

the
MANY FACES
of
BEAUTY

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THE FUNCTION OF THE UGLY
IN ENHANCING THE
EXPRESSIVITY OF ART

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Beauty is an ambiguous term. On the one hand, it designates positive aesthetic value; beautiful is what is “aesthetically excellent” (Bosanquet 85). On the other hand, beauty is a particular kind of positive aesthetic value, often associated with what is pleasing or harmonic, and which can be contrasted, for example, with the sublime. A pleasurable meadow landscape may be beautiful, whereas a mountain landscape that evokes awe is more likely to be sublime. Similarly, we can contrast the beautiful in its more specific meaning with the ugly; a photograph of a junkyard might be ugly, but it may have positive aesthetic value.¹ That is, the work may be beautiful not in the specific sense of pleasing or harmonic but in the overarching sense of being aesthetically excellent. Although the ugly often has negative aesthetic value, it can, under circumstances I will explore in this essay, have positive aesthetic value. In such cases we can speak of aesthetically excellent or beautiful ugliness.

I approach the question of the ugly in three interlocking ways. First, I introduce some basic terms and distinctions, as is appropriate when traversing such slippery terrain. Second, I offer a few historical reflections on the emergence of the ugly over time and especially in modernity. Third, I analyze possible relations between the beautiful and the ugly, with a focus

on different modes in which the ugly can become aesthetically excellent or beautiful.

My field is literature and, to a lesser extent, film. Many of the examples, therefore, come from these areas. However, some come from sculpture and painting, which offer an interesting contrast with literature. In one of the earliest reflections on the ugly, Lessing distinguished between the ugly in the temporal and static arts, noting that in the temporal arts, such as literature, the ugly can be given a secondary position within a larger whole and so be accommodated more easily, whereas in sculpture and painting, to put the ugly into a subordinate role is more difficult (§ 23–24). For the most part, I have omitted examples from music as well as non-Western art, both of which are complex within themselves and beyond my competence.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE UGLY

What does it mean to say that a work is beautiful in the sense of having positive aesthetic value or being aesthetically excellent? Many people today would say that positive aesthetic value is reducible to what is beautiful in the eye of the beholder or deemed beautiful by the conventions of the age. These two views have in common a privileging of reception as the determiner of aesthetic value. I propose, in contrast, an elevation of artwork aesthetics, which, unlike reception aesthetics, focuses on what is distinctive about art.

We traditionally divide aesthetics into production, artwork, and reception aesthetics. Production aesthetics focuses on what contributes to the generation of a work, for example, biography and identity issues, sources and preliminary versions, and the broader political, sociohistorical, and intellectual context. Artwork aesthetics analyzes and evaluates the content of the work, including the story, theme, argument, and broader ideas; the form of the work, that is, the art form and genre to which the work belongs, its style and structure, and its capacity to express meaning indirectly; and the interrelation of form and content and of parts and whole. And last, reception aesthetics explores such areas as the history of a work's reception, the ways in which preconceptions influence interpretations, the emotions evoked by works, and the norms and conventions of interpretive communities as they shift over time.

What makes an artwork distinctive is not that it has a production or reception context (realms common to all intellectual products), but that it has objective qualities which constitute it as an artwork. The priority of artwork aesthetics does not, of course, eliminate the value of production and reception aesthetics. To understand a work, we must often investigate its broader context, which may help us decipher a passage or understand its implications. Also, a focus on production may draw our attention to unjustly neglected works. Reception aesthetics has taught us that we must be conscious of the presuppositions of our interpretive practices, creative with the questions and categories with which we approach a work, and receptive to new meanings and diverse interpretations. Some works are not immediately recognizable as beautiful and require a variety of cognitive and imaginative capacities for us to understand the ways in which dissonance, tension, and seemingly heterogeneous parts, along with often repugnant subject matter, fit together to constitute an artwork.

The greatness of an artwork, I would propose, depends on the quality of its content and form, the relation of content and form, and the integration of part and whole.² Great art has a cognitive dimension, opening up a window onto metaphysical meaning. In addition, it expresses meaning indirectly, and in doing so is both formally innovative and nuanced as well as internally coherent. Further, to separate the greater meaning or content and the particular shape or form would be to violate the integrity of the whole. Finally, great art unites parts and whole such that the parts, though of independent interest, nonetheless gain their full meaning only within the whole. The beautiful, the sublime, and the ugly meet these criteria, despite differences among them, whenever they partake of positive aesthetic value.

When these criteria are not met, the result is negative aesthetic value. The content may be banal, mediocre, tendentious, or untrue. The form may be monotonous, pedestrian, simplistic, uneconomical, artificial, haphazard, or in some other way deficient. The two sides, the meaning and the shape, may be unrelated or at odds with one another, such that even a meta-harmony cannot be deciphered. Or the parts may be viewed as unrelated to one another and to the whole and so dissonant or ununified.

In the context of the ugly, Bernard Bosanquet introduced the concept of "difficult beauty" (85). Many observers will call such a work ugly, but others—on the basis of education and experience, a willingness and

patience to attend to details, natural insight, and imaginative effort—will come to recognize beauty. Goethe's famous account of his being completely taken by the Strasbourg cathedral, contrary to his expectation that Gothic and barbaric would be one and the same, is an instructive example of extending one's horizon of taste, expanding one's tolerance and capacity for discrimination (19:29–38). We can speak of the *seemingly ugly* as an analogue to difficult beauty: the seemingly ugly arises when a work has dimensions that are so unusual, innovative, or complex, such as parts that seem not to integrate into the whole, that they may at first appear to have negative aesthetic value. However, the form does in the end match the content, and the parts do cohere. These demanding works may be misjudged as ugly, but they are only seemingly ugly. When the hidden beauty of a work, say, an El Greco painting, is finally recognized after centuries, the work did not suddenly become beautiful; it was always beautiful, and we were simply not equal to the challenge. Positive aesthetic value is a feature not of reception but of the work itself.

To grasp the role of the ugly in artwork aesthetics, we need to distinguish between what the work represents or describes, the object depicted, and the sort of representation or description it is, what kinds of properties it has as an artwork (Goodman 31). In terms of the object depicted, the ugly can involve, first, *physical ugliness*, which is usually taken to designate what is different from the norm or the average as well as unhealthy, for example, a hunchback or a face marred by disease. One thinks also of monsters, death, excrement, or whatever we might consider repugnant or disgusting. Disgust is, in evolutionary and psychological terms, a natural reaction to something both offensive and alien, contaminants that awaken fears of our own animality and mortality (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 200–206). A beautiful representation of a physically ugly object may allow us to see and imagine the ugly more clearly than ever. Already Aristotle notes that we react not with disgust, but with pleasure, when we see accurate portrayals of repugnant beasts or dead bodies; to see such items vividly is to expand our realm of knowledge (1448b). Positive aesthetic value, beautiful ugliness, is the result.

