



THE UGLY [part 1]

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THE UGLY

Mark Cousins

That the ugly *is*, is central to this argument.¹ But to assert this is to contradict a long tradition which seeks to relegate ugliness to the status of a philosophical problem of the *negative*. Since antiquity, beauty has been regarded as possessing a privileged relation to truth. From this it follows that an ugly representation, or an ugly object, is a negation not just of beauty, but of truth. The category of beauty plays an epistemological role; it represents the truth of an object. Ugliness belongs to whatever negates that truth. It belongs to a series of categories which similarly distort the truth of objects. It belongs to what is contingent, for contingency cannot admit of the truth of objects. It belongs to what is individual, for individuality does not express the truth of an object. It belongs to the hell of error; it can never accede to the heaven of what is ideal and what is necessary. This philosophical drama, in which the forces of truth and of error wage war over the territory of art, determines the character of ugliness. Ugliness is condemned to the role of the mistake, to the role of the object that has gone wrong. Ugliness does not exist as such, but only as a privation of what should have been. It belongs to the same family of 'error' as the merely contingent or the grossly individual. It has negated what is real, what is a true object of thought.

Ugliness, contingency, individuality are all terms which belong to the pole of negation. As a consequence of these philosophical axioms, it follows that ugliness will be thought of from the point of view of beauty. At a logical level, ugliness is the negation of beauty; at the level of perception, ugliness is the opposite of beauty. All speculation about ugliness travels through the idea of what it is not. This is indeed characteristic of philosophy's attempt to postpone or prevent any encounter with ugliness as such. Ugliness is always shadowed by the beautiful. The argument that will be presented here is part of an attempt to suggest that ugliness has little to do with beauty and that, in fact, beauty and ugliness belong to quite different registers.

What we might call the philosophical account of ugliness was already laid down in antiquity. For Aristotle, the beautiful object is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality. The romance of Western philosophy with the category of the totality is well documented.² Here it means that the art object must be articulated as a whole. This in turn guarantees that it exhibits the proper relations to itself and to what is not itself, to its inside and to its outside. Its form is clear and distinct. Internally it exhibits coherence; externally it establishes a sharp boundary between itself and the world. This establishes a relation between perfection and the idea of the beautiful object. In this case, perfection does not mean, as it does to us, the zenith of beauty. The perfect object is, rather, one which is finished, completed. Any addition or subtraction from the object would ruin its form. The idea of being finished relates, not to an aspect of the duration of the work, but to the expression of an indivisible totality. This idea may

have lent, historically, a certain drama to the moment of completing a work — that separation of the artist from his work which echoes the separation of God from His Creation.

But the account of God's working week was really about coherence rather than time. This stress upon the object's being perfect and therefore finished already suggests a philosophical criterion as to what will function as ugly. It is that which prevents a work's completion, or deforms a totality — whatever resists the whole. An ugly attribute of a work is one that is excessively individual. It is not just that monsters and characters from low life belong to a class of objects which are deemed ugly; it is that they are too strongly individual, are too much themselves. As such, they resist the subordination of the elements of the object to the ideal configuration of a totality. The ugly object belongs to a world of ineluctable individuality, contingency, and resistance to the ideal. Yet it is here that Aristotle and others make an initial concession to the idea of ugliness, a concession which haunts future speculations concerning the relation between beauty and ugliness. Firstly, ugliness plays a part in comedy. While tragedy has always been discussed in terms of the nobility and coherence of its effects, comedy presents philosophers with a difficulty, for comedy may incorporate the disgusting, the grotesque and the incoherent. Secondly, ugliness appears in discussions of mimesis. If the task of the work of art is to represent, does the beauty of the representation lie in the object which is represented or in its representation? If in the latter, can we then conceive of a beautiful representation of an ugly object? Lastly, ugliness appears in discussions concerning the nature of genius. What sets the work of a genius apart from that of an artist who merely makes a beautiful object? In classical and subsequent hymns to genius something of the following impression may be formed: genius has a sublime relation to structure. Rather than effortlessly and swiftly creating a totality, the genius may incorporate alien objects into the structure of a work, elements that would defeat a lesser artist, in whose hands the whole would break down into a ridiculous collection of incompatible fragments. The genius is able, indeed needs to, pit himself against a seemingly impossible task — to mould individual, inappropriate elements into a final whole. The greater the difficulty, the greater the final impression that the totality makes. In this sense the ugly is part of the power of genius.

