

Studies in German Idealism 17

Mojca Küplen

Beauty, Ugliness and the Free Play of Imagination

An Approach to Kant's Aesthetics

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An Approach to Kant's Aesthetics

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For My Parents

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Abbreviations of Kant's Works

References to Immanuel Kant are given in the text to the volume and page number of the standard German edition of his collected works: *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (KGS). References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. References are also given, after a comma, to the English translation of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), which includes the “First Introduction” (KGS 20). Listed as follows are the original works and translations that I have used:

- A/B *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (KGS 3–4). *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996.
- Anthro *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (KGS 7). *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Beob *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (KGS 2). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. Paul Guyer. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick Frierson & Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- BL *Logik Blomberg* (KGS 24). *The Blomberg Logic. Lectures on Logic*, trans. Michael Young. (*The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 5–246.
- FI *Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft* (KGS 20). *First Introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 3–51.
- JL *Jäsche Logik* (KGS 9). *The Jäsche Logic, Lectures on Logic*, trans. Michael Young. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 521–640.
- KU *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (KGS 5). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- LD-W *Logik Dohna-Wundlacken* (KGS 24). *The Dohna-Wundlacken Logic. Lectures on Logic*, trans. Michael Young. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 431–516.
- MV *Metaphysik Vigilantius* (KGS 29). *Lectures on Metaphysics*, trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 417–506.
- R *Reflexionen* (KGS 15–19). *Notes and Fragments*, trans. Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer & Frederick Rauscher. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 481–518.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In an episode of the comedy show, *Seinfeld*, there is a scene of an elderly couple standing in front of a painting in which is depicted a character from the show named Kramer. The couple is arguing about the aesthetic value of the art work. The woman is pleased by the painting, finds it beautiful, and expressive of spiritual ideas, whereas the man finds it displeasing, dreadful, and ugly. Surprisingly, however, they are both moved by the painting, admire it and cannot look away from it.

This scene illustrates two significant issues in philosophical aesthetics. First, a widely discussed question is whether aesthetic judgments of beauty and ugliness are merely subjective judgments, which have only private validity, or if it is possible a characteristic for them to have universal validity. Second, a question which has drawn little attention and research from aestheticians is how it is possible that something that we find displeasing and ugly can nevertheless retain our attention and even be highly appreciated.

Immanuel Kant, the founder of modern aesthetics, offered a sophisticated and intricate solution to the first question, claiming that judgments of taste have a subjective – universal validity, but unfortunately did not write much on the nature of experiencing ugliness. This is not surprising for eighteenth century aesthetics which was occupied primarily with taste and beauty as aesthetic values *par excellence*, while ugliness was considered an unfavorable aesthetic concept, denoting lack of aesthetic value and beauty, and therefore associated with aesthetic disvalue and therefore not deserving much attention.

Contemporary artistic production, however, has challenged this traditional aesthetic picture. This is demonstrated by the proliferation of art works that evoke (and aim to evoke) negative aesthetic feelings of ugliness and repulsion and the positive appreciation of them. A brief look at modern and contemporary art galleries such as the Tate Modern in London will show that artistic ugliness is highly valued and appreciated. Examples that evoke negative aesthetic experience, yet are recognized as valuable works of art, include Asger Jorn's semi-abstract painting *Letter To my Son* (1956–1957) in a childlike and chaotic style, Francis Bacon's

distorted depiction of a human face in *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1966) and Jean Dubuffet's flattened figure of a female body in *The Tree of Fluids* (1950). The problem that such examples illustrate is known in philosophical aesthetics as 'the paradox of ugliness', namely, how we can like, attend to, and value something that we *prima facie* do not like, find positively displeasing or even repellent?

In contemporary aesthetics two main solutions to this problem have been offered. Briefly, the first solution claims that what we like and value in such works of art is not the ugly subject matter, but the beautiful representation of ugliness (Lorand 2000, pp. 260–262). An art work may evoke negative aesthetic feelings due to the ugly objects that it depicts, but what we value is the creative artistic representation of ugly subject matter. What we value is therefore not ugliness, but the beautiful artistic representation of ugliness. The second solution, on the other hand, claims that such works of art have cognitive, not aesthetic value (Carroll 1990, pp. 182–186). Through artistic ugliness, certain cognitive ideas and attitudes can be represented and explored, that could not otherwise be. Since artistic ugliness is merely fictional and imaginative, it allows us to attend to and enjoy our cognitive and intellectual inquiry, and this is itself a valuable experience, which compensates for aesthetic displeasure. So what we value in such art works is not ugliness, but the pleasure of intellectual exploration that artistic ugliness affords.