Second is *moral ugliness*. Examples would include self-indulgence, indifference, envy, malice, haughtiness, hypocrisy, hatred, and cruelty. Here, too, one can imagine aesthetically valuable works that portray moral ugliness. In the brutal scene between the doctor and the midwife in Michael Haneke's film *The White Ribbon*, we see moral and physical ugliness to-

gether and recognize the far deeper ugliness of the former. If the work portrays moral ugliness in its inadequacy or in such a way as to help us understand its dynamics, then here, too, we can speak of beautiful ugliness.

One could also imagine a work that portrays ugliness as intrinsically attractive. I am not thinking of a work that portrays physical ugliness as subordinate to spiritual beauty; there the attraction is ultimately beauty. David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man* comes to mind. In contrast, I am thinking of works that present moral ugliness, racism or fascism, let us say, in such a way as to render it beautiful and attractive, to celebrate it; to do so is to violate one of the conditions of positive aesthetic value, that it open up truth, and so the work could be called ugly or bad art, however refined its form may be. Analogously, one might imagine a work that mocks not false conventions but true virtue. The properties of the work are such that what is truly good or beautiful is treated as if it were repugnant or otherwise deficient. No matter how technically astute, such a work has negative aesthetic value.

Finally, a work is ugly if it is formally weak, be it technically inept or lacking any integration of part and whole. We could thus speak of an ugly portrayal of ugliness and an ugly portrayal of beauty. In other words, the ultimate determiner of aesthetic value is not the object that is being depicted, which can be beautiful or ugly, but the properties of the work, the way in which the object is depicted.

THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF THE UGLY

Although the ugly surfaces intermittently throughout history, at various times it becomes especially salient. In ancient Greece, we encounter the many-headed Hydra and the Cyclops, the stench of Philoctetes' wound and the blood from Oedipus's eyes, but each of these moments is subordinate within a wider horizon. Ugliness is not a term that leaps to mind when one thinks of classical Greek art and literature, and so Greek art and literature can hardly be seen as a center of focus in any overarching history of the ugly even if, as with these examples or as with the earthy comedy of Aristophanes, we do recognize moments of the ugly.

The ugly appears in a prominent and sustained way for the first time in the Roman era, a time period, it has often been noted, that has parallels to our own age. In terms of genre, Roman literature is derivative of its

Greek forebears, but satire, which has no counterpart in Greece, is an exception. Quintilian notes that “satire is entirely our own.”³ In Roman satire we recognize a pervasive interest in moral ugliness coupled with its bitter indictment. Hegel notes the introduction of this new art form in his *Aesthetics* and comments that “reality is shown in the madness of its ruin, such that it destroys itself from within” (14.120). Consider Juvenal’s ninth Satire, where Naevolus laments being overworked and complains about his poor earnings and his patron’s greed. His duties include having sex with the patron’s wife, fathering his children, and then satisfying the patron’s desire to be penetrated in anal intercourse. Juvenal holds back his commentary in this dialogue, letting the character’s vanity, self-pity, and complete lack of moral dignity reveal themselves on their own. Juvenal’s irony and mockery carry an implicit moral understanding. The result is the ugly as a subcategory of positive aesthetic value.

The second major development in the presentation of the ugly occurs in Christianity, with two sets of images: first, the devil, hell, and macabre images of death, which remind us of our ephemerality; second, the suffering and death of Christ and in his wake, the torments and tortures of the Christian martyrs. In the *Crucifixion* of his Isenheim Altarpiece (fig. 11.1), Matthias Grünewald portrays Christ in such torment that the ugly is a valid epithet. As Erich Auerbach notes, Christ’s passion involved “the ugly, the undignified, the physically base” (72). In Grünewald’s work, consider the hands, for example, and the body. This contrasts with later, idealizing depictions, such as Rubens’s *Crucifixion* (fig. 11.2). The torment in Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* makes manifest Christ’s humanity and the cost of his suffering; it is undignified and base.⁴ The Christian world was able to tolerate such ugliness, well before the ugly became a more widely accepted aesthetic category for at least two reasons: first, for Christianity the lowliest, most wretched person, however ugly in word or deed, had an innate dignity; second, the ugly and repugnant were implicitly recognized as transitory and part of a larger tale of promise and redemption. Christ’s *Resurrection*, after all, belongs to the same Grünewald altarpiece. Paradoxically, the religious frame allowed for a deeper encounter with the ugly. Not all Christian art immerses itself in evil (one need think only of the angelic tone of much of idealizing Christian art), but a Christian art, as for example in Caravaggio, that is realistic and not otherworldly or triumphalist, is able to do justice to the gruesome aspects of reality without losing itself in them, as happens during stretches of modernity.

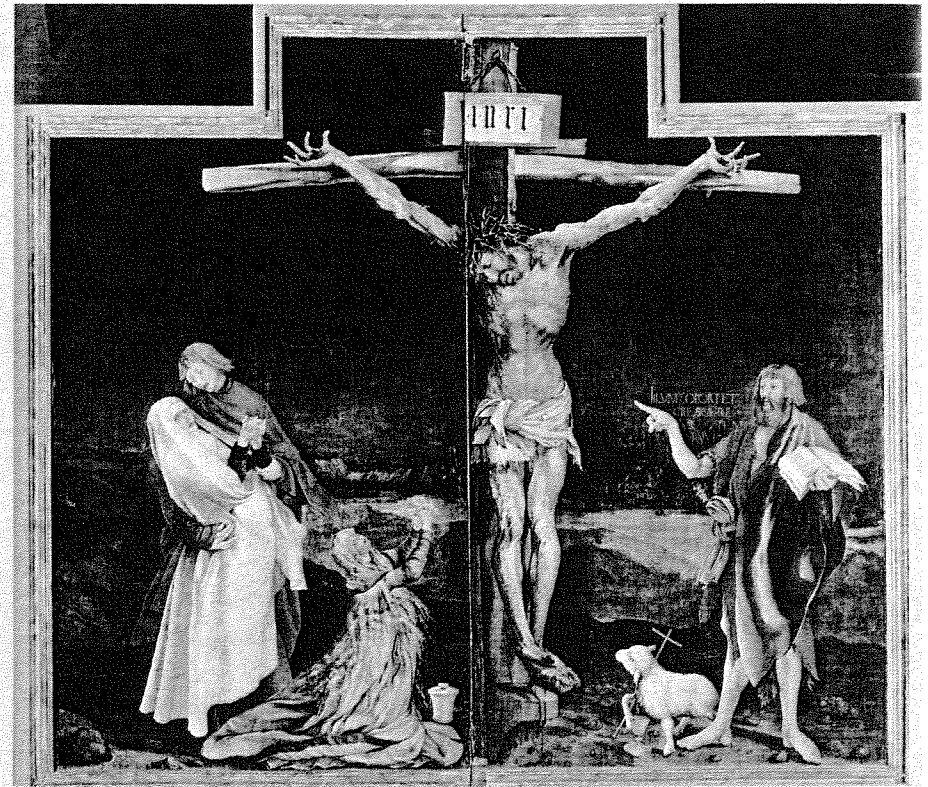


Figure 11.1. Matthias Grünewald, *The Crucifixion*, Isenheim Altarpiece, ca. 1512–16. Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Courtesy Bridgeman Art Library International.