This account of genius introduces a permanent instability into subsequent discussions of beauty and ugliness; a dialectic between the two is now played out through the issue of the coherence of the totality. Ugliness can deform a work, but it can also strengthen it. For the stronger the totality of a work of art, the more it has had to overcome those elements within itself that oppose its unification. Indeed, if this is true, a new doubt about a certain type of beauty arises. If the structure of a beautiful object has been too little tested by whatever opposes that structure, then it is condemned to occupy a place which is the inverse of genius. It is facile, 'merely' beautiful.

Ugliness, by complicating beauty, achieves an ambiguous status — utterly excluded from beauty, and at the same time a ‘moment’ in the unfolding of a beauty whose form as a totality is all the more triumphant for having overcome the resistance to itself in its ‘moments’ of ugliness.

The discourse of aesthetics, especially in Kant’s *Third Critique*, fundamentally complicates and radically skews this relation, but does not reverse it. Commentators have frequently identified the category of the sublime as one which overthrows the limits of the classical conception of beauty. Certainly, conceptions of the sublime seem to license types of art production that are characterized by a lack of the proportion and symmetry which figure in descriptions of the beautiful object. That which is vast, ill-defined, irregular or capable of stirring negative emotions is now admitted to aesthetics under the description of the sublime. But we should resist reaching a conclusion that is based upon an idea of the *content* of a sublime representation or production, for in theoretical terms the situation is more complex. It is true that within the sublime the attributes which define the beautiful object (its perfection, its existence as a totality) seem to be displaced by an incitement, to that which seems to have no limit, no proportion — to what is wild. But this is an inadequate characterization of the sublime, which essentially consists in a certain relation between an object which is fearful or awful and a subject who survives the experience of that object. Kant says,

consider bold, overhanging and as it were threatening rocks, thunder clouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. And we like to call those objects sublime because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of quite a different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence.³

What is made clear here is that the sublime is neither an image nor an object of a particular type, but the enactment of a scene in which the subject and object have a dynamic relation to each other within a specific setting. The awfulness of the object does not immediately threaten the subject, but rather — given the subject’s safety-in-danger — it awakens in the subject an apprehension that his potential scope, even his scale, is greater than the vast and fearful object. It is in this sense that Kant refers to God as fearful. Our sense of the extension of the soul depends on our surviving a sense of this awful, fearful character. But if this relation collapses, leaving only fear in its place, then we can have no Christian experience of the soul. We simply fear something; it does not matter whether it is God or a spider. We are afraid and we flee. Indeed, there seems to be something almost inescapably cinematic about Kant’s description of the site of the sublime. I sit (safely) confronting such arresting, awful, fearful representations.⁴ As long as the gap between the subject and the object constitutes a margin of safety, as long as the subject does not cross that fateful boundary between the fearful and

fear, the relation of the sublime can be maintained. If it is crossed, if the subject goes too far or the object comes too close, the sublime will collapse. The paradox of the sublime — or rather its inherent ratio — is that the closer I am to the boundary, the more intense is my experience of the sublime. The moment of its zenith is also the moment of its collapse.

But the vastness of the object, its indistinctness, its lack of proportion or symmetry, does not necessarily signal a revolution in the relation between beauty and ugliness has occurred. For, if the totality of the object seems to be absent in all these sublime representations of the world with its unfinished and unlimited character, this does not mean that the sublime abandons the category of the totality. Here, totality is an attribute, not of the object but of the subject, and of the subject’s relation to the object. The subject of the sublime, who now, in an important sense, has become, if not the work of art, then part of its work, is completed within the moment of sublimity. The attributes of symmetry and proportion, which now may seem to be lacking in the object, none the less reappear as a symmetry and proportionality *between* the subject and the object. The subject always ‘fits’ over the object, demonstrating that the subject ‘comprehends’ it, can contain it as an experience, and is, finally, more extensive than the object. The subject becomes a kind of subjective overcoat for the object. The sublime therefore depends upon a permanent separation and a permanent connection between the subject and the object. The relations of the sublime do not undo the story of the totality.