Even though these two proposals can explain some cases of pleasure we feel when confronted with artistic ugliness, they do not, however, explain the fascination with ugliness itself. Among contemporary writers, ugliness has been characterized as aesthetically significant, interesting, astonishing and captivating (Kieran 1997; Brady 2010). A notably distressing scene in the David Lynch's movie *The Elephant Man* (1980) illustrates the peculiar appeal of the ugly which attracts as the same time as it repels. The main character John Merrick is chased by a crowd of people eager to gawp at his severely disfigured face. Psychoanalyst John Rickman (2003, p. 86) describes well such a stirring effect of ugliness by saying: "Ugliness is not merely displeasing in the highest degree, a cause of mental pain, giving no promise of peace, it is something which stirs phantasies so profoundly that our minds cannot let the object alone." Indeed, if we take a closer look at the Jenny Saville's photograph *Closed Contact # 3* (1995), which depicts the artist's obese, naked body, squeezed onto glass, we can notice that the photograph captivates our attention precisely for the same reason it repels us, namely due to the grotesque disfiguration of this image. Even though the artist may intentionally produce ugliness, the satisfaction of the artist's intention does not make the object beautiful. Knowledge of the artist's intentions and the theoretical background of the art work can justify the ugliness of the artistic form and the displeasure it occasions, but it cannot transform it.

Furthermore, the proposed solutions cannot account for the appreciation of those works of art that have no representational elements, such as abstract art, and which do not engage our cognitive interest, yet which are considered to be aesthetically displeasing. For example, Asger Jorn's abstract painting *Oui, chérie* (1961) is just lines and colors, without representing anything, yet the chaotic composition of these colors and lines makes the work discomforting to look at. Another example is

Stockhausen's *Helicopter String Quartet* (1995). This highly appraised instrumental piece of work combines the rhythm of the helicopters' rotor blades and four string players flying in the helicopter. The unconventional combination of classical music and the sound of the helicopters do not represent anything; nevertheless it is highly disharmonic, displeasing and difficult to listen to.

Similar is the case of our experience of ugliness in nature, which can retain our attention and be fascinating, even though it is not artistically converted into something beautiful, nor does it have as its purpose the exploration of cognitive ideas. The bizarre appearance of the Madagascan primate *aye-aye*, or the monstrous looking *angler fish*, hold our attention and captivate our interest precisely because of those features that cause displeasure and frustration in the first place.

Some have argued, however, that in comparison to art, no real ugliness exists in nature. Allen Carlson (2002), the most prominent proponent of such a view, claims that appreciating nature in the light of scientific knowledge will always result in positive aesthetic appreciation. Such scientific knowledge relevant for aesthetic appreciation includes placing the natural object under its correct scientific category (for example, that the whale is a mammal, not a fish) and also more specific scientific knowledge of that category (what its natural function is and how it contributes to the positive performance of the environment in general). Because establishment of scientific categories depends on the principle of intelligibility, that is, the correct scientific category for a natural object is the one that best explains nature as possessing qualities of order and balance, and since qualities of order, balance and harmony are qualities that are appreciated as positive aesthetic qualities, it follows that perceiving a natural object under its correct scientific category will always result in a positive aesthetic experience of the object.

There are many problems with this kind of explanation. In order for Carlson's argument to be successful he must show that it is impossible for someone to have scientific knowledge of a particular natural object and not find that object aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. But this he cannot do. Consider for example the straightforwardly ugly animal called the *Naked Mole Rat*. Even though we know that its physiological structure is well adapted to living in an underground environment, this knowledge does not prevent us finding this animal extremely displeasing and revolting. In fact, it is precisely because of these particularly well adapted features of the *naked mole rat* (such as – its large front teeth, which help the animal to burrow, and its sealed lips behind the teeth, which prevent earth from filling its mouth), that the animal appears particularly displeasing. A natural object may be a perfect specimen of its kind, can exhibit great fitness and adaptation to its environment, and hence their perceptual structure may exhibit great natural order, yet at the same time the same perceptual structure is experienced in an aesthetically displeasing way. This shows that there is a significant difference between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and the appreciation of natural purposes that objects fulfill. While the former refers to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in the immediate experience of perceptual features of the object, the latter refers to the agreement of such perceptual structure with the object's function or natural purpose,