As we move from the medieval toward the modern world, we continue to recognize moments of the ugly, as, for example, in Thomas Nashe or in various works of Shakespeare, but the ugly is not the dominant theme that it will become in modernity. At times, the ugly loses its fascination. Renaissance art and the literature of the German Klassik are as far removed from a preoccupation with the ugly as is ancient Greece. Consider Goethe’s comments on his “physical-aesthetic pain” when encountering the morally repugnant elements of Hartmann von Aue’s *Poor Heinrich*; Goethe felt contaminated simply by touching such a work (16.237). The next prominent change, prepared for in the period of German Romanticism, occurs in the long age of modernity.⁵ Over time the

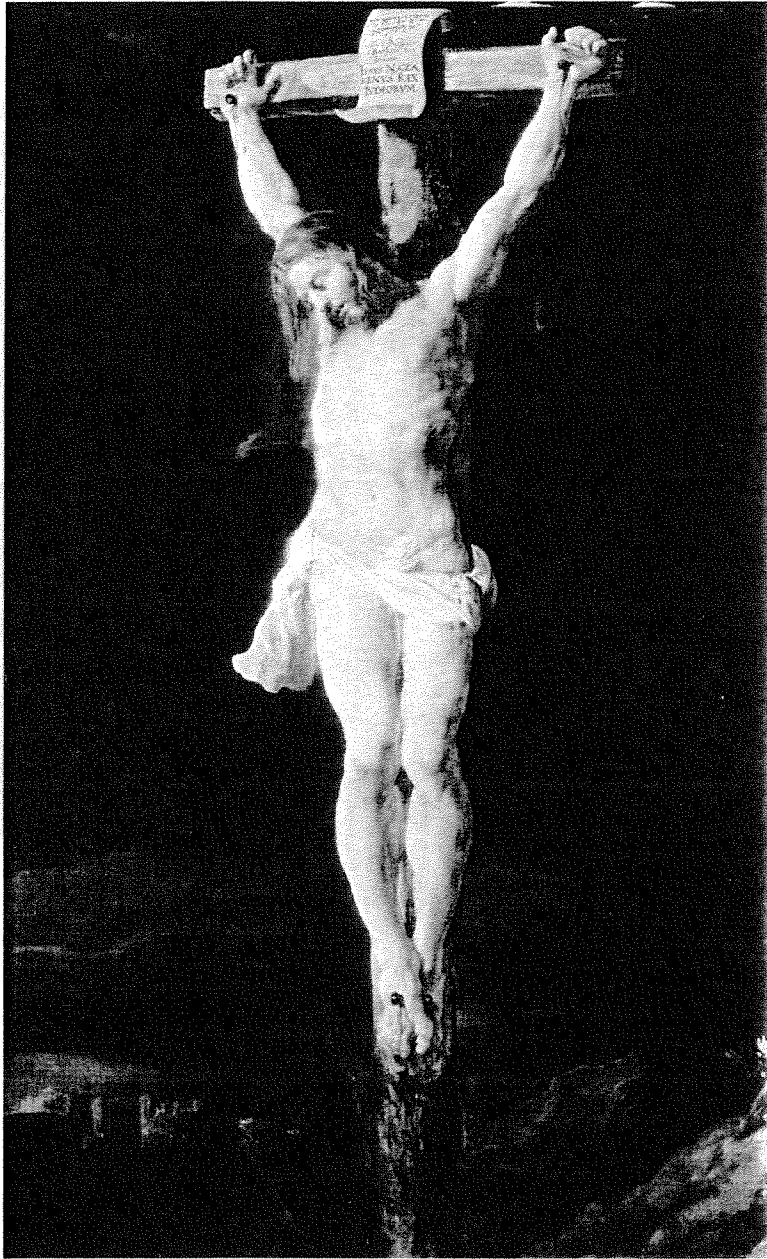


Figure 11.2. Peter Paul Rubens, *Christ on the Cross*, 1615–16. Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich. Photo bpk, Berlin, Art Resource, New York.

ugly surfaces in every possible way, with content that is revolting or repugnant, forms that include asymmetries, tension between form and content, and parts that gain excessive individuality without being integrated into a large whole.

What triggers the change? First, a different concept of reality emerges in modernity. In ancient Greece, mimesis was not simply imitation of the existing world, but an attempt to uncover metaphysical meaning, to discern the higher forms, to portray characters who are greater than real life. With the abandonment of the classical ideal and the dissolution of Christianity, we see a rejection of transcendence or the idea that there is an ideal world we seek to understand and imitate in moral activity as well as in art, and we are left with a concept of reality as simply what is. Wittgenstein's "the world is all that is the case" differs greatly from Plato's view of reality as a higher order (11). The reality of modernity is no longer a realm of being that has implicit in it a normative claim, but sheer facticity, the merely sensible world. But modernity does not stop there. The view emerges, and becomes dominant, that our existing world is repugnant, fragmentary, and without overarching meaning. "Ugliness was the one reality," suggests Oscar Wilde's most famous aesthete, Dorian Gray (211). The two defining moments of this new realism are immanence and repugnance.

This historical shift explains why the sublime, in which dissonance likewise plays a major role, could be accepted long before the ugly but then become increasingly supplanted by it.⁶ In challenging our senses and imagination, evoking terror through the display of vastness or power, the sublime nonetheless reaffirmed, in some cases even heightened, our sense of transcendence and nobility; think of Kant's moving comments at the end of his second *Critique*. The transcendent moment explains its connection to tragedy and its meaning for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The ugly, on the other hand, was traditionally more difficult, challenging us, via its repugnant subject matter or its seemingly inorganic form, and leaving at least the initial sense that it is an affront to transcendence and nobility. In modernity, however, with widespread abandonment of the transcendent and a negative view of reality, the ugly becomes dominant.

This turn to reality and the ugly was reinforced by industrialization, which offers fewer pastoral images and instead jarring pictures of an expanding technology and its effects—urbanization along with the crowdedness, busyness, and disorder of daily life, including greater awareness of the plight of those in dire circumstances. There was much to which a

more enlightened consciousness could object: war, brutality, poor working conditions, racial biases, restrictive social conventions, asymmetrical gender relations. We see a rising sensitivity to the objective causes of suffering and to the effects of suffering and despair on the poor and disenfranchised as well as an attempt to describe and understand them with increasing exactitude.

At the same time, the new concept of reality came in tandem with, and helped to exacerbate, an abandonment of the theodicy. For Augustine, evil and the ugly do not ultimately exist; all that is, has a place in the larger order and harmony of God's creation. In modernity, larger meta-narratives, be they religious (and providential) or rational (and progressive), lose much of their persuasive power and give way to a focus on isolated moments of dissonance abstracted from any overarching speculative frame. Instead of asking, given a certain concept of God, how are we to understand the seeming dissonance of reality, we ask, what possible concept of God could follow from the unambiguous dissonance of reality (Hösle, "Theodizeestrategien")? In literature this means, for example, that tragic suffering does not fit within a larger drama that includes hints at reconciliation, and comedies less frequently end in marriage or in other harmonic ways; and when they do, they do so ironically. Voltaire's account of one almost unspeakable hardship after another in *Candide* may be viewed as a paradigmatic example of this new concept of reality and its farewell to the theodicy.

A second historical factor, in some ways working in tandem with the first, has to do with a shift in aesthetic values. If the world is repugnant, then art forms, it is argued, should mirror this ugliness. Given that beauty includes an appropriateness of form to content, in an aesthetic interpretation of the ugliness of life, great asymmetries and perversions of what is traditionally called beautiful may be appropriate. As a part of this reevaluation of aesthetic values, we see a conscious rejection of past aesthetic norms associated with harmony along with a privileging of the disjunctive and asymmetrical.

In the post-Christian era, art no longer portrays a divine ideal and the artist is no longer the medium through which this ideal becomes visible (Hauser 349). Originality becomes the new watchword. The artist wants to be innovative and different, which means pushing the limits of form (being creative and experimental at the cost of the organic) and pushing the limits of reception (creating works whose primary purpose

is to surprise or shock or confuse).⁷ The contemporary artist is challenged by the burden of the great art of earlier ages and the increasing speed with which new art movements arise. It is not easy to be original in such a climate, and yet innovation becomes ever more important.

A further modern development is the elevation of autonomous art and, in its most radical manifestation, the severing of the link between the aesthetic and the ethical. Oscar Wilde comments: "the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (1048). With this splintering out of art from any moral responsibility, the immoral need no longer be considered ugly. This can lead to works that celebrate moral ugliness or that portray moral beauty as ugly or repugnant. Nonetheless, the representation of the morally ugly as beautiful can have cognitive value; it can help us better understand how evil works. Further, the loosening of the link between art and morality has encouraged modern artists to avoid explicit condemnation, and works that withhold such judgement are often aesthetically more powerful.

These two factors, the realism factor and the aesthetic value factor, have been reinforced by theorists of the ugly. Not until the early nineteenth century did the ugly become prominent in aesthetics, and of those philosophers who belong to the canon, only Theodor Adorno, a twentieth-century philosopher, can be said to have made the ugly the center of his aesthetic theory. For Adorno, the level of immersion in the ugly, its quantitative increase, leads to a new quality in art, an emancipation from harmony (74–75, 154). Adorno criticizes reconciliation, which minimizes tension and obscures negativity (75, 85); any reconciliation in art, he believes, must come at the price of reconciliation in reality (84).

Adorno, and later Slavoj Žižek, resists the traditional definition of the ugly as the negation of beauty and instead sees beauty as derivative of the ugly, an attempt to shade over the ugly of the world and thereby deny it (Adorno 81; Žižek 21). There is an unstated parallel here to Karl Marx's claim that religion is the opium of the masses, which deflects our attention from the dissonance of reality. Adorno notes that the more aggressively the Nazis tortured people in the basement, the more they insisted that the roof should rest on columns (79–80). For Adorno, any effort to criticize the ugly shows a lack of intellectual capacity to deal with this challenge: "The primacy of spirit in art and the inroads made by what was previously taboo are two sides of the same coin" (144). The ugly as what is rejected and ignored mirrors what Julia Kristeva calls abjection.

For Kristeva, the abject is what cannot be assimilated, what disturbs order, that from which we turn away. This includes excrement, disease, the corpse, outcasts, whatever is seen to oppose the autonomy of the self or the order of society. For Žižek, similarly, the ugly becomes “an object that is in the wrong place, that ‘shouldn’t be there’” (21). This theoretical fascination with the ugly as a kind of transgression, a bold integration of what is taboo, should not lead us to forget that disgust is not a weak or false response, but instead is, along with other distancing devices, such as mockery, a normatively appropriate response to moral ugliness.⁸

An emphasis on the ugly has many advantages. The ugly engages elements from which we might otherwise be tempted to avert our gaze. In addition, successful blending of the ugly and the beautiful has generated many sophisticated and innovative works; such blending adds to the tension that is an element of all great art. The prominence of the ugly in works of beauty expands our sense of originality and our appreciation for innovation. Such works challenge our interpretive capacities in new ways by asking us to identify the often submerged merit of formal innovations, and they challenge our hermeneutic capacities by asking us to relate form and content or to integrate various art forms and styles when they seem fully at odds with one another. In addition, the critical potential of art—art as the medium with which we see reality anew, including uncovering our own prejudices—is evident in much of dissonant art. This integration of what society considers taboo, what it neglects to see or face, reinforces the value of art as a critical force. Its moment of nonreconciliation allows us to linger with, rather than move beyond or minimize, the dissonant structures of reality and their effects on the suffering individual.

As the ugly became dominant, many artworks no longer fulfilled the expectations of positive aesthetic value, such as opening up a window onto truth or integrating part and whole, and critics consciously rejected at least some of these expectations. The result has been a difficulty in differentiating good from bad art. If artwork aesthetic criteria along the lines above are abandoned, how can we identify an artwork as bad? What criteria remain? On the one hand is the sociological reduction of art, which says that good art is whatever people call good art. There are no normative criteria at all, simply whatever the market can bear. On the other hand is the introduction of new criteria, such as being innovative, shocking, or outrageous, which, however, when taken to be sufficient, lead to many cases of bad art.⁹

It is difficult to argue with the claim that many contemporary artworks exhaust themselves in shock and gimmicks. And yet even efforts to break boundaries and outrage the audience are sometimes undertaken with a kind of tired self-irony, as if shock itself has become so routine, at least for observers of the art world, that it hardly provides the desired antidote to boredom or cultural satiation or whatever else the artwork is trying to break through in its efforts to transgress taboos (Menninghaus 398). I am still hoping for a brilliant aesthetic theorist to help me grasp how art that reaches its high point in self-mutilation and public defecation, as with the Viennese performance art of Günter Brus (*Brus Muehl Nitsch Schwarzkogler*, 223), or the performances of the American GG Allin, which included also the eating of excrement and physical assaults on the audience, can be understood to have positive aesthetic value. Putting together random assortments of objects, taking photographs of excrement, or performing acts of self-mutilation, and then challenging the audience to make something of them may well be the ideal avenue for an opening up of metaphysical meaning.¹⁰ However, if the critique of our age that motivates such works is justified, we may wish to include such works in that critique as well. Art for art’s sake, fully disengaged from goodness, mimics the broader historical development, whereby a holistic universe is split into autonomous subsystems of culture, of which art is one, and the artist’s freedom from morality only fulfills the expectation that she operate within her own autonomous sphere. Rebellion unveils itself unwittingly as conformity.