We can now move to a hypothesis concerning ugliness: *Aesthetics cannot deal with ugliness, save as a negation and as a moment of beauty.* Aesthetics is the theoretical knowledge of beauty and the subject’s relation to beauty, and it therefore follows that there cannot be an aesthetics of ugliness. It also follows that the experience of ugliness is not an aesthetic experience as such. Kant’s notion of aesthetic experience and of judgement cannot admit propositions such as ‘This is ugly’. The judgement ‘This is beautiful’ does not have an opposite. The failure to form a judgement of beauty is just that; it is not an assertion of ugliness. If ugliness is to become an object of inquiry, this inquiry will have to be conducted outside the scope of aesthetics. But like aesthetics it cannot afford to *collapse* into the relativism of taste. For, if the investigation of the ugly is reduced to the question of what is held, here and now, or there and then, to be ugly, there is nothing to say, beyond the fact that some people say one thing, some another. The sociological and historical investigation of personal preferences, or the cultural machinery of taste, can never accede to the problem of beauty and ugliness. For that problem is not about the variability of taste, but about a certain modality of subjectivity in relation to the object.⁵

We have argued that beauty and ugliness operate in different registers, but this much they do have in common: they cannot be accounted for in terms of the way in which a culture imposes a scale and a hierarchy of preferences. The problems of beauty and of ugliness both exceed, though differently, the way in which cultures use the terms. Like beauty, ugliness entails a certain relation of a subject to an object; nor can ugliness be reduced to a set of attributes which are assigned to it. It exists, decisively and fundamentally, within the relation. But what is this relation?

The next hypothesis is as follows: *The ugly object is an object which is experienced both as being there and as something that should not be there.* That is, *the ugly object is an object which is in the wrong place.* It is important to detach this definition of ugliness as far as possible from aesthetics, for it is not at all a question that an object, having been judged to be ugly, is experienced as something which should not be there. This is not a theory of propriety. It is, rather, that the experience of the object as something which should not be there is primary and constitutive of the experience of ugliness. At this level such an experience is identical to the idea of its being in the wrong place. This does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place. For this is not a relation of incongruity or impropriety; the 'wrong place' is an absolute. But in what respect is the ugly object an object which is in the wrong place? Briefly, from the position of the subject to whom the object discloses itself as ugly.

But where may we look for help in thinking out the issue of something which is out of place? Undoubtedly the strongest thoughts about what is 'out of place' come from religious taboos and from the clinical analysis of obsessional neurosis. Both sources (if indeed they are not the same source) betray an underlying concern with things being in their place, and the opposite of this, which is *dirt*. Mary Douglas has famously remarked that dirt is matter out of place. What makes dirt dirty is not its substantial form, however much we commonly believe this to be the case, but the fact that it is in the wrong place. In Judaism the earliest ideas concerning sin were expressed, not as abstract issues of ethics, but as the material problem of the *stain*. And it is the stain which leads that early notion of sin to imagine its expiation in terms of purification rather than restitution. A stain must be cleansed.⁶ Is this because the stain is ugly? The stain is not an aesthetic issue as such. It is a question of something that should not be there and so must be removed. The constitutive experience is therefore of an object which should not be there; in this way it is a question of ugliness. This connection between a thing being in the wrong place, sin, and ugliness still obtains where the prohibitions within a culture take the form, not of elaborate reasoning, but of swift revulsion from the 'ugliness' of an act. An economy of dirt is therefore one way of opening up the question of ugliness.

This economy can also be translated into spatial terms. As a first approximation, in so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is an ugly deduction from 'good' space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this light, 'dirt', the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object. One way of clarifying the difference between the registers of beauty and ugliness is to translate them into topological entities. Broadly speaking, the beautiful object remains the same size as itself, while the ugly object becomes much larger than it is. There is an important reason for this. All objects exist twice, both as themselves and as representations of themselves. But I have a vested interest in pretending to myself that this is not so, for if I were forced to recognize this I would have to conclude that my own existence — as myself and as my representation of myself — are different, and in certain conditions might even come apart. It is not just an idealization of the

human body which is implied in the Vitruvian scheme of proportion; it is a manic insistence that an even more fundamental proportion in man is guaranteed: that he takes up only as much space as his form displaces. This phantasy depends upon a conviction about isomorphism, about the relation between objects and space. Firstly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between an object and the space it occupies. Secondly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between the outside of an object (representation) and its inside (existence). Thirdly, that this is most true when the object is a human being. For the thought of an inside being larger than its outside is one which repels human beings.

But how different is the space of the ugly object, and how little Archimedes understood of it. Contamination, at a logical level, is the process whereby the inside of an object demonstrates that it is larger than its outside or representation. This is one reason why it is important for architecture to be able to think the ugly object. It is also the topographical reason why the ugly object as dirt is not merely a question of 'where the object shouldn't be'. It is not just that the ugly object has trespassed into a zone of purity, for the ugly object is voracious and, through contamination, will consume the entire zone. This demonstrates that an important aspect of the ugly object is its relation to space — including, as we shall see, the space of the subject.

No one knows this better than the obsessional neurotic. Leaving aside the question of cleansing as a form of assuaging guilt, it is clear that for the obsessional the answer to the question 'Where should the object *not* be?' is 'Close to me'. It is not just that the obsessional wants to keep ugly objects as far away as possible; it is, rather, that they become ugly by getting closer. Underlying this is the conviction that what is at a distance is under control, and what is closer is out of control. The obsessional thinks in terms of the formula that ugliness is a function of proximity, but also thinks that the way to stop an object getting closer, to bring it under control, is to clean it. This involves a phantasy about gleaming surfaces; whatever gleams is sufficiently distant from myself. What I polish recedes; what is dirty approaches. But the hopelessness of the task of cleaning is all too apparent. The more you clean something, the dirtier it gets. As the surface is cleaned it reveals those fewer but more stubborn stains which demonstrate even more starkly how the remaining stains consume the surrounding space. The case of the obsessional shows that the ugly object, in its relation to the subject, is not static but is always eating up the space between it and the subject.

But what is this subject? Why is it confronted by something which is in the wrong place? In order to answer this it is necessary to remember that the 'subject' referred to here is not the 'subject' that Kant has in mind, nor the subject of philosophical discourse in general. Still less is it the 'subject' that serves as the bearer of cultural codes in the human sciences. It is, rather, the subject that responds to objects as a determinate psychical apparatus, that is, as a radical division between unconscious and conscious life — a being which is the locus of desire as well as the locus of institutions of defence against those desires.

This has immediate consequences for a psychoanalytic account of the difference between our responses to beauty and to ugliness. In

so far as beauty may be taken as an object of desire, the subject is governed by the pleasure principle. But it is the nature of desire to work in respect of representations. 'Representation' here does not refer to the nature of an object, whether it be a painting or a person: it refers, rather, to the fact that the economy of desire is intrinsically about representation. All objects of desire are representations, since they are substitutions for something that is experienced as having been lost. This economy of desire can be illustrated by reference to the infant. The infant does not experience desire as long as he is satisfied. The first gap in existence occurs with a lack of satisfaction. The infant does not exactly 'experience' this lack. Rather, experience is born of it. The infant deals with the lack of satisfaction by hallucinating what he imagines is the object that would restore satisfaction. But hallucination involves a relation to a representation; it does not produce satisfaction. The representation, in this sense, is a substitute for something which is now lost, and which constitutes the subject as a complex of lacks. The infant assumes subjectivity as the catastrophic precipitation into a world of desire (lack) and substitutions for a lost object. However much the subject strives to fulfil his desires, the economy of lack can never be satisfied. The lost object can never be found because it is no longer an object; it is the condition of desire. Caught between what is experienced as lost and the illusions of desire, the subject follows the plot of his own fiction.⁷

This economy governs both the life of phantasy and life in the world. But the world includes obstacles to desire; indeed the world itself may be thought of as an obstacle to desire. It is this which leads Freud to define 'reality' in a special sense, one which is quite alien to definitions offered by philosophers or by the human sciences. If the philosopher defines reality or existence as the sum of what there is, and if the anthropologist defines it as the sum of what there is from the standpoint of a culture, those definitions are no part of Freud's reasoning. For him reality is anything that functions as an obstacle to desire. The idea of 'reality testing' is not the cognitive adventure that psychologists imagine, but the painful blow, or wound, that is delivered to our narcissism. Reality is that which, being an obstacle, both arrests and denies us our pleasure. It is in this sense that we can consider a thesis which might otherwise seem petulant and melodramatic: *The ugly object is existence itself*, in so far as existence is the obstacle which stands in the way of desire. And so it is, from the point of view of desire, that the ugly object should not be there. Its character as an obstacle is what makes it ugly.

But the human being is not a stoical being. Far from accepting his or her fate in a world of obstacles, the human being resorts to the primitive mechanism of projection: whatever is not a friend of desire is an enemy which seeks my destruction. Late in his life Freud reformulated his definition of reality in the dark and laconic observation that reality is equivalent to castration. Whatever is an obstacle is invested with the power to punish or annihilate me; it, in a literal sense, is coming to get me. At this point the clinical observation of the obsessional neurotic applies to the daily life of humanity. The ugly object, as obstacle, is a punitive force which is sweeping towards me. The response to this threat can be twofold — to destroy the object, or to abandon the position of the subject.

Since the former is rarely within our power, the latter becomes a habit. The confrontation with the ugly object involves a whole scheme of *turning away*. The child's closing of the eyes rehearses the vanishing of the subject. Not looking, turning my back, inattention: all betray the fugitive reaction to the ugliness of that which exists. This is a defence against a reality which shows that the relation to ugliness is quite different to the movement of desire, and is fought out on another plane. Such an account provides, however, only a view of the relation to ugliness at the level of the ego and its defences. There is another story, more obscure and obscene, about the relation between the unconscious and ugliness. It is an account of the ecstasy which the unconscious enjoys in all that is dirty, horrifying and disgusting — that is, of ugliness as an unbearable pleasure.

Notes

1. This article, which is the first part of two articles, is a synopsis of twenty-two articles on ugliness delivered at the AA in the academic year 1994/95. It attempts to present ugliness as a distinct problem, one that cannot solely be accounted for by aesthetics. It is concerned to develop, in a preliminary way, a psychoanalytic account of ugliness, in so far as ugliness involves experiences which are, at least in part, unconscious.
I would like to thank the audience at these lectures and at previous lecture series. The comments made at the seminars after the lectures have allowed me to reformulate what I have tried to say. In particular I would like to thank Michael Newman, Brian Hatton, Olivier Richon, Pam Golden and Gordana Korolija.
2. The work, especially the early work, of Jacques Derrida is exemplary in this respect. Much of what he characterizes as the 'metaphysics of presence' is also a privilege which is consistently accorded to the category of the totality, and more generally to whatever makes up a 'whole'.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 120.
4. In a section which follows the quotation above, Kant gives an unusual definition of the brave soldier: 'one whose sense of safety lasts longer than others'.
5. Since the late eighteenth century an argument has existed that assertions that something is beautiful or ugly are nothing more than a linguistic assertion that the subject 'likes' or 'dislikes' something. As such, aesthetics is ruled out of court, in favour of the analysis of preferences or taste. Contemporary sociology attempts to show how the mechanisms of taste serve the interests of certain social classes and relations of cultural prestige. But these forms of argument, however appealing, fall short of Kant's problem.
6. There is a necessary ambivalence about the stain itself which must be cleansed, or the place of the stain. The space as a whole has been violated. Contamination is a process which by definition *spreads*. This is why both religious taboos and the obsessional are concerned with minutiae. For even the tiniest violation of a boundary always has large consequences.
7. This is an absurdly contracted statement of a psychoanalytic view of the birth of the subject, which is so different from the birth of the infant. It is concerned to signal that from the point of view of desire all objects are also representations. Such a condition reaches a point of intensity in the wish to see. For what is it that we wish to see, beyond what we see?