

UGLY, CREEPY, DISGUSTING, AND OTHER MODES OF ABJECTION

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Summary

How do we relate to the excess of the real which cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe of meaning? How do we avoid being haunted by it in the guise of what Kristeva called abject? We can disavow it, we can sublimate it in works of art, or we can surrender to the abyss of its deadly *jouissance*.

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UGLY

The notion of the Ugly as an aesthetic category was first systematically deployed by Karl Rosenkranz – editor and scholar of Hegel, author of his first «official» biography, although himself a reluctant Hegelian – in his *Aesthetik des Haesslichen* (*Aesthetics of the Ugly*,¹ 1853). Rosenkranz’s starting point is the historical process of the gradual abandonment of the unity of True, Good and Beautiful: not only can something ugly be true and good, but ugliness can be an immanent aesthetic notion, i.e., an object can be ugly and an aesthetic object, an object of art. Rosenkranz remains within the long tradition from Homer onwards which associates physical ugliness with moral monstrosity; for him, ugly is *das Negativschöne* (the negatively-beautiful): «The pure image of the Beautiful arises all the more shining against the dark background/foil of the Ugly.»² Rosenkranz distinguishes here between «healthy» and «pathological» mode of enjoying the Ugly in a work of art: in order to be aesthetically enjoyable and, as such, edifying and permissible, ugliness has to remain as a foil of the beautiful – ugliness for the sake of itself is a pathological enjoyment of art.

¹ *Haesslich*: ugly and, literally, worthy of hatred, that which provokes hatred, «hatable.»

² Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetik des Haesslichen*, Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag 2007, p. 36.

Ugliness is as such immanent to Beauty, a moment of the latter's self-development: like every concept, Beauty contains its opposite within itself, and Rosenkranz provides a systematic Hegelian deployment of the all the modalities of the Ugly, from the formless chaos to the perverted distortions of the Beautiful. The basic matrix of his conceptualization of the Ugly is the triad of the Beautiful, the Ugly, and the Comical, where the Ugly serves as the middle, the intermediate moment, between the Beautiful and the Comical: «A caricature pushes something particular over its proper measure and creates thereby a disproportion which, insofar as it recalls its ideal counterpart, becomes comical.»³

A whole series of issues arises here. First, can this third term not also be conceived as the Sublime, insofar as the ugly in its chaotic and overwhelming monstrosity which threatens to destroy the subject recalls its opposite, the indestructible fact of Reason and of the moral law? Which, then, is the triad, the Beautiful, the Ugly, and the Comical (Ridiculous), or the Beautiful, the Ugly, and the Sublime? It may appear that it depends on what kind of ugliness we are dealing with, the excessive-monstrous one or the ridiculous one. However, excess can also be comical, and *du sublime au ridicule, il n'y a qu'un pas*. The Sublime can appear (turn into) ridiculous, and the ridiculous can appear (turn into) sublime, as we learned from Chaplin's late films.

Second, the notion of the Ugly as the foil for the appearance of the Beautiful is in its very core profoundly ambiguous. It can be read (as it is by Rosenkranz) in the traditional Hegelian way: the Ugly is the subordinated moment in the game the Beautiful is playing with itself, its immanent self-negation which lays the (back)ground for its full appearance, OR it can be read in a much stronger literal sense, as the very (back) ground of the Beautiful which precedes the Beautiful and out of which the Beautiful arises -the reading proposed by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*: «If there is any causal connection at all between the beautiful and the ugly, it is from the ugly as cause to the beautiful as effect, and not the other way around. If one originated in the other, it is beauty that originated in the ugly and not the reverse.»⁴ (In a homologous way, one should turn around the standard Thomist notion of Evil as a privative mode of the Good: what if it is the Good itself which is a privative mode of Evil? What if, in order to arrive at the Good, we just have to take away an excess from the Evil?) Adorno's point is here double. First, in general terms, concerning the very notion of art, the Ugly is the «archaic» or «primitive» chaotic (Dionysian) life substance which a work of art «gentrifies», elevates into the aesthetic form, but the price for this is the mortification of the life substance: the Ugly is the force of life against the death imposed by the aesthetic form. Second, with a specific reference to the modern era in which the Ugly became aesthetic category, Adorno claims that art has to deal with the Ugly «in order to denounce, in the Ugly,

³ Op.cit., p. 145. Rosenkranz strangely ignores Hegel in his book on the Ugly, although Hegel points the way towards EH when he conceives Romantic art as the art which liberates subjectivity in its contingency (ugliness) and culminates in humor as a way to assume the ugly.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1984, p. 75.