The ascendancy of the ugly has triggered a simultaneous resurgence and crisis in modern art. The resurgence arises from the strikingly distinctive forms of beauty that integrate the ugly. Along with its invention of new art forms, such as photography and film, modernity’s signature contribution to the history of art may well be its intense integration of the ugly. By crisis I mean the sudden dominance of two kinds of negative aesthetic value, *kitsch* and what I will call *quatsch*. “Kitsch” refers to a sugary, tacky, or formulaic work that not only eschews the ugly but also lacks any tension whatsoever. Adorno has rightly noted that in its lack of tension, kitsch is, paradoxically, “the beautiful as the ugly” (77). *Quatsch*, a German word, like “kitsch,” means bunk, nonsense, or bullshit, with reference to speech. I am borrowing the term and extending its meaning, as a counterpart to kitsch, to refer to an ugly work in which there is no metaphysical opening onto deeper meaning and whose technical accomplishment

tends to exhaust itself in innovation. Think of the naked Günter Brus or of others whose works reveal, in their cases metaphorically, that the artist is wearing no clothes. What we see today is an increased interest in kitsch on the part of recipients, who do not understand the difficult beauty of much that is seemingly ugly, and an increased production of quatsch on the part of would-be artists. For the Austrian writer Hermann Broch, “kitsch” occupies the place of “evil in the value-system of art” (170); for Broch, kitsch is the sensuous expression of our age, a positivistic, anti-Platonic world, which reduces the infinite to the finite (145, 168–69). But quatsch is its sister: whereas kitsch seeks to please, independently of any higher aspirations for art (123), quatsch seeks to shock or confound, independently of any higher aspirations for art. Both lack transcendence; the one manufactures a sentimental, alternative reality, and the other mimics the reality of repugnance or pushes art into the realm of a confidence game.

FORMS OF BEAUTIFUL UGLINESS

In this final section, I reflect on possible relations between the beautiful and the ugly in the light of positive aesthetic value.¹¹ Before I move on to modes of beautiful ugliness, let me first note an anomalous form, what I call *radiant beauty*, that is, beautiful works that do not include the ugly or in which the ugly plays a modest role, for example, Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Although Adorno sees the dissonant and the ugly emerge as dominant only in modern art, he at times speaks as if they were constitutive of all art or that fracturedness is a constitutive element of great art, irrespective of time period. He fails, thereby, to see how diverse beauty can be. Certainly, all great art must at some level include tension, but that need not mean that the work be engaged specifically with the ugly or that the tension remain unreconciled. To exclude radiant beauty from the realm of positive aesthetic value strikes me as a mistake. We recognize among theorists of the ugly such as Adorno a tendency to reduce great art to ugly art instead of seeing it as a fascinating kind of great art among a wider variety of possible models. To accept or appreciate only one kind of art is to truncate the richness of possible aesthetic experience.

Some examples of radiant beauty could be criticized as escapist. Such a critique might apply to a poetic realism that slides over problems, when they might otherwise be worked through, and so could be said to culti-

vate a kind of false consolation. Such works can be criticized for insufficiently integrating the ugliness that is part of the world; many recipients rightly expect art to engage the challenges of its age. A related objection would be that an age that is truly immoral is not deserving of artworks that are beautiful. This argument, while it can be shortsighted or overblown, is not to be taken too lightly, especially as a genuine motivating force, for example, in Roman satire (cf. Juvenal 1.22–30). To create beautiful works in such an age may seem to justify what exists.

A counter-argument to the claim of escapism would be that such works are other than their age and, in being different, may contain an implicit critique or at least a window onto alternatives. The playfulness and harmony of such a work, a harmony derived in part by its being self-contained, may serve as a counter-model to a reality defined by fragmentation and ugliness. In addition, one could argue that as miserable as the world may be, one way to imagine hope for change is to draw attention to seeds of alternatives, whether submerged in this world or lying beyond it. If one of the tasks of art, in Arthur Danto’s paraphrasing of Hegel, is to “represent ourselves for ourselves” (118), then it makes sense to represent our highest aspirations as well as those aspects of our world that deserve loathing. Art allows for a tremendous range, and not all art need be concerned primarily with the ugly; the world, even in its ugliness, is hardly only ugly.

I turn now to several ways in which the ugly contributes meaningfully to positive aesthetic value. The object may be physical ugliness or, more frequently, moral ugliness or the consequences of moral ugliness, but in each case the result is beautiful ugliness. The first set of modes draws on the relation of content and form. The second set adopts a complementary lens and explores the relation of parts and whole, asking to what extent the work identifies with, or distances itself from, the ugly.

I begin with *repugnant beauty*, that is, a beautiful depiction of some aspect of ugliness: war, poverty, violence, bodily functions, death, industrial and polluted landscapes, and so forth. Such images can be portrayed with technical virtuosity and in such a way as to evoke deeper meaning. The repugnant may involve an exploration of age and mortality, as with Rodin’s *The Old Courtesan* (fig. 11.3). Or one may think of Thomas Eakins’s *The Gross Clinic* (fig. 11.4), with its technical virtuosity and its uncompromising realism; in a self-reflective gesture, Eakins even shows one of the characters in the painting being repulsed by the surgery portrayed. Consider as well the poetry of Gottfried Benn, with its formal

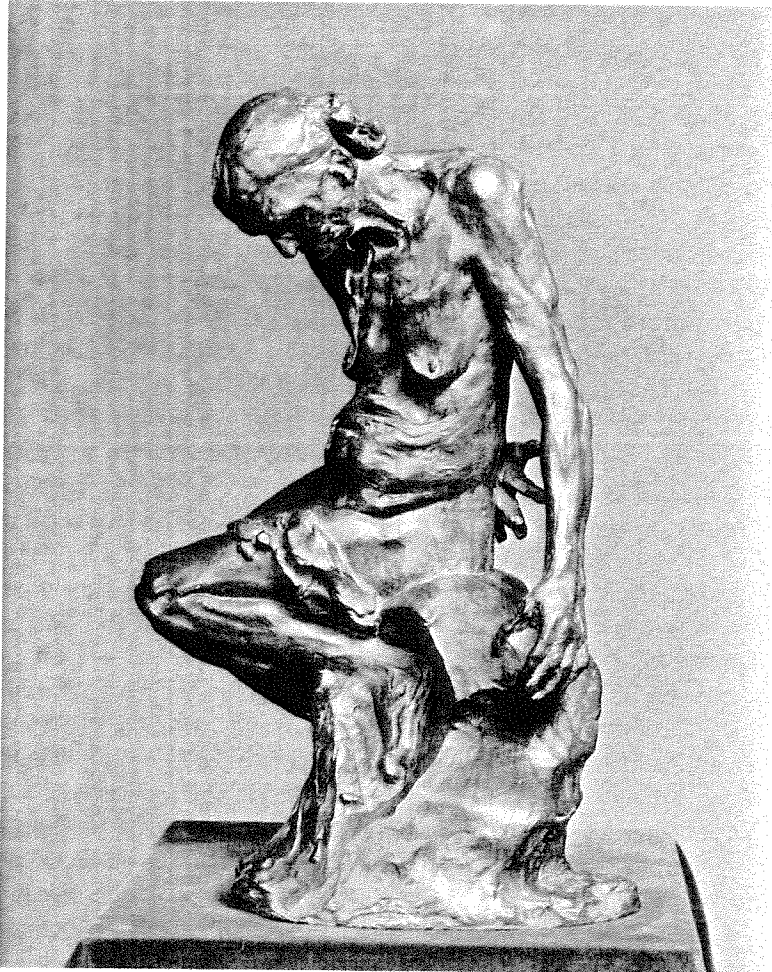


Figure 11.3. Auguste Rodin, *The Old Courtesan*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Art Resource, New York.

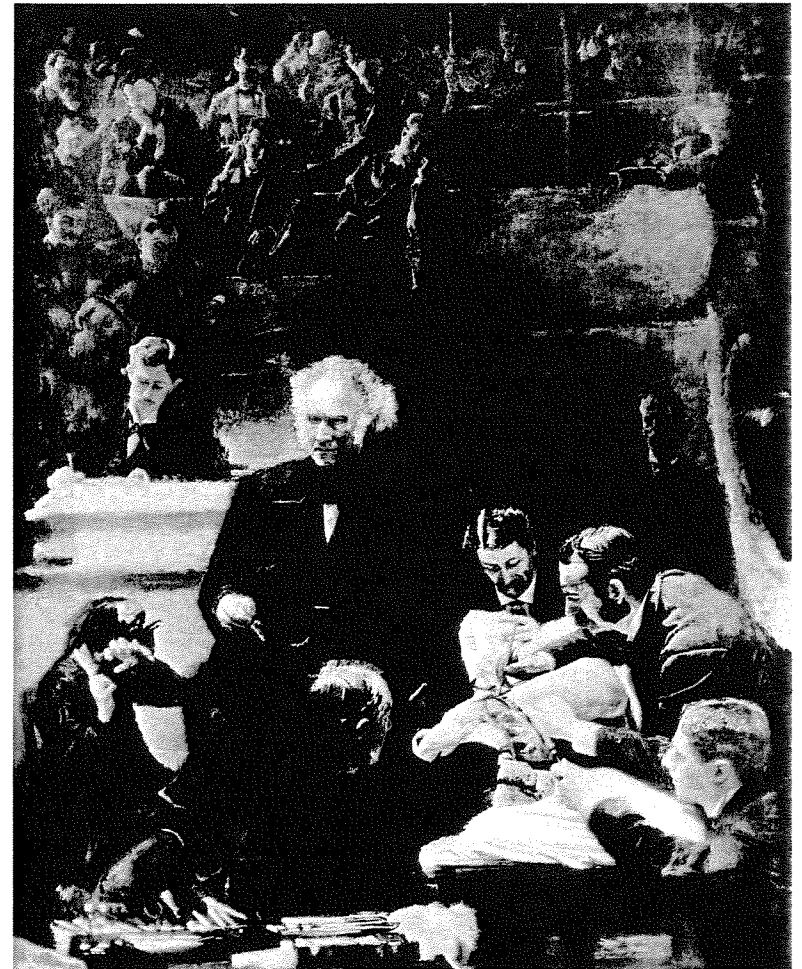


Figure 11.4. Thomas Cowperthwait Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Courtesy Bridgeman Art Library International.

mastery combined with its integration of, for example, a nest of young rats in the stomach cavity of a drowned girl or a woman lying on a pillow of dark blood, her throat slit open with a knife. In repugnant beauty, the focus on the ugly is often an end in itself,¹² but not always: Käthe Kollwitz's sketches of hunger and misery, the poor and disenfranchised, and the impact of war have a certain beauty that is designed to widen our sense of empathy by drawing attention to the abject circumstances of our fellow human beings.¹³

Second are works that depict content that is not necessarily ugly but with a form that is disjointed or fragmented. I call this *fractured beauty*. Consider Picasso's *Head of a Woman* (1960), with its asymmetries and disharmonies. The message seems to be that in our world, we cannot have the whole but only perspectives and thus distortion, even when the content is beautiful.¹⁴

Third are works that are not only ugly in subject matter but also fractured in form. Because most modern European languages, drawing on their Latin roots, use two words for the concept of ugliness, distinguishing between the aesthetic ugliness of form (*deformis* in Latin) and the moral ugliness of content (*turpis* in Latin), I introduce a neologism *aischric beauty* (drawing on the Greek *aischros*, which is a single word that encompasses both dimensions) to refer to art that is both repugnant in content and dissonant in form.

Some such works of suffering, horror, and hopelessness exhibit, paradoxically, a higher unity of form and content. Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck* portrays a world of disarray and disharmony and does so in a form that likewise eschews any teleological direction. The episodic form of Arthur Schnitzler's play *Anatol* formally reinforces the protagonist's lack of enlightenment and is in this way surprisingly organic. Ludwig Meidner's images of crisis, for example, *I and the City*, are fractured in style but mirror thereby the theme of disorientation (fig. 11.5). Or think of Picasso's *Guernica*, which in a fractured style depicts bombing and the suffering of soldiers and civilians as well as animals during the Spanish Civil War; the style effectively matches the content (fig. 11.6). Dmitri Shostakovich's *String Quartet no. 8 in C Minor* evokes the victims of totalitarianism and is appropriately full of dissonance, thereby serving a pattern and a purpose. What distinguishes these works from bad art, among other things, is that the dissonance of content matches a dissonance of form, thus reaching on a meta-level a congruence of form and content. It is indeed fascinating to see that in presenting dissonance, works often integrate formal moments



Figure 11.5. Ludwig Meidner, *Ich und die Stadt* (*I and the City*), 1913. Copyright © Ludwig Meidner-Archiv, Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main. Private Collection. Courtesy Neue Galerie, New York.

of dissonance, which then serve the higher meaning of the work and are thus on a meta-level not dissonant, but organic.

Although my initial set of modes draws on the relation of content and form, a complementary lens asks, does the work identify with, or distance itself from, the ugly? This question, which explores the interaction of parts and whole, leads, first, to what I call *beauty dwelling in ugliness*, a lingering in the ugly characterized by affirmation, melancholic acceptance,

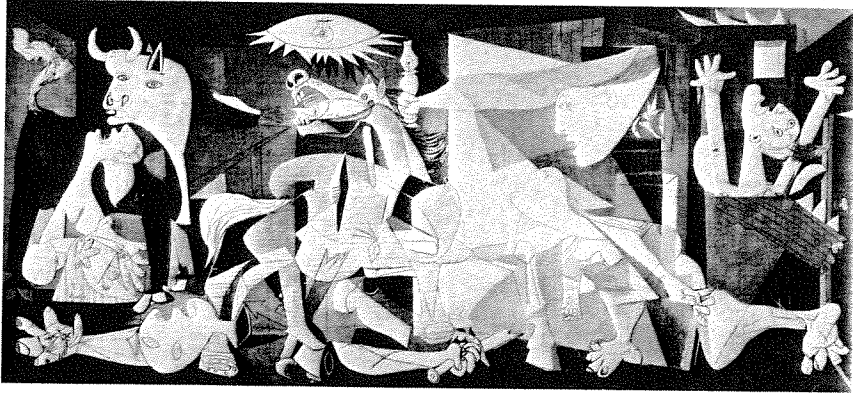


Figure 11.6. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1939. Copyright © Estate of Pablo Picasso/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

or indifference. Consider the early Gottfried Benn, for example, where the poet dwells on a nest of young rats in the stomach cavity of a drowned girl or a woman lying on a pillow of dark blood, her throat slit open with a knife. Also painting offers us images of ugliness that are either positive, suggesting perhaps a reevaluation of conventional standards, or simply without evaluation of any kind, as with Lucian Freud's *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995).

The next model likewise grants the ugly a prominent role, yet works of what I call *dialectical beauty* contain an implicit critique of the ugly. The ugly dominates the work, but rather than dwelling without evaluation or reveling in the ugly qua ugly, the work points toward the ugliness of the ugly, or the negation of negativity, as we saw in Roman satire. Goya presents cruel atrocities, such as torture, rape, and poverty, not to celebrate dissonance but to paint the problems as problems. He reverses the more traditional focus on successful warriors or self-sacrificing martyrs and portrays instead the oppressed. His *Disasters of War* elicits displeasure, encouraging recognition of the problems of reality. Otto Dix depicts the inhumanity and ugliness of war in his cycle of prints *Der Krieg*, which in many ways follows in the tradition of Goya. George Grosz presents the corruption of Germany in World War I and the Weimar Republic in clearly ugly ways, as, for example, in *Pillars of Society* (fig. 11.7), but his portrayals are invariably designed to uncover the ugliness of the ugly. Note in this work the scarred and brainless Nazi with a beer mug and a



Figure 11.7. George Grosz, *Pillars of Society*, 1926. Nationalgalerie, Berlin/ Bridgeman Art Library. Art copyright © Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

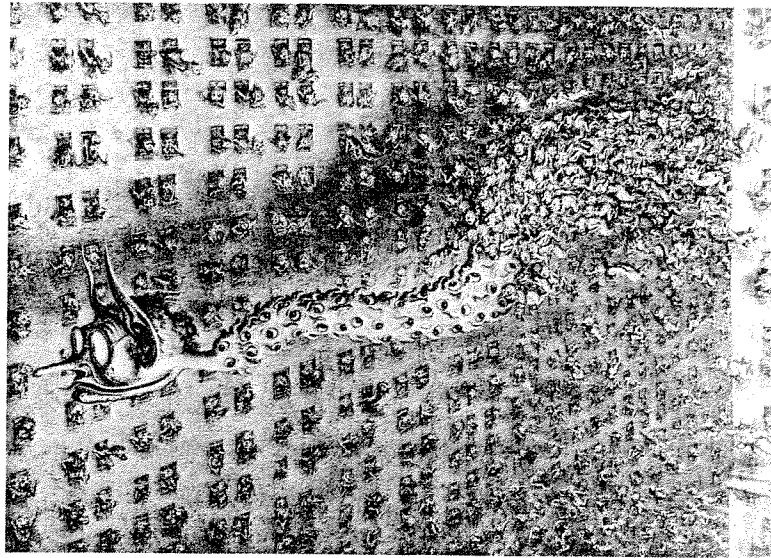


Figure 11.8. Andreas Paul Weber, *The Rumor*, 1934–35. Copyright © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Gild-Kunst, Bonn.

sword; behind him are two members of the middle class, one whose head is filled with a steaming pile of excrement; and in the back one sees a rather unappealing priest blessing the army. Dialectical beauty can encompass the comic as well as the satiric. Andreas Paul Weber's *The Rumor* portrays gossip and rumor and, in its exaggeration, mocks them (fig. 11.8). Consider, along with the snake-like shape (a symbol of deception), the large ears, and the inclusion of the crowded and ugly tenement.

A contemporary example of an artist working within the concept of dialectical beauty is the Russian Maxim Kantor, also a contributor to this volume, who portrays the wretchedness and distortions of contemporary Russian and Western life in a style that exhibits formal inventiveness and elicits distance from what is portrayed, as in his *Wasteland* and *Metropolis* prints. Kantor's works indirectly affirm values by exhibiting the ugliness of, for example, injustice, abuse of power, callousness, blindness, disenchantment, corruption, terrorism, and even anti-terrorism.

The earliest and greatest sequence of thinkers in the history of aesthetics to reflect on the ugly were the early Hegelians, whose works point toward a concept of dialectical beauty.¹⁵ For these thinkers—Christian

Weiße, Arnold Ruge, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, and Karl Rosenkranz—the ugly belongs within art, but the ugly is to be included only insofar as it is negated, and for each of these artists the form in which this negation occurs is the comic. Rosenkranz, the final figure in this sequence, devotes an entire book to the ugly.¹⁶ As much as Rosenkranz insists on the importance of the ugly, he also emphasizes that the ugly must be a temporary and subordinate moment (40). To render it full and independent would be contrary to its concept (41). It belongs to the nature of the ugly to negate itself, and so its subordination is the result not of some external machination on the part of the artist but instead the artist's capacity to let its internal contradictions emerge, to let the ugly reveal itself as ugly and so destroy itself (43). One may think in this context of Johnson's *Volpone*, Molière's *The Miser*, Goldoni's *The Liar*, or Kleist's *The Broken Jug*. Prominent for Rosenkranz, as with his predecessors, is the figure of a negation of a negation. The comic presents obscenities and other inadequate positions in their absurdity and as such negates them. The presentation indirectly serves a moral purpose: "This whole sphere of sexual vulgarity" is "aesthetically freed through the comic" (246).

Insofar as dialectical beauty ranges from lightly mocking comedy to indignant satire and even the self-destruction of the morally repugnant tragic hero, as with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Camus's *Caligula*, the term "dialectical beauty" seems appropriately broad. The early Hegelians, despite their rich and early insights, are, in contrast, too focused on the comic as the only avenue for integration of the ugly. I take the term "dialectical" from Hegel, who recognizes the dialectical as the negative moment within the dialectic; the dialectical recognizes the self-destruction of the negative but does not itself represent resolution, which arrives only with what Hegel calls the "speculative" (8.168–79).

Let me conclude then with what I call *speculative beauty*, in which a position beyond the self-cancellation of the ugly is positively shown and whose most prominent theoretical advocate would be Hegel. In speculative beauty the ugly, repulsive, or hateful is present, even prominent, but ultimately subordinate within a larger, more complex and organic unity. Among the most striking early presentations of the ugly, as noted, are those of Christ's passion. In this model the negative is included but shown to be subordinate within a wider whole.

The integration of the ugly within a wider whole is evident in an often overlooked dramatic genre, the drama of reconciliation, which flourished in ancient Greece, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at*

Colonnus; in the late romances of Shakespeare; and in the period of German idealism, with works by Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist.¹⁷ Or one may think of the speculative novel. Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, the most lyrical of all German novels and in terms of narrative levels one of the most complex, displays tremendous suffering and death but integrates, through the distinction between the experiencing and narrating narrator, a culminating development toward composure and tranquility. Although speculative beauty is more difficult to depict in painting, Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda*, which Peter Landau analyzes elsewhere in this volume, might serve as an example.

In modernity, with its skepticism toward any kind of resolution, speculative beauty may seem rarer, but one art form in which it seems readily manifest is film, not only in the Hollywood expectation of happy endings, which often border on kitsch, but also in films by truly artistic directors. Alfred Hitchcock's works, for example, immerse themselves in negativity but frequently end with hints toward reconciliation; *I Confess* may be the most pronounced example. Or one may think of Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*. More recently, Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, which is deeply immersed in the ugly, comes to mind as a tragedy that includes moments of reconciliation and redemption. More common in modernity is what one might call *epiphanic beauty*, in which, beyond deep immersion in the ugly, one encounters a momentary glimpse or mere hint of resolution, as in Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*, which gestures toward, but does not fully present, forgiveness and reconciliation.

All great art is inexhaustible; here, beauty and the ugly have in common the idea that they cannot be fully comprehended. Alexander Nehamas, drawing on Plato's link between love and beauty, notes: "So long as we find anything beautiful, we feel that we have not yet exhausted what it has to offer" (9). Adorno is wrong when he senses that any harmony obliterates dissonance. No matter how close we may come to analyzing and exhausting the meaning of a great artwork, even a work of speculative beauty, there are moments that affix us, transform us, captivate us—and simultaneously elude us. Adorno argues that artworks conceived as successful wholes or integrated parts necessarily render those parts dead (84), but this view suggests that a part cannot be interesting and vital in and of itself as well as contribute to the whole. In contrast, Hegel argues, with greater awareness of the aesthetics of part and whole, that parts have continuing and independent interest for us even as their full mean-

ing evolves only from their position within the whole of the artwork (13.156–57).

We might reformulate a phrase of Hegel's and propose that art is its age captured in sensuous presentation. This could explain the very strong tendency toward negativity and the ugly in contemporary art. We can understand this turn to the ugly, in the form of the oppressed, the marginal, and the fractured, as a complete rejection of any attempt at wholeness, or we can understand it as a recognition that what was taken for complete was only partial, that the longing for greater harmony is not to be abandoned. Attention paid to what was left out of the alleged classical synthesis can involve a conscious affirmation of the fragmentary, as in Adorno's quip, "the whole is the untrue" (*Minima Moralia* 57), or it can, alternatively, involve a recognition that what was taken to be whole was not itself complete and needs to be extended further. It can be viewed as an argument for greater integration. The turn to the ugly in modern art may thus be indicative of a higher logic and part of a longer story.¹⁸

NOTES

I am grateful to Peter Holland, Christian Illies, and especially Vittorio Hösle for their insightful comments, which greatly improved this essay.

1. Nelson Goodman notes: "If the beautiful excludes the ugly, beauty is no measure of aesthetic merit" (255).
2. I have outlined this theory of aesthetic excellence in greater detail in the first two chapters of *Why Literature Matters*.
3. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.93. All translations are my own.
4. For some helpful reflections on Christ's crucifixion in the context of the ugly, including ample references to the broader literature, see Hamburger. On the broader context of this transformation in aesthetics, see Auerbach.
5. Varying accounts of the appearance of the ugly in art and literature, primarily in modernity, are available in Krestovsky, Gagnebin, Kleine, and Engelmann. In my eyes the most illuminating overview of theory and practice across the ages is provided by Klicke. A very good neighboring study is Kayser on the grotesque, a form of the ugly emphasizing exaggeration and caricature, with an emphasis on the body and the material world. Well known in German circles is the Jauß anthology, which contains a variety of historical studies. Finally, Eco provides the richest collection of materials on the ugly across time.

6. The early Hegelians recognized in the sublime the reverse of the ugly, with one evoking the infinite, the other holding on to the finite. See, for example, Ruge 98.

7. Because the ugly is not easily assimilated, it could be said to resist commercialization. Nonetheless, the ugly has not fully resisted the allure of the market. In this sense Adorno was wrong, much as Walter Benjamin was wrong about the link between film and progressive politics. Even if the boldness and counter-cultural rhetoric of such claims may have wide appeal, such links between artwork and production or reception aesthetics tend to be too simplistic.

8. As Nussbaum argues in *From Disgust to Humanity*, disgust can be directed to the wrong object, but, when in harmony with moral values, disgust remains a valid emotion.

9. For a fuller evaluation of some of the categories privileged in contemporary aesthetics, such as innovation, eccentricity, and incomprehensibility, see Roche, *Why Literature Matters* 88–92.

10. In addition to Brus, I have in mind works such as Jason Rhoades's *Garage Installation New York* (1994) and Andres Serrano's *Shit* (2008).

11. The few brief commentaries in English on the ugly, such as Goodman's, tend to work with distinctions and definitions, though the number of such studies is so modest that I am essentially traversing new territory. The numerous commentaries on the ugly in German and French tend to be historical; these studies recount the emergence of the ugly in art and art theory, often with a focus on individual periods, works, or subtypes, such as caricature. The third part of my essay is the most unusual. I am not aware of a study, other than that of Rosenkranz, which seeks to define and analyze types of beautiful ugliness.

12. There are historical precedents for this fascination with the ugly as an end in itself, for example, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, by Hieronymus Bosch, or *The Triumph of Death*, by Pieter Brueghel.

13. One might speak here, with Hickey, of "subversive beauty," a portrayal of what society views as negative in a beautiful light. Hickey recounts the neo-Marxist argument that because beauty is marketable, it must in some way be spurious; as a result, museum curators and other purveyors of the educative or therapeutic role of art for many years excluded works of formal beauty and masterful technique and focused instead on ideas, those of formal innovation and of socio-political protest, as markers of quality in art. This meant, given the bracketing of beauty, a default elevation of the ugly or what in terms of image and appeal was at least neutral. The concern was not with how art looks but with what it means. I find Hickey's concept of subversive beauty suggestive, but, in contrast to Hickey, I would argue that subversive beauty need not transgress norms; it can be subversive in a variety of ways, including by simply alerting us to overlooked or unsolved problems.

14. Fractured beauty is for the most part highly innovative but lacking in unity. Its metaphorical meaning and formal capacities on the local level separate it from quatsch.

15. Commonly, accounts of the history of the ugly focus on the emergence of the idea of the ugly in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, a discussion that could be said to commence with Lessing's *Laokoön* and Schlegel's *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (*On the Study of Greek Poetry*), which calls for a "theory of the ugly" (311, 315). See Oesterle, Funk, Jung, and, to some extent Menninghaus, who explores the related category of the disgusting. The ugly is not prominent in the history of aesthetics, but there are isolated comments. Aristotle, for example, notes its value within the genre of comedy (1449a), but it was not until the early Hegelians, who for the most part have been forgotten, that we find the ugly occupying center stage.

16. Those unfamiliar with the details of this post-Hegelian development tend, mistakenly, to identify Rosenkranz as the thinker who initiated systematic reflection on the ugly. See, for example, Gigante 584 and Bachmetjevas 30. Nonetheless, it is true that Rosenkranz is the author of the one and only attempt in the history of aesthetics to give a truly detailed account of the ugly. A sign both of contemporary interest in the ugly and the standing of Rosenkranz is that his study, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, has been reprinted multiple times in the past decades, with Frommann (1968), the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (1973, 1979, and 1989), and Reclam (1990, 1996, and 2007). Translations have also appeared or been reprinted in French (2004), Italian (2004), and Romanian (1984). The lack of an English translation as well as the relative dearth of studies on the ugly in English is a fascinating subject in itself.

17. On this genre, see especially Höfle, *Vollendung der Tragödie*, 126–71, and Roche, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 247–89.

18. The significance of discovering neglected moments in earlier attempts at synthesis is a central dimension of my study *Dynamic Stillness*; see esp. 121–23.

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