

ASPECTS OF UGLINESS

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When I say: ‘The landscape of Tuscany is beautiful’, I pronounce this subjective judgement of mine as if I could expect that everyone of you who is acquainted with that landscape would agree with me. In fact, I am pretty sure that you would agree. My judgement therefore shows strongly the characteristic of ‘subjective universality’ that Kant claims for the judgement of the beautiful.

You and I share the disinterested pleasure that this landscape of mainly man-made origin awakens in the beholder: the free play of our cognitive faculties is advanced by this harmonious interplay of sloping fields in patterns of yellow, brown and green, the rows of slender cypresses that confine them and the ochre farmhouses that seem to grow out of the fields. The pleasure you experience is increased even more by the memory of the mediaeval and Renaissance paintings

you saw in the museums of Florence and Sienna, whose background showed you the same landscapes as you are now driving through. Obviously, your experience of beauty was shared, five or six centuries ago, by the artists whose work you admired. Traditional specifications of beauty such as ‘harmony’, ‘unity in the manifold’ and the ‘claritas’(i.e. clarity and radiance) of Thomas Aquinas seem to be altogether easily applicable to this Tuscan landscape.

But there is a region in Tuscany, about thirty kilometres south of Volterra, that has a totally different and disturbing experience in store for the traveller. In the surroundings of the village of Larderello there lies a vast area where sources of boric acid are used to generate electric energy. The landscape in that area is covered with huge pipelines which in a chaotic jumble find their way criss-cross, and often spanning the roads, to the powerhouses. Clouds of steam escape from those pipelines and a hissing noise is audible all over the place.

Compared with the charm and loveliness, the beauty of the Tuscan landscape you traversed so shortly before, Larderello is its exact opposite: it is ugly, it excites discomfort and uneasiness and a feeling of anger that so much beauty has been overpowered by motives of utility. But after a while those feelings become intermingled with a certain fascination. The ugly utilitarian chaos radiates also the power of a ruthless purposiveness, the strength of a hidden order you do not understand but that is, so to speak, in the air everywhere. By and by the steaming and hissing get another dimension too; that of the invigorating dynamics and vitality of powers of nature brought under control. Little by little, the whole scenery seems to acquire a strange beauty of its own. And this paradoxical experience of the strange beauty of an ugly scenery is accompanied by a certain satisfaction, because it turns out that you are able to enjoy what is at first sight not enjoyable at all.

When you leave this area and are amidst the ‘normal’ Tuscan landscape again, it even takes some time to see the beauty of it anew with a clear eye. At first it seems a bit all too smooth and lovely after all the violence and power you got accustomed to, as if it were all too beautiful and therefore has a touch of the kitschy.

This more or less phenomenological description of an experience of

'beauty in the ugly' may be considered as the introduction to an evocation of the Kantian sublime, which shows a similar going-together of pleasure and displeasure as I described. But neither Kant's specification of the mathematical sublime nor that of his dynamical sublime seems to fit for this landscape of Larderello. It is not sublime in the sense that it is so great and big that all other things are proportionally small in comparison with it: the pipelines did not surpass every standard of my senses. And Larderello did not, in my experience, stress the power of my imagination (Einbildungskraft) to such an extent that there opened up a threatening abyss before me in which I was about to loose myself. Kant's own examples of sublime experiences *vis-à-vis* thunderstorms, volcanoes and hurricanes are of a definitely other order than the hissing and steaming I told you about.

In my opinion, the two opposites of the beautiful: the ugly and the sublime, should not be confused. Not in every case where pleasure and displeasure go together in a paradoxical way, one should be too ready to conclude that it must be an instantiation of sublimity. Following in the footsteps of Barnett Newman, Jean-François Lyotard and others, much aesthetic philosophizing is referring to the sublime as an interpretative framework for modern art. This line of interpretation is, I think, often extremely fruitful. What I would like to advocate, however, is a renewed attention to the category of the ugly.

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For about a hundred years a change has been noticeable in the traditional, negative outlook on the ugly. After Hegel had already, in his *Ästhetik (Aesthetics)*, conceived the ugly as a necessary component of the Romantic art-form of Antiquity, there was, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a thorough revaluation of the non-beautiful.

'The matter is to create for oneself an ugly, deformed soul, like somebody who implants warts in his face and cultivates them', Arthur Rimbaud writes in one of his two letters of 1871 about being a poet, which have become known

as the ‘Voyant’ letters. In them he develops the thought that the poet must be a seer. That was not new. Rimbaud knew that idea for instance from an essay by Montaigne, in which the latter, in his turn, brings up a statement by Plato about poetic lunacy. But Rimbaud developed that idea radically. As a poet he wanted to observe the invisible, to hear the inaudible. In his *Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (*Structure of Modern Lyrics*) of 1956 Hugo Friedrich pointed out that the ‘landing in the unknown’ that Rimbaud mentions as the aim of the poet, assumes an empty transcendency that can only be approached with the use of such empty concepts as ‘invisible’ and ‘inaudible’. So the means for that end is: operative uglification, self-maiming of the soul. Whoever wishes to look into that unknown, must be the great sick man, the great criminal, the great outlaw. In his eruptive urge to go beyond so-called reality he will have to deform that reality to unreal images. The seer who is capable of doing so would in recent terminology be called a ‘decentred subject’. Rimbaud: ‘The I is somebody else (...) It is wrong to say: I think. It would have to be: I am thought’. Deeper powers possessing a collective nature, an ‘âme universelle’ are active here.

It will be clear that in such a context ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ do not mean a contrast of values anymore, but a contrast between kinds of stimulations. The effect of their contrast is exploited artistically. Whereas in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the ugly was a sign of burlesque uncourtliness, moral inferiority, ridicule, so elements which unequivocally belonged to the realm of the comic, with the authors of German Romanticism and with such poets as Baudelaire the fascinatingly deformed, the so called ‘interesting’ also acquires access to the non-comical art. Rimbaud has intensified that tendency of deformation to an explicit wish of ugliness, an ugliness that also serves to provoke the naive sense of beauty. An ugliness that shocks.

The position of Nietzsche *vis-à-vis* such purposeful ugliness is, as is often the case with him, distinctly ambivalent. Five years after Rimbaud’s Seer-Leters, he writes in the first volume of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (*Human, All-too-human*), No 217, 1 about the modern music of his time, which,

according to him, has made our ears more and more ‘intellectual’. It appears that we can bear more and more of what, at first hearing, is unpleasant:

The ugly side of the world, originally incompatible with the senses, has been conquered for music. Its realm of power, especially in expressing the sublime, the terrible, the mysterious, has, as a result, been increased to an astonishing degree, now music makes things speak that formerly had no tongue. In this way also some painters have made our eyes more intellectual and have gone far beyond what used to be called the joy of shape and colour. Here, too, the side of the world which originally was regarded as ugly has been conquered by the artistic mind.

The consequence of this process is, however, for Nietzsche: the eye and the ear become independent from the senses and the sensual, the pleasure is shifted to the mind. What is, is replaced by symbolism. And the threatening result of it is barbarism: an upper stratum contains catching ‘meanings’ through everything unpleasant, the other part of the audience gets however more and more used to enjoying the ugly and the disgusting as such.

In a wider context than the artistic one Nietzsche is sometimes markedly negative when he talks about the ugly. From a physiologic point of view, he says in *Götzen-Dammerung (Twilight of the Idols)* No 20, the ugly enfeebles man, it reminds him of decay, danger, impotence. Where he is depressed he notices the proximity of something ugly. The ugly is to be conceived as a sign and a symptom of degeneration. People feel *Hass* (hate) of that *Hässliche* (the ugly, literally: that which is worthy of hate). What they hate then is, in fact, the decline of their species.

Far more positive is then again the tone in some posthumous fragments. In No 416 of *Der Wille zur Macht (The Will to Power)* Nietzsche develops the idea that the will to beauty keeps to forms remaining equal, as a temporary means for maintenance and cure. But creativity must always destroy. Now the ugly is the

way of seeing things that is inspired by the will too lay a new sense in what has become senseless, the accumulated power that compels the creator to ignore what had been there until then as untenable and as not having come out very well, as ugly, in fact. A radical variant of this way of thinking is provided by No 852: from a feeling of power one may express the judgement ‘beautiful’, even about things and situations that from an instinct of powerlessness can only be valued as worthy of hate, *hässlich*, as ugly. The point is then what somebody would still be equal to when it came in his way as a danger, as a problem, as temptation.

A third provocation of beauty apart from Rimbaud’s explicit will to ugliness and Nietzsche’s more sophisticated vision of the function of the ugly is the one which is expressed in Lucebert’s often quoted poem I try in a poetical way’ from *De alfabetische naam (The analphabetical name)* of 1952. After he has called the road of which he wishes to take snapshots -defiled’, he continues:

In deze tijd heeft wat men altijd noemde
 schoonheid schoonheid haar gezicht verbrand
 zij troost niet meer de mensen
 zij troost de larven de reptielen de ratten
 maar de mens verschrikt zij
 en treft hem met het besef
 een broodkruimel te zijn op de rok van het universum

In these days what was always called
 beauty beauty has burnt its face
 it does no longer comfort people
 it comforts the larvae, the reptiles, the rats
 but it frightens man
 hitting him with the realization
 to be a bread crumb on the skirt of the universe

What do these three provocations tell us and what further speculations may be attached to them? What they have in common - just apart from Nietzsche's ambivalence - is that they make the traditional aversion from the ugly and the equally traditional glorification of the beautiful unsettled. The ugly explores the unknown, breaks the standard codes of beauty, can be an expression of creative power and means of renovation. That is the more or less activistic position of Rimbaud and Nietzsche. With Lucebert it is rather an attitude of resignation: who tries 'who give expression to the space of full life' simply cannot but show in his poems that the road of which he takes snapshots is a soiled road. 'Beauty' would then be false comfort against which protest would be appropriate, a protest in the very name of that 'full life'.

An attitude of provocation and protest against the beauty canons of the past may also take a more specific, historically determined shape. Thus surrealism and dada are aimed at the beauty cult of the bourgeoisie. All such attitudes, both such specifically oriented and the three more generally formulated ones we have just dealt with, form together an integral component of what might be called artistic modernity. The provocative element of it is strikingly expressed in the title of a volume by the Dutch author Jan Greshoff: *Zwanen pesten* (*Nagging swans*) of 1948.

That such an element of protest and contrariness about beautiful and ugly is inextricably bound up with artistic modernity is not accidental. It is a general tendency of modern art and literature that they function strongly as theorizing and polemizing, with the categories, delimitations and notions of traditional aesthetics and poetics as 'sparring partners'. In many artistic experiments the invalidation of definitions and determinations-of-value from tradition can be recognised as implicit or explicit ends.

Yet, in the desire to give a great deal of prominence to the non-beautiful in the aesthetic experience a traditional aspect is visible. The fascinating, impressive, distressing, shocking need not be beautiful at all and may nevertheless have a strong artistic effect. When Rimbaud sees the ugly as the way to the totally different or when Nietzsche combines it with the mysterious and the terrible, it has

undoubtedly characteristics in common with what Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgement*) has called ‘the sublime’: the grandiose and overwhelming that, in fact, is not agreeable to be experienced, that does not give us pleasure and that, according to his own definition, is not ‘beautiful’. But when we hold out against that overwhelming’, it confronts us with what we could be more than just natural beings, limited by the boundaries of the senses and the intellect. The aesthetic experience of the sublime becomes a medium of transcendence then.

Such a transcendence was involved, although in another context, also with Rimbaud. The ugly he was looking for is, therefore, not simply ugly: it is an ugliness of a certain type. Its characteristics are intensity and expressivity. The dully ugly, the insipidly ugly, the trivial, the vapid, the sticky sweet, the sickly, the bungling, the pompous, the banal: all such forms of ugliness are not meant here. It is, to put it briefly, clear that who wants to speak about the ‘ugly’ cannot help giving some further specification. A first point of departure for that purpose can still be Karl Rosenkranz’ *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (*Aesthetics of the Ugly*) of 1883. Rosenkranz provides a fine catalogue of notions of ugliness divided into the categories of formlessness, incorrectness and defигuration or deformation, each with its subdivisions. Thus the third category has two main divisions: the banal and the disgusting and the latter is, in its turn, largely subdivided again. In that subdivision, quite at the end, there is the type of ugliness that seems to agree most with what is meant by Rimbaud: the evil, the criminal, the diabolical.

In addition to such a specification another one is necessary. It is, namely, remarkable that in dissertations on the ugly often no distinction is made between the ugliness of what is represented (for instance a cry deforming a face, a desolate scenery) and the representation of it whether ugly or not. Who thinks that art may not stop before the disgusting, need not think at all that the work in which the disgusting takes shape must therefore be disgusting itself. Undermining and negating classical rules on what may be represented in art is one thing, but not to set the requirement that the work that goes beyond those boundaries is somehow attractive is quite a different matter. In this case ‘attractive’ must be taken in a wide sense. It

must comprise the fascinating, the shocking, the sublime and not only what provides 'delight' in the sense in which Kant discussed it in view of the beautiful.

It may seem almost trivial, yet it is not superfluous to state that in the approaches that we have reviewed, making a distinction between 'beautiful' and 'ugly' is not under discussion, but only the valuation of what, from certain points of departure and definitions, is regarded as 'beautiful' or -ugly'. Who wishes to deny the distinction between the two because it is supposed to be impossible and obsolete, must realize that he thus deprives modernity of much of its provocative power. Revaluation of the ugly has no sense if it does not exist.

That anyhow a distinction must be made between beautiful and ugly implies that it remains useful to characterize the ugly in more detail and to specify it according to the forms in which it appears. In that connection it is a problem that the notion of 'ugly' seems sometimes almost to be tabooed and only some of its descriptions and indications seem to be allowed in discourse. This certainly holds good where human ugliness is involved. Determining and discussing it tend to be experienced as discriminating and indelicate. At most, people venture to use expressions as 'beautiful in its ugliness'. The term has fallen a little less into disuse when it refers to the sight of natural or man-made landscapes, as in the example of my introduction. In the field of the arts it is especially architecture, as a form of art that is under the eyes of everybody, that is sometimes the subject matter of a general debate that does not shun the word 'ugly'. But in the field of the plastic arts, of music, theatre, literature, insiders mostly express their displeasure in terms of an indicative understanding: this is a dreadful mess, dicey, wrong, faulty, this is just impossible. 'Ugly' tends to be regarded as a term of outsiders, as a pedantic word that, moreover, does not, for instance, do justice to the outlined provocative developments in art itself.

Yet there seems to be no objection to let 'ugly' keep its coordinating and covering function, provided ugliness, in its many facets, is specified as clearly as possible and those specifications are named and analysed as neutrally as possible. In that case the point is to consider from case to case whether the indications of

ugliness used primarily characterize the object itself or characterize the experience of subjects that are confronted with something ugly. This distinction is not always easy to make, but it does exist, as already witnessed by the two notions which are used in Latin for ugliness: *deformitas* (deformity) as a typical object qualification and *turpitudo*: ugliness as that from which the subject turns away (derived from the Greek *trepomai*, to turn around).

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Let us now, at the end of our little survey of aspects of ugliness, return shortly to the example we started with. Of course not all the elements of the modern provocations of the beautiful I developed in the foregoing find their exact counterparts in that example. So it would certainly, as I said, be exaggerated to see in the landscape of Larderello an instantiation of Kant's sublimity or of Rimbaud's diabolical transcendency. But I am convinced that the revaluations of the ugly and the protests against the purely beautiful mentioned above paved, so to speak, the way to our capability to enjoy the ugly scenery I described, to enjoy the ruthless dynamics, the intensity and expressivity of it in spite of its disgusting appearance. Our sensibility for the stimuli of the shockingly and fascinatingly ugly must have increased immensely since Nietzsche analysed it so ambivalently. He talked about the modern music and paintings of his times, but what would he have said about the music of our time, the paintings of a Francis Bacon, an Edward Hopper?

Perhaps indeed our ears and our eyes have become, in Nietzsche's sense, more and more 'intellectual', even more so than he could think of? Or perhaps we should rather think of Lucebert who wanted to give expression to the space of full life by making snapshots of the soiled roads of that life? Anyhow, the position of the ugly in our aesthetic experience has to be thoroughly rethought.

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