

The Ugly in Art

Bjaurumas mene

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Santrauka

Tradiciskai estetika meną suvokė kaip vidujai susietą su grožiu. Buvo teigiama, kad meno užduotis yra per-gaminti ar imituoti grožį. Meno istorija ir ypatin-gai šiuolaikinio meno vystymasis prieštarauja tokiam požiūriui - modernioji estetika atrodo susitaikiusi su to, kas istoriniu, socialiniu ar kultūriniu požiūriu yra laikoma pasibjaurėtina, buvimu mene. Kita vertus, gro-žio kaip vienintelio kriterijaus meno vertei nustatyti atsisakymas veda prie subjektyvizmo ir reliatyvizmo. Straipsnyje, remiantis trijų bjaurumo mene apologe-tų – Karl'o Rosenkranz'o, Bernard'o Bosanquet'o ir Theodore'o Adorno – meno teorijomis, siekiama nu-brėžti vidurinio kelio tarp dviejų kraštutinumų gaires.

Rosenkranzo bjaurumo kaip kontrasto grožiui inter-pretacija, Bosanquet'o sudėtingo grožio samprata ir Adorno bjaurumo kaip kulto prezencijos moderniaja-me mene suvokimas kiekvienas savitai pasiūlo meta-fizinį, psichologinį ir istorinį bjaurumo mene pagrindi-mą ir pateisinimą. Šios teorijos yra interpretuoja-mos kaip konstruktyvus pagrindas išgelbėti objektyvų meno vertinimą, tuo pačiu neredukuojant meno tik į grožio vaizdavimą.

Esminiai žodžiai: meno teorija, grožis, bjaurumas, Rosenkranz'as, Bosanquet'as, modernioji estetika, Adorno, objektyvus meno kriterijus, dialektinis po-žiūris.

Summary

Traditionally aesthetics perceived art as intrinsically connected with beauty. It was argued that the task of art is to re-produce and imitate beauty. The history of arts and especially the development of the contemporary art contradicts such a view – modern art theories seem resigned to the presence in art of what is culturally, historically and socially perceived as ugly. On the other hand, discarding beauty as the only criteria for artistic excellence leads to subjectivism and relativism. The article, drawing on the theories of the three apologetes (Karl Rosenkranz, Bernard Bosanquet, and Theodore Adorno) of the ugly in art attempts

to outline the middle way between the two extremes. Rosenkranz's interpretation of the ugly as the foil for the beautiful, Bosanquet's concept of difficult beauty, and Adorno's understanding of ugliness as the cultic presence in art each in their own way offer a metaphysical, psychological and historical justification of the presence of the ugly in art. These theories are interpreted as a constructive reason to save the objective criteria for art without at the same time reducing art to a mere depiction of beauty.

Key words: art theory, beauty, ugliness, Rosenkranz, Bosanquet, modern aesthetics, Adorno, objective art criterion, dialectical approach.

What is called philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art.

Friedrich Schlegel

The Problem of Subjectivity in Art

Traditionally aesthetics perceived art as intrinsically connected with beauty. The task of art, it was argued, is to re-produce or imitate beauty. In order to demonstrate such an intrinsic and exclusive connection of art and beauty sets of rules were

defined. At one point or another unity, composition, symmetry and alike were seen as the criteria for perceiving art as beautiful. However, such a definition of art and a statement of necessary bond between art and beauty entailed that ugliness is

something that is alien to and ultimately stands outside of art. Representation of ugly objects in art, according to this view, either disqualifies such an art or at least is a mistake, an error, which has to be rectified. Socrates was the first to 'correct' Homer and other poets in Plato's *Republic* for representing things which were not true and disgusting. (Plato, 1997, 2.376e-3.402c) Art, it was reasoned, has to do exclusively with beauty and ugliness is not merely outside of art, but is essentially opposed to it.

The history of art and especially the development of contemporary art seem to contradict such reasoning. Examples abound. From scary masks of ancient rituals to Joseph Beuys' installations and from medieval drawings of hell to the compositions of Krzysztof Penderecki history of art seems to be a story as much of representing ugliness as it is of representing beauty. Vincent Van Gogh's dirty boots deserve a place in the history of art as much as his sunflowers; it would be a strange kind of aesthetics to argue higher aesthetical value of the *Crime and Punishment* over *Brothers Karamazov* on the grounds that the main character of the latter is more likable than that of the former. Modern aesthetics seems resigned to the presence in art of what is historically, socially and culturally perceived as ugly. Furthermore, disqualifying art *a la* Socrates would mean huge losses in the history of art in the form of the examples of art and significantly shake up the traditional canon. However, on the other hand, discarding beauty as the only criteria for artistic excellence leads to a lesser or greater degree of subjectivism and relativism. Breaking the intrinsic bond between art and beauty leaves art and philosophy of art in a certain sceptical vacuum where ultimately a sort of Kantian aesthetics, which ascribes every observer of art a right to a judgment prevails. The dilemma faced by modern aesthetics seems to be irreconcilable – either art is only about beauty and then there is no place for ugliness in it, or, to use Paul Feyerabend's dictum from another context, 'anything goes' and thus any aesthetic judgment is as good as it gets.

In this paper I would like to discuss one of the possible solutions to this dilemma.¹ I believe that the problem arises from transmitting the rules of nature to the rules of art. The task of art since

Aristotle was understood to immitate nature². Therefore, it was natural to think that what we perceive as ugly in nature remains ugly in art.³ I will argue that such a transmission of criteria is wrong. We rightly understand art as the immitation of nature. Art takes its inspiration from nature. However, the examples which it encounters there art reproduces or reworks within its own laws and logic. Human imprint on painting or description of landscape does not merely immitate nature, but also produces a new essence. Artistic inspiration, by casting its attention on certain object, withdraws it from nature and puts it in (completely different) aesthetic realm. Automatic transgression of the rules of life to art fails to grasp the nature of art as one of free imagination and play. Therefore, I would like to argue that the ugliness encountered in nature is neither opposed, nor closely related to art - it is rather irrelevant. An ugly duckling is ugly both in nature and in art. However, we perceive ugly duckling in art as ugly only because we project it back to nature. Yet this does not prevent from a fairy-tale about it being beautiful. A kitsch painting of the Virgin sold in churches recaptures the supposed beauty of the character, yet it does not make the painting beautiful. In other words, natural beauty does not make up what we could call aesthetic beauty. Neither does it diminish it. The separation between the two concepts helps to explain away the ugliness in art and the intrinsic striving of art towards the beauty.

Furthermore, I will try to show that ugliness which is encountered in nature has a positive role to play in artistic production. Firstly, I will turn to the theory of Karl Rosenkranz who was the first to systematically investigate the problem of ugliness in art and saw it primarily as the dialectical foil for the represented beauty. Inspired by the Hegelian aesthetics, Rosenkranz tried to show that only ugliness which is subjugated to the higher – aesthetical – beauty is acceptable in art. Although Rosenkranz implied the distinction between aesthetical and natural beauty, he did not emphasize it. Therefore, I will turn to Bernard Bosanquet for such a distinction. I believe that his concept of difficult beauty provides necessary conceptual background for the dialectical explanation of ugliness in art, expounded by

¹ The most obvious solutions, of course, are to take one or another side of the above-mentioned dilemma, yet I believe that in that case the losses are too significant to be ignored. Either we discard what we normally perceive as a great art, or we ban any possibility of an objective discussion on art.

² By nature I understand everything what stands outside of art, i.e. everything what can become an object of artistic representation.

³ For example, murder is ugly in life, thus it has to be ugly in works of art and so on.

Rosenkranz. Finally, I will discuss Theodore Adorno's understanding of ugliness in art as a social and historical construct. Adorno held that the appearance of ugliness and beauty in art and the dominance of one or another could be explained as

a reaction to social and cultural conditions of the given historical moment. Such a view, I believe, is a valuable and insightful contribution to the aesthetics and helps to explain further the nature and inner dynamics of art.

Karl Rosenkranz's Aesthetics of the Ugly

Karl Rosenkranz is best known as the disciple and biographer of Hegel. However, his aesthetical theory (which incidentally did not receive much attention when it appeared) proved to be a valuable contribution to the art theory and to have a lasting impression.⁴ In his book *Die Aesthetische den Häßlichen* Rosenkranz reassured the bond between the beautiful and art, yet did not discard ugliness from art, but, on the contrary, tried to show that it can play a prominent role in it. Such a role could be summarized as a harmonizing role – the ugly, according to Rosenkranz, appears in art as a counterpart to the beautiful in order to provide contrast and symmetry. Rosenkranz emphasized that the ugly is 'inseparable from the concept of beauty, for in its development, beauty constantly carries ugliness along with it as the deviation into which it may stray by being even slightly too much or too little of something. Whenever aesthetics attempts to positively determine the beautiful it has necessarily to touch its negation, the ugly, as well.' (Rosenkranz, 1968, 12f^s) Ugliness has the intrinsic relation to the beautiful in the dialectical sense, for every concept contains its own negation within itself. Thus it is in the nature of the beautiful to contain within itself its negative, the ugly, as its foil. The beautiful, argues Rosenkranz, has a content only because of its opposite, the ugly.

However, it is not merely on the conceptual level where the ugliness appears in art. Ugliness plays out also on a more concrete level in a form of the ugly objects being represented in art next to the beautiful ones. Ugly objects, according to Rosenkranz, only enhance the beauty of the beautiful ones. Thus ugliness appears as an auxiliary element, which is used only to aid and increase the final goal, but never is the final goal itself. As Rosenkranz put it, 'from the dark foil of the Ugly the pure picture of the Beautiful stands out ever

more brightly.' (Rosenkranz, 1968, 36) To be sure, such a usage of ugliness in art is only optional and not obligatory, for beauty, according to Rosenkranz, has enough contrasts within itself to enhance its own effects. Beauty does not need anything outside itself and has enough overtones to provide the contrast.⁶

Art emerges here as the representation of the spirit of culture in which it appears. Art, as does reason, represents the idea, yet it is different from the representation which we achieve in reason for it owes much of its effect to the particular insofar as its contents and means are concerned. Thus the dialectical nature of idea is at play both in reason and art. Art, in order to represent the idea fully and not one-sidedly, has to represent the negative of the beautiful, namely the ugly. 'All forms, which can spring from coincidence and from arbitrariness, also realize factually their possibility, and the idea proves its divinity above all through might, with which it still retains together the unity of its law in the mass of intertwined phenomena, in the separation of coincidence from coincidence, of impulse from impulse, of arbitrariness from arbitrariness, of passion from passion. Thus if art wants to bring the idea not just one-sidedly to experience, then it also cannot spare the Ugly.' (Rosenkranz, 1968, 38) Therefore, argues Rosenkranz, representation of ugliness in art is justifiable by the striving of art toward the universality and totality of the idea. However, the nature of art allows to incorporate the negative of the beautiful in art without losing or relativizing the beautiful primarily because ugliness is seen as the essential part of the beautiful as its necessary foil and counterpart. The ugliness merely enhances the effect of the beautiful and in such a way points to a better grasp of the beautiful itself. Only art which shows both the positive and the negative can be representative of the idea.

⁴ The new interest in Rosenkranz's theory of art is proven by the new edition of his *Die Aesthetische den Häßlichen* in the previous decade.

⁵ Rosenkranz's references are to the first German edition. The English quotes are from the unpublished translation by David F. Hoinski, Philipp Steinkrüger and me.

⁶ Rosenkranz uses Goethe's *Iphigenia* as an example of a set of beautiful characters who are to provide contrast to each other.

This is not to say that any art which represents the ugly is to be regarded as a 'good' art. Rosenkranz distinguishes healthy and pathological enjoyment of the ugliness in art. In this sense he remains a strict formalist for only ugliness which is represented as a foil of the beautiful is to be regarded as aesthetically enjoyable and permissible. If ugliness is used in order to provide a contrast or to represent the negative moment of the idea it is enjoyable and edifying. Ugliness for the sake of itself is, as Rosenkranz calls it, a pathological enjoyment of art. Yet if ugliness is enjoyed for the sake of its own, it is, according to Rosenkranz, a sign of concern in society.⁷ Similarly mistakes in artistic production should not, according to Rosenkranz, be regarded as a foil for the beauty of the objects represented. Artistic naiveté or a lack of technical excellence are not to be perceived as the ugly which strengthens the beauty of art.⁸

Bernard Bosanquet's Concept of Difficult Beauty

Similarly the role of ugliness in art was seen by another follower of Hegel Bernard Bosanquet. In his *Three Lectures on Aesthetics*, written already in the beginning of the 20th century, Bosanquet approaches the same problem Rosenkranz dealt with, yet concentrates on a more conceptual level. He sets off by clearly distinguishing aesthetic beauty from any other form of beauty. Aesthetic beauty is used to define something what is aesthetically excellent and pleasing as opposed to beauty which we encounter in actuality. Art is a form of expression thus in order to have an aesthetic value and impact ugliness, according to Bosanquet, has to have a certain expressive form. In order to be judged aesthetically, ugliness has to have a certain place in the artwork. Accordingly, if ugliness does not have it, it is outside of the aesthetic reckoning altogether. 'If it [the ugly – VB] has no expressive form, it is nothing for aesthetic. If it has one, it belongs to the beautiful.' (Bosanquet, 1963, 52) Such a, it seems, simple distinction is, however, significant, for it emphasizes precisely what Rosenkranz failed to

The distinction between the natural ugliness and aesthetic ugliness is implied in Rosenkranz's account, although not stated explicitly. Although he defines ugliness as the foil for the beautiful in the work of art, he also refers to ugliness as a 'lack of structure, incorrectness or deformity' (Rosenkranz, 1968, 5), which clearly points to the aesthetic merits of artistic production. In this sense ugliness is nothing else than artistic imperfection. Such ugliness appears in the works of art that do not meet artistic requirements and therefore fail to produce aesthetic beauty. It is important to note that aesthetically ugly art for Rosenkranz does not have any necessary relation with what is represented in that art. He makes clear that artistic production which makes art itself look ugly does not provide a necessary foil for the beauty which artist intended to depict or portray.

emphasize, i.e. that aesthetics has to be judged by aesthetic standards while beauty outside of it does not fall under aesthetic judgment at all. In other words, Bosanquet legitimizes the distinction between nature and art, in such a way establishing the autonomy of art. The ugliness which has a form necessarily is pointing to something which is not itself, that is not ugly. Thus in this sense ugliness can be expressive of the beauty. On this account Bosanquet agrees with Rosenkranz and even extends his proposition. While Rosenkranz allowed that ugliness in art may appear only in contrast to the beauty, Bosanquet argues that ugly object might be represented in art without contrasting it with immediately present beautiful object next to it. According to Bosanquet, ugly object carries beauty within itself.⁹

Central to Bosanquet's account is the notion of difficult beauty which he opposes to simple beauty. Difficult beauty designates sophisticated works of art that require certain aesthetical awareness in order to be perceived.¹⁰ Such works of art may

⁷ Rosenkranz provides a list of examples of such an enjoyment: chasing animals, gladiatorial games, lascivious *symplegmas*, cartoons, sensual and softened melodies, colossal orchestration. One could add any contemporary kitsch, pornography, pop music, etc.

⁸ Rosenkranz fails to clearly identify the difference between aesthetic and natural beauty which seems to be required at this point. However, Rosenkranz's main concern here is to make sure not to provide a justification for artistic irresponsibility, therefore he puts an emphasis on the technical mistakes and naivety. Furthermore, naivety should not be understood as simplicity - Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* is hardly an example of technical excellence or complexity, yet it is surely not an example of naivety either. This distinction is important for Rosenkranz's argument.

⁹ Although both Rosenkranz and Bosanquet can be said to apply Hegelian methodology, Bosanquet certainly emerges as a more radical dialectician, for he trusts that one object can reveal the dialectics within itself while Rosenkranz would settle only for the contrast of two opposing objects.

¹⁰ Bosanquet's examples of simple and difficult beauties are the Venus dei Medici and the Venus of Milo, the opening of *Marmion* and the first chorus of the *Agamemnon* respectively. (Bosanquet, 1963, 46)

contain representations of ugly objects within them and therefore aesthetical training is required in order to grasp such a beauty. Bosanquet employs Aristotelian theory of the ‘weakness of the spectator’ to justify the concept of difficult beauty. According to his theory, the failure to notice the beauty in great works of art is down to the lack of training or education of the spectator.

This leads Bosanquet to a much more radical statement. He sets out a goal to define true ugliness. ‘This must mean, if it means anything, invincible ugliness, such as no sane imagination can see as beauty.’ (Bosanquet, 1963, 51) However, Bosanquet notices that in the course of history all things were at one point or another conceived as beautiful and therefore it is impossible to find true ugliness. Thus he makes a paradoxical conclusion: true ugliness does not exist. Failure to meet the criteria for the true ugliness seems to support the ‘weakness of the spectator’ theory. Bosanquet argues that ugliness which we perceive is down to the inability of the spectator to see the beauty and not to the lack of beauty itself. In other words, if ugliness in art is expressive and is pointing to beauty, it cannot be called true ugliness for it will not be ugly to all sane imaginations. ‘If an object comes within a definition of beauty [if it has expressive form as it must], then

(supposing the definition is right) its being unpleasant to us would merely be due to our weakness and want of education, and it would come within the limits of difficult beauty.’ (Bosanquet, 1963, 98) This entails a really radical conclusion: all artistic expressions are beautiful and it is only our lack of education which fails us to see it. Or as Dale Jacquette put it in a more Hegelian parlance, ‘whatever expresses spirit is beautiful, however difficult it is to appreciate.’ (Jacquette, 1984, 82)

Clearly such an argument seems to invite criticism – Bosanquet’s claim that there is no true ugliness seems to give a licence to any kind of artistic production. The criticism of such a production could always be discarded on the grounds that it is the failure of the spectator to see the beauty and not the for the lack of the beauty itself. To be sure, Bosanquet realizes such a danger and therefore proposes three criteria for the difficult beauty, namely, intricacy, tension and width. Furthermore, he does not claim that such a list is exhaustive, thus leaving open the possibility for further discussion. Bosanquet’s account remains interesting because it sets out the criteria for aesthetic beauty at the same time incorporating ugliness as a possible element in the aesthetic production without reducing judgment of art to a merely subjective matter.

Theodore Adorno’s Historical Approach

Both Rosenkranz and Bosanquet perceived ugliness as the negation of the beautiful. German philosopher Theodore Adorno reversed the relation. ‘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.’ (Adorno, 1984, 75) Thus the ugly is prior to the beautiful. This at a first glance formal shift has strong implications for it changes the meaning of the beautiful. The beautiful is no longer perceived as the unchanging universal concept which only needs the formal criteria to be fully grasped, but becomes a part of human history. As Adorno put it, ‘archaic art carries its antithesis in itself. The qualitative leap of art is a minute transition. It is because of this dialectic that the image of beauty keeps changing with the overall movement of enlightenment.’ (Adorno, 1984, 77). The concept of beauty is designated by Adorno as the transition from the archaic and primitive to a later, more enlightened, cultural stage. While this transition, according to Adorno, contains in itself a moment of

progress in a form of a better comprehension of the aesthetic, it does not completely break the bond with the primitive. ‘The affinity of all art with death is most noticeable in the idea of pure form imposed by art on the living manifold, which is thus snuffed out.’ (Adorno, 1984, 77).

Art emerges as the suppressor of nature. Where art succeeds to bring about aesthetic reconciliation, it does so at a high price, namely the death of the nonaesthetic material. The ugly in this context is synonymous with the archaic and the primitive which art as the enlightening force tries to escape. However, the ugly also articulates the force of life against the death of the aesthetic form. Thus the history of art is seen by Adorno as the dialectic intertwining of the modern and the archaic.

Adorno suggests that ancient art is not coincidental with its cultic function, but it cannot be described as the opposite of it either; ‘breaking loose from cult objects by a qualitative leap, art at the same time preserved and transformed the cult element. This structure has reproduced itself on an expanding scale in subsequent stages of art history.’ (Adorno, 1984, 400). In other words, the history of

art preserves the cultic element in all its phases as a necessary element. Looking at modern art, in particular at the works of Picasso, Adorno notes the “marks of terror” (Adorno, 1984, 400), i.e. the shock produced in the viewer by the deformation of the represented object. He interprets it as the presence of the cultic elements, the return of the horror invoked by the cultic figures. This implies that ugliness is not a purely formal question. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl notes, ‘it is closely linked to a larger issue of the origin of art and the significance of the cultic element. As long as one looks at Adorno’s understanding of the ugly exclusively or primarily in the context of the history of aesthetics, one will miss this crucial link.’ (Hohendahl, 2005, 184)

These two lines of argument underscore the third, arguably the most important, i.e. the social impact which the representation of ugly in art has to play. In society the ugly emerges as the set of taboos. According to Adorno, ‘art must take up the cause of that which is branded ugly.’ (Adorno, 1984, 72) In so

doing, ‘art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.’ (Adorno, 1984, 72) Thus art, according to Adorno, has a task to be on the side of those social phenomena which are treated as taboo in society. The ugly, represented in art, only increases its critical impact and opposition to the social status quo. Such a critical impact and opposition is especially crucial in modern art. The ugly determines both the content and the form of the artwork. As Adorno put it, ‘the repressed creature who is on the side of revolution is, by the standards of the beautiful life in an ugly society, uncouth, distorted by resentment, bearing all the marks of humiliation and unfreedom inflicted by a life of physical toil.’ (Adorno, 1984, 72) It is the task of modern art to be on the side of those social phenomena that have been treated as taboo. The critical function of the modern artwork, specifically its opposition to the social status quo, is only supported and enhanced by the presentation of the ugly.

Conclusions

In summary I believe I have shown that the presence of ugliness in artwork is justified not only factually, but also has a strong theoretical support. It can not just be brushed away. Modern art illustrates the increasing role that what traditionally was perceived as ugly has to play within aesthetics and artistic production. I believe that the above discussed theories can play a positive role in explaining the implications of the ugly in art. The dialectic understanding of the artistic beauty, as shown in the above exposed examples, is one of the possible ways round the dilemma that the modern art theories have

faced. Rosenkranz, Bosanquet and Adorno provide three similar, yet each of them original interpretations of the presence of ugliness in art. Rosenkranