesthetically-neutral objects that sink without a trace into the quagmire of unobtrusiveness. The "not-ugly" and "not-beautiful" can thus be categorised as "ordinary." Aesthetic appreciation—whether positive or negative—is a form of individualisation: both appraisals accord the object a status that transcends the ordinary or normal.[4] The beautiful and the ugly therefore are both *outstanding,* albeit in vastly divergent ways and on disparate grounds. Experiencing beauty or confronting ugliness are two completely distinct things, with very different issues at stake.

The aesthetic experience is oriented towards immediate impressions and presupposes that the act of contemplation detaches the appearance from the object, and hence the latter's existence and agency in the world vis-à-vis its origin, meaning, value, function, purpose. Experiencing a spring day or a landscape, a melody or a physique as "beautiful," and expressing this perception, implies that one is impressed by the mere appearance or (visual) inexhaustibility of what is seen or heard, devoid of vested interests or intention to profit from it, and without any comparative assessment against established criteria (such as the idea of perfection or a moral consideration). I would argue, however, that this "disinterested pleasure," as Kant terms it, is structurally associated with another element. This is our surprise that beauty does, in fact, exist: "A thing of beauty is incredible—and exists."[5] Crucially, beauty is always "new" and exceptional, and therefore unexpected. It takes us by surprise, and this because of its incomprehensibility and deviation from our expectations of "normality."

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 190ff.
[5] Paul Valéry, *Cahiers, II,* ed. Pléiade, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 962; translated from the French: "*La belle chose est incroyable – et est.*"

Consequently, a thing of beauty always seems *improbable*. The Kantian "subjective universality" that characterises aesthetic judgement thus expresses the claim that something *is*, in fact, genuinely beautiful, i.e. that it goes beyond individual "preferences" or "tastes." An experience of beauty is akin to a *broadening of reality*. And because the manifestation of beauty presents a paradox—being both implausible and yet irrefutable—the implication is that a new reality outshines the one we already know. The experience of beauty, therefore, entails far more than a simple delight in the appearance of something: it always involves a *discovery*. Beauty functions as an "ontological threshold." But the discovery is made through a coincidental, fortunate encounter: one needs to be present at *that* specific time and place for it to be seen or heard. The certainty that beauty "has happened" is only given through a subjective, personal and unique experience. It privileges both a moment and an individual. Beauty is thus existentially anchored and can mark someone's life. The so-called "judgement of beauty" therefore does not articulate a verifiable opinion on a "state of affairs." It does not aim at a scientific description of reality, which relates to the objective properties of objects. It belongs to a language-game of a completely different order. To judge something as beautiful, therefore, is to bear *witness*: it is the statement of a universal truth as revealed to one person via a unique experience.[6]

Classical aesthetics posited ugliness as a negative principle and examined whether it might "dissolve" within something beautiful (and thus lend beauty a specific "colouring")—and if so, by what means. Twentieth-century philosophical reflections on themes such as the "formless" and the "abject," concomitant with developments in modern and contemporary art, have contributed to the insight that ugliness cannot only be defined in negative terms, or merely reduced to an absence of beauty. Ugliness is a thing unto itself; it has an independent status.

Beauty triumphs over the ordinary and augments what already exists. The *Wohlgefallen* [aesthetic pleasure] is coupled with the affirmation of this surprising enrichment of reality. Ugliness, in contrast, is not "new." It does not amaze or surprise; it does not come on top of what exists but, instead, cleaves onto the "normal world," and is immediately recognised. Ugliness is a *revenant*: it is permeated by a resistance or force that precedes the ordinary world. Enlightenment theories of aesthetics assumed that ugliness, and the sense of something being ugly—like the notion of beauty—was "natural," a primary mode of being (for objects) or of

[6] I developed this argument more fully in "Fatale waarheid: bemerkingen bij het esthetisch oordeel en de schoonheidservaring," *De zaak van de kunst. Over kennis, kritiek en schoonheid* (Ghent: A&S/books, 2011).

experience (for humans). Everything in existence was believed to be either beautiful or ugly to a greater or lesser extent, and thus experienced as such, with the many guises of ugliness, like those of beauty, individually linked to specific feelings and emotions. Attempts were made to identify and classify these myriad kinds of ugliness and to correlate them with the responses they engendered. The "experience of ugliness," though, is even more specific and quite distinct from that of beauty. It is not ugliness as such that elicits rejection or disgust. Aesthetic appreciation—the ability to apprehend something as ugly and give it a name—already involves the processing and mastery of primary emotions and reactions that *precede* the aesthetic. "Ugliness" is the aesthetic mode of appearance for everything that erupts "from below" to disrupt the "ordinary" or "normal" or, in short, our whole, life-sustaining world. With ugliness, the threat of the monstrous and a risk of contamination by the formless shines forth.

Normality is threatened, disturbed or ruptured in two radically different ways: by the monstrous or terrifying—Rosenkranz uses the word *Abform* [deformity]; or by the formless or disgusting—which he called *Ungestalt* [formlessness].[7] One can, admittedly, easily conjure up disgusting monsters. But the monstrous, as such, is not disgusting, and the formless is not, as such, terrible.

The monstrous is "a deviation from nature," the fruit of "an efficient cause that claims omnipotence, a will that strives to compete with nature, and a tortured and dominant matter;" the monstrous is "uncanny."[8] It proves the fragility of form and the uncertainty of order. The monstrous is the uncontrolled, disorganised and deformed, it engenders and encourages caprices and excesses; it is the advent of chaos. Or, as Lucretius described it, monsters are primordial remnants that lurk beneath the wafer-thin crust of what we call "nature" and of man-made order and "normality." And the ultimate example of monstrosity is clearly the "deformity-humanity" (Rosenkranz calls it "the ugliest ugly".)[9] Deformity threatens ruin and destruction. It is dangerous, spreads panic, paralyses or petrifies, and causes all in its path to flee. The triad of monstrous, grey Graiae—the

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[7] Rosenkranz, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[8] Gilbert Lascault *Le monstre dans l'art occidental. Un problème esthétique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2004), pp. 21, 24-25; translated from the French: "*un écart par rapport à la nature*;" "*une cause efficiente qui se veut tout puissante, d'unevolonté qui veut rivaliser avec la nature et d'une matière torturée et dominée*;" "*inquiétante étrangeté*."

[9] Rosenkranz, *op. cit.*, p. 12; translated from the German: "*das hässlichste hässliche."*

triplet sisters of the fearsome Gorgons Medusa, Skylla and Echidna—are Horror (Enyo) Terror (Deino) and Destruction (Persis).[10]

Formlessness, on the other hand, is vague, viscous and glutinous, weak, decayed, diseased and rotten, with the most pungent variant being bodily secretions (the "abject"): Georges Bataille's squashed spider or worm. At its core is *Verwesen* [putrefaction], or organic decay: not dying or dead, but "*das Entwerden des schon Toten*" [the decomposition of the already dead]. The human body reverts to waste or "remains"—teeming, nameless, soulless life: "we are more disgusted and repulsed by the appearance of life in what is already itself dead."[11] A lack of form radiates negativity; an encounter with the formless is contagious, sticky and contaminating: it attacks the *Gestalt* and identity, provokes revulsion and disgust, makes one recoil and retch; it must be kept at bay, and all contact immediately remedied by purification, cleansing, "disengaging" and vomiting, or through (ritual) laughter.[12]

A direct confrontation with the monstrous or the formless invokes archaic and automatic responses that precede every possible form of aestheticisation or "experience of ugliness:" the actual confrontation with a heinous creature, or pus for example, never directly inspires aesthetic appreciation, or even a "judgement of ugliness." Rather, they provoke the primary reactions and operations that neutralise the imminent threat. All

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[10] For the literature on the monstrous see, in addition to Lascault (with an extensive bibliography), David Leeming, *Medusa in the Mirror of Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), and Jean Clair, *Medusa. Contribution à une Anthropologie des arts du visuel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[11] Rosenkranz, *op.cit.*, p. 294; translated from the German: "*Der Schein des Lebens im an sich Toten ist das unendlich Widrige im Ekelhaften."*

[12] The writings of Georges Bataille were essential to the introduction of the formless (and disgusting) as a theme in art and art theory. He, in turn, drew upon anthropological studies of primitive religions and rituals, especially on the subject of "purity" (Mary Douglas, Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Roger Caillois). Inspiring is the collection of texts gathered in *Traverses* 37. *Le dégoût*, published by Centre Georges Pompidou in April 1986. The most important overview and first conceptualisation of the artistic use of "formless," before it became concentrated upon the physical and abject, is the exhibition catalogue *L'informe. Mode d'emploi*, curated by Yve-Alain Bois & Rosalind Krauss (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1996): *Formless. A Users Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). The couple of pages that Rosenkranz dedicated to the subject are certainly *grundlegend* [fundamental]: see *op. cit.*, about "Das Ekelhafte" [the disgusting], pp. 293-303. See also Aurel Kolnai *Ekel*, *Hochmut, Hass. Zur Phänomenologie feindlicher Gefühle* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2007), and the recent survey: Winfried Menninghaus *Ekel: Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).

societies develop a "culture" to deal with these things. Religions, particularly, offer many solutions, including myths and a whole range of ceremonies and magical practices, from exorcisms, ritual insults and cursing, to sacrifices, purification and simply "laughing it off." It took centuries of arduous effort to wrest theatrical and visual forms of representation from their original religious contexts and, furthermore, to sufficiently divest them of their magical aspects. In so doing, performances and images could finally be put to "artistic" use—not only as a way of "playing" with meaning (probably the first and ultimate type of artistic "work"), but also as a method of isolating appearances and offering them up for aesthetic appreciation. The difficult and profoundly artificial base operation of aestheticisation does not primarily preclude, contrary to expectation, the finding of beauty in ugliness. What it does imply is that everything monstrous or disgusting can successfully be kept at arm's length and subjected to scrutiny, whereupon it becomes innocuous, or merely "ugly," i.e. practically harmless, and perhaps even ridiculous. The *sight* of what is effectively monstrous or disgusting therefore becomes, in the worst case, merely "unpleasant"—a "lingering emotion" associated with the origin of this "ugly appearance." Rosenkranz noted that a painting of the Raising of Lazarus is powerless to convey the human stench of death: the viewer "is only forced to *think* of the superficial beginning of decay."[13] Elsewhere, he refers to the fresco of the *Triumph of Death* in the church Campo Santo of Pisa, a detail of which depicts a noble hunting party pinching their noses as they ride past a corpse in an open grave: "we see this well enough, but we do not smell it."[14] Indeed, to find something "hideously ugly" already presupposes an aesthetic distance, one that has terminated the primary automatic reactions. The detachment implied by an experience of ugliness, therefore, is much more complicated, ambiguous and tainted than an encounter with beauty. It conceals a greater involvement and deeper significance than is associated with the latter, whereby the engagement follows disinterested contemplation and is related to the existential meaning of a life-changing moment and unexpected discovery.

It is possible, just as with beauty, that the isolation and contemplation of ugliness occurs through *the eye of the beholder.* Yet because the experience of ugliness does not commence with "disinterest" but with a primary, *pre-aesthetic* engagement, it is much more problematic. A

[13] Rosenkranz, *op.cit.*, p. 297; translated from the German: "*doch eben nur an einen oberflächlichen Beginn der Verwesung zu denken hat*."
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 295, translated from the German: "*Wir sehen dies wohl, aber wir riechen es nicht*."

specific "disposition" of the attention rarely suffices. Special resources and specific contexts, such as the arts, seem necessary to the successful neutralisation and reduction of the impending monstrosity or invading formlessness. Once distilled to a mere image or appearance—reduced to pure visuality and "unreality"—it can be "aesthetically appreciated" and be deemed (merely) "ugly." Here, the effective medium par excellence is undoubtedly representation, or the image/likeness. Perhaps the paralysing, lethal or contagious potency of the monstrous and disgusting can never be fully neutralised, but an image can tone it down, just enough for it to be viewed. Their powers can be captured and imprisoned when reflected in a picture or performance. This is what I will call the "*medusa strategy*."

Rationalist and ahistorical aesthetic theories mistakenly interpret the emotions involved in disliking an unpleasant picture as a response (or reaction) to ugliness itself. The aesthetically-distant relationship with the "ugly" always cloaks a specific stance towards the monstrous and/or disgusting. Our dealings with ugliness—the "aesthetic" rejection—are always existentially loaded, motivated by other concerns, and somewhat archaic. Our familiarity with ugliness means that we view it as par for the course. "The intricate, the contradictory, the amphibious, and therefore even the unnatural, the criminal, the strange, even the mad" is always interesting.[15] It can even *fascinate:* something of the ancient and well-known shines through but must remain suppressed and concealed. A hint of obscenity hangs over the ugly. (And the reverse might also be true. Rosenkranz was probably right to say that everything phallic, though venerated by religion, is ugly when viewed aesthetically and so cannot be idealised/aestheticised: "All phallic gods are ugly.")[16] It is not a question, therefore, of whether something ugly can still be regarded as "beautiful." "Ugliness," as such, is the result of the "aestheticisation" of the monstrous or disgusting. But it can also lend a *frisson* to works of art when added in small doses. The different and more primal level at which this engagement occurs is the very reason that its (carefully controlled) "appearance" in art can be far more gripping and intense than the presence of beauty. The ever-ambiguous satisfaction that one feels at the sight of (a successful artistic representation of) ugliness—such as, for example, in one of the variations of the "sublime," or as an ingredient of the picturesque or fantastic—is not derived from the pleasantness of its "pure appearance" but from the realisation that a risky enterprise has succeeded. It is not the

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 104; translated from the German: "*[d]as Verwickelte, das Widerspruchvolle, das Amphibolische und daher selbst das Unnatürliche, das Verbrecherische, das Seltsame, ja Wahnsinnige*."
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 223; translated from the German: "*Alle phallischen Götter sind Häßlich*."

appearance, as such, that we admire, but the triumph of the depiction: we are amazed that the hideous-monstrous and/or disgusting—which we would never dare confront—has been tamed through visualisation and can now be viewed with "detachment." Artworks can, it would seem, keep the monster in check and produce complex, equivocal experiences in which unease at the recognition of a dangerous enemy is mingled with gratitude at its imprisonment, as well as a sense of elation. To illustrate how the "aesthetic" dispositive can neutralise the monstrous and disgusting and, furthermore, lend meaning and value to "ugliness," I would like to cite *Inspirations méditerranéennes* by Paul Valéry.[17] In this published lecture, Valéry describes how the Mediterranean Sea formed its own *sensibilité*. He illustrates his point via two "impressions," both of which had a decisive, profound and lasting impact upon his psyche. These did not stem from the beautiful, or a "pure appearance," but from the successful way in which, *by quasi-artistic strategies*, the terrible became visible and, quite exceptionally, even the disgusting.

The first of these is a consummate and classic example of the sublime vista and the power of the romantic "landscape gaze."[18] When describing a panoramic view of the harbour and sea from the courtyard of his former school, Valéry wrote: "for me there is no spectacle to compare with what can be seen from a terrace or a balcony pleasantly situated above a harbour."[19] The view combined the "uniform simplicity of the sea" with "closer by, the lives and industry of humans, those who traffic, build, maneuvre."[20] On one side: the sea, the eternal, natural, unchangeable primordial source, "a nature eternally primitive, untouched, unchangeable by man." On the other: the coastline, where the sea and the earth collide and the passage of Time is revealed, "the erratic work of time, continually reshaping the shore …".[21] And on the shoreline, the trifling works of men that are accorded such significance: "the reciprocal work of man—the

[17] "Inspirations méditerranéennes," *Essais quasi politiques*, *Œuvres I,* ed. Pléiade, (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp. 1084-1098.
[18] For an interesting series of essays on the sublime landscape see the catalogue *Le Paysage et la question de sublime* (Musée de Valence, 1997).
[19] Valéry, *op.cit.*, p. 1084; translated from the French: "*ce que l'on voit d'une terrasse ou d'un balcon bien placé au-dessus d'un port*."
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 1085; translated from the French: "*la simplicité générale de la mer*" and "*la vie et l'industrie humaines, qui trafiquent, construisent, manoeuvrent tout auprès*."
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 1085; translated from the French: "*une nature éternellement primitive, intacte, inaltérable par l'homme …*" and "*l'oeuvre irrégulier du temps qui façonne indéfiniment le ravage*."

accumulation of constructions with their geometric forms, straight lines, planes and arcs—contrasting with the disorder and accidents of natural forms."[22] The blind, irregular effects, the dangerous natural "disorder" that cannot be conquered or regulated, are encapsulated within an image of the world, positioned alongside and amongst the perfect man-made chaos. In a parallel passage in a different text, *Regards sur la mer,* Valéry placed greater emphasis on the inhuman and "monstrous" aspect of the sea and natural time, and the genuine disparity in which man arranges his insignificant history: "for is this not the exact frontier at which the eternally wild, brute physical nature, the unfailing primitive, the ever-virginal, meet face to face the works of the hands of man, the earth arranged, symmetries ordained, solids drawn up in ranks, energies directed and opposed, and the whole apparatus of an effort of which the evident principle is finality, economy, the appropriate, foresight, hope."[23] The coast is where Nature confronts "the contrary will of edification, voluntary labour, and the rebelliousness" of man.[24] The truth is, though, that "these peaceful depths" can stir at any moment, whereupon the sea "suddenly crashes upon the monstrous pedestals of emerging lands, assails, crushes, devastates the populated continents, ruins cultures, buildings, and all of life."[25] From the appropriate distance and height of the school courtyard, therefore, we are both cognisant of the danger and in thrall to its magnificence: "the gaze enfolds the human and inhuman at a sweep."[26] The impending monstrosity, the eternal and irreconcilable battle between nature's indifference and animalism, which comprises the truth of human

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 1085; translated from the French: "*l'œuvre réciproque des hommes, dont les constructions accumulées, les formes géométriques qu'ils emploient, la ligne droite, les plans ou les arcs s'opposent aux désordre et aux accidents des formes naturelles*."

[23] "Regards sur la mer," *Pièces sur L'Art, Œuvres II*, ed. Pléiade, (Paris:Gallimard, 1960), p. 1340; translated from the French: "*N'est-ce point ici la frontière même où se rencontrent éternellement sauvage, la nature physique brute, la présence toujours primitive et la réalité toute vierge, avec l'oeuvre des mains de l'homme, avec la terre modifiée, les symétries imposés, les solides rangés et dressés, l'énergie déplacée et contrariée, et tout l'appareil d'un effort dont la loi évidente est finalité, économie, appropriation, prévision, espérance*."

[24] "Inspirations méditerranéennes," *op.cit.*, p. 1085; translated from the French: "*la volonté contraire d'édification, le travail volontaire, et commerebelle*".

[25] "Regards sur la mer," *op.cit.*, p. 1136; translated from the French: "*se heurte tout à coup au socle monstrueux des terres émergées, assaille, écrase, dévaste les plates-formes populeuses, ruine les cultures, les demeures et toute vie*."

[26] "Inspirations méditerranéennes," *op.cit.*, p. 1085; translated from the French: "*L'œil ainsi embrasse à la fois l'humain et l'inhumain*."

existence, is here aestheticised and "resolved" into the "sublime"—*but only in an image, and only so long as it lasts.* (When the horror of the monstrous is entirely neutralised and the threat no longer recognised, therefore, the sublime or downright "ugly" becomes ridiculous: the monster is caricatured and/or becomes comical: a big friendly giant.)

The category of the sublime has been used since the eighteenth century, from Burke to Kant and in German idealism, to describe the successful artistic aestheticisation of the monstrous/terrible, or the inhuman/unnatural. It was only much later, principally in the field of late twentieth-century French philosophy, that the category was also linked to the formless/disgusting. The sight of mountains from an aeroplane window, the raging sea crashing against the rocks, or the vast vault of the Pantheon that floats in the air for a thousand years: these all cause an involuntary shudder born out of a real but distant threat of annihilation. But does this really equate to the "safe" contemplation (for example, in an art gallery or museum context) of the disappearance and dissolution of form?

Valéry did not describe his second impression as sublime but used the word "beauty"—a "*hideous* beauty" [*d'une affreuse beauté*]. Before presenting his story, he even apologised for any offence he might cause. As a young boy, Valéry decided to take a swim in the harbour. On the day in question, the local fishermen had landed huge catches of tuna fish. Before diving from the jetty, he gazed into the water: "Looking down all at once, I saw only a few feet away, in the marvellously still and transparent water, a hideous and resplendent chaos that made me shudder. Things of nauseating red, masses of a delicate pink, or of a deep and sinister purple, lay there …"[27] What Valéry saw, just before jumping, were the red, pink and purple guts that the fishermen, as was customary, had thrown back into the sea: "I recognised with horror the dreadful heap of viscera and entrails, I could neither flee nor endure what I saw, for the disgust caused by the charnel house struggled in me against my sense of the real and exceptional beauty of that confusion."[28] Valéry subsequently

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 1088; translated from the French: "*Tout à coup, abaissant le regard, j'aperçus à quelques pas de moi, sous l'eau merveilleusement plane et transparente, un horrible et splendide chaos qui me fit frémir. Des choses d'une rougeur écœurante, des masses d'un rose délicat ou d'une pourpre profonde et sinistre, gisaient là ...*"

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 1089; translated from the French: "*Je reconnus avec horreur l'affreux amas des viscères et des entrailles .... Je ne pouvais ni fuirni supporter ce que je voyais, car le dégoût que ce charnier me causait le disputait en moi à la sensation de beauté réelle et singulière de ce désordre*."

gives an elaborate, colourful description of the "disorder." He provides a masterful summary of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the experience, in which he was "torn between repugnance and interest, between flight and analysis." And he correctly pinpoints the locus of the conflict in the difference between the primary, total, *gut reaction* (*l'âme*, or the soul) and the aestheticising detachment (*l'œil,* or the eye): "the eye admired what the soul abhorred."[29]

What Valéry's description illuminates, in my view, is the gulf between the sublime (in which the monstrous is recognisable and the danger both still palpable and alive) and the "disgusting" that (in the above spectacle, at least) is completely overridden and unexpectedly gives way to a vision of hideous beauty [*affreuse beauté*,] or even actual beauty [*d'une beauté réelle*.] What might be regarded as "repulsive" certainly can, with a kind of artistic pirouette, also be aestheticised and linked to the sublime as, for example, in one of the many kinds of *Orgientheater* [Theatre of Orgies.] With the sublime, however, the threat of the monstrous is merely curbed: the danger is ever present. By contrast, the "disgusting" vision in Valéry's second "impression" is real and only "artistically" neutralised by the *eye of the beholder* in *conjunction with the sea*. Here, the aestheticisation is brought about by literally disabling the senses of touch, taste and smell—through which the "impure contact" is either made impossible or perfectly harmless—thus reducing the disgusting-formless tuna entrails to an almost abstract spectacle of free and random shapes and colours that *can* be regarded as "pleasant," while they might never be sublime. Unless, of course, along with Lyotard and other deconstructionist thinkers, that term is extended to encompass every philosophical collision with the "other" or the "strange," every "margin" of the understanding, or is even used to orchestrate the *écriture* itself into a "terrifying threat." (When the turbulence that emanates from the formless-disgusting is completely neutralised, but not transformed artistically into the "abstract-beautiful," and the origin of the image remains recognisable, it transforms into the gross, vulgar and scabrous-comic.)

The wonder of Valéry's narrative lies in his discovery of the power of the aesthetic gaze before he even knew that such a thing as "art" existed. Art produces an identical effect to that of the harbour water upon the entrails. The blue sea acted as a transparent "medium" that eliminated the smell (also "taste") and the possibility of contact and, in so doing, transformed the entrails into a purely visual apparition and spectacle: "but

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 1089; translated from the French: "*divisé entre la répugnance et l'intérêt, entre la fuite et l'analysis… L'œil aimait ce que l'âme abhorrait*."

art is comparable to that limpid and crystalline depth through which I saw those hideous things."[30] The disgusting pertains to the mouth, nose, stomach and fingers, not the eyes or the mind. For nothing is disgusting to the faculty of sight ... but we need art to glimpse what we dare not, or cannot, look in the eye.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 1089; translated from the French: "*Mais l'art est comparable à cette limpide et cristalline épaisseur à travers laquelle je voyais ces choses atroces: il nous fait des regards qui peuvent tout considérer*."

CHAPTER II

ON THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE UGLY

HERMAN PARRET

1. The question "what is beauty" has had, since Plato, a prominent place in Western philosophy. Yet aesthetics as a scientific, philosophical discipline having beauty as its object begins in the first half of the eighteenth century with Alexander Baumgarten who invents the concept *aesthetica* and establishes its domain of research. An important ambition of this new philosophical discipline consists in the construction of so-called "aesthetic categories," "aesthetic values" or "aesthetic predicates." Throughout the entire history of aesthetics the *beautiful* and the *sublime* have served as the central aesthetic categories. Thus the question was: under which condition can the predicate "beautiful" or "sublime" be ascribed to an object, a situation or an event? Furthermore, a problem was raised, which I will hereby particularly attend to, namely whether the *ugly* can be considered as an aesthetic category. Is there an aesthetic experience of the ugly? Or even: what is the relation between the ugly and the beautiful?

One can indeed ask the pertinent question regarding the significance of such an abstract discussion about "aesthetic values." One can above all have doubts about the relevance of aesthetic categories such as the beautiful and the sublime in relation to contemporary art or to the contemporary experience of art. Has the *ugly* maybe become the only valid aesthetic predicate in the guise of *formlessness* and the *abject*? However, both in the production and the theory of art, the *decline of beauty* is a certainty. Maybe, as Adorno has already argued, beauty—and then the "new beauty"—can only be approached by taking distance from the beautiful. This withdrawing beauty still fascinates: it haunts us constantly, it does not let go of us. After the nineteenth century, the ascension of the beautiful and the sublime follows Hegel, who is largely responsible for the idea of the "decline of beauty." But the destruction of beauty can be even more radical. There is a tendency nowadays to link the experience of the

beautiful to a conservative political position, to the bourgeois culture, to a regressive social taste. The very idea of *modernity* would then be essentially linked to the condemnation of the beautiful as aesthetic *value* and *norm.* That is why it is maybe better to no longer use the term "beautiful" altogether and that happens often nowadays. The term "beautiful" is being used less and less when visiting museums or listening to a concert, while the predicate *interesting* prevails upon *beautiful.* The times are long gone when Baudelaire proffered beauty as the only "right" label that could determine his love for art.

This retreat is echoed in Paul Valéry's jest: "Beauty is a kind of death." Antonin Artaud, together with the artists Soutine and Bacon, join forces and turn "beauty" into "cruelty" [*cruauté*] and sadomasochism. The most contemporary art certainly questions the existence, the significance and the value of the *beautiful* in favour of the *new,* the *intense*, the *uncanny*, as Deleuze writes somewhere. Our time concentrates on all sorts of mutations, our mentality has become time-sensitive and all this disputes the beautiful since beauty is unchanging and stable. Beauty is calm, serene and harmonious, and brings about only contemplation. From Breton to Lyotard, precisely this becomes a subject of a fundamental criticism. "Beauty will be *convulsive* or not at all," writes Breton. The introduction of the unconscious welcomes us into the age of the Differend [*le différend*], including a revaluation of the instant and of instability, disorder and imperfection. Valéry concludes that aesthetics is no longer a *science of the beautiful* but it became a *science of sensations*, a science of a convulsive subjectivity whose sensitivity functions chaotically and is context-dependent. Indeed, contemporary art has subverted the classic aesthetics of the beautiful. However, this cannot result in an *a priori*, global and desperate renunciation of the idea of beauty. This problematisation described above raises new questions that I shall approach in the following. Is there a *formless* beauty? Does formlessness lead to *ugliness*? Can one aesthetically experience *ugliness*?

2. Firstly, I shall determine what beauty *cannot* be. A particularly fashionable and seductive yet suspicious conception of the beautiful is found in the sociology of taste, like the way Bourdieu elaborates it in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979). In this epoch-making study, Bourdieu is interested in the variety of things that are found beautiful. He explains the experience of beauty from the perspective of more global social phenomena. For instance, the greater the knowledge of art and its enjoyment, the higher the education and the social status. Bourdieu does not hesitate to return to his argument that aesthetic

"taste" is nothing but a means for the social elite to display its superiority. He concludes that beauty is a political means that structures social relationships. Art enthusiasts in our society are thereby snobs manipulating a cruel thing in order to exclude other people. But, against Bourdieu, the question can be asked whether everyone who is highly educated is also open to art. Are not things more complex than that? Furthermore, Bourdieu's sociology deals only with general models of reaction and not at all with individual experiences. The social distribution is not essential to the insight into the love for art but rather, I think, the psychological embeddedness of the feeling of beauty.

Another exceptionally strong paradigm for the explanation of the "subjective" feeling for beauty is equally reductionist. It is the biological *evolutionary perspective.* Evolutionary biologists argue that the love of beauty is necessary for *survival*. Attachment to beauty benefits human self-preservation and thereby it became a basic human skill. Think of the *Venus of Urbino*, of all the representations of Venus from the Renaissance, of all female figures that Titian painted. The allure of all these female bodies would be related to procreative mechanisms, just like the muscular athletic bodies of the representations of Apollo and Adonis attest to the virility of the fighter or the hunter, thus to the power of survival. This does not seem to be the case in a lot of contemporary art, like Francis Bacon or Lucian Freud for instance, where the male-female contrast is settled so to speak.

What is beauty then? Are there possible theories as alternatives to sociologism and biologism? In the following I shall discuss a few other theories of beauty: object- and subject-oriented theories on the one hand and, on the other hand, perspectives on beauty where sensibility and materiality play a central part as distinct from perspectives that appeal to the supersensible.

Object-oriented theories of beauty attempt to conceptually grasp the "secret" characteristics of the beautiful. These are the theories of proportion, the perfect composition, the sinuous lines and the form- and function dialectics. They pretend to be *objective*. The doctrine of proportion, harmony, perfect symmetry, geometrical purity, of Pythagoras (the right angle, the bodily proportions) about Palladio (a column must be nine times higher than its width) up to Marilyn Monroe (the ideal breast circumference) are all doctrines that reduce the experience of beauty to a *concept*; to an insight into a relation according to a given *ratio*; to the insight into the structure of the *cosmos* in its entire ideality. Such aesthetics are called *formal* but there are many kinds of "formalisms" that are, for that matter, well matched. Generally, formalisms consider the

essence of beauty as a characteristic of a *holistic* nature: beauty is the rule of the whole, of the combination of separate elements, of interrelations and juxtapositions within the object. The particular elements must go hand in hand in a "composition" without losing their identity through their relationship to a totality.

Functionalist theories of beauty are equally object-oriented and objectifying. A functionalist aesthetics teaches us that visual pleasure is found in the objects' adequate *usability*. According to functionalism, the *integrity* of an object consists in the perfect combination of form and function: the more the function determines the form, the more beautiful the object is. Such a theory of beauty pleads for the removal of all redundancies, for the purely decorative, for the elimination of everything that can seem frivolous, gracious, and elegant. This functionalist perspective is difficult to sustain. Duchamp's theory of the *readymade* argues that for the object to be seen as object of art it has to lose its function. A functionalist theory of art is also counter-intuitive: what about the beauty of *colours*? What is the function of colours in their combinations and abstraction?

On the other hand, there are *subject-oriented* perspectives that highlight the subjective reaction of the one experiencing, cultivating and valuing the beautiful. The experience of beauty concerns the state of someone's mind [*Gemüth*].[1] This subject-oriented aesthetics can be considered the "Copernican revolution" in the history of theories about beauty. It was Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that introduced this idea. The aesthetic *experience*, the intensity of the *gratification*, even the feeling of *bliss* (Kant speaks of *Wohlgefallen*, a state of being well-disposed) in the contact with natural beauty or with the beauty of an artwork become the theme of philosophical aesthetics. Kant is clear regarding this: an aesthetic experience is impossible without a feeling of *gratification*, without a special "mood" and this "mood" is intimate, personal, and subjective. Moreover, no moral or political engagement, no interests or any other desires may disturb this "mood." The reception of the latter condition, the *disinterestedness*, has been especially problematic. Nietzsche, for instance, considered it purely hypocritical and James Joyce, in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

[1] Translator's note: the German term *Gemüth* is hereby translated as 'mind' just to follow the existing English translations of Kant's *Third Critique.* However, the meaning of this German word does not refer to concepts, knowledge or any determination about an object (as the word "mind" suggests) but rather to the mind's disposition, to the feeling of the mind's faculties caught in a reflexive stance, without an actual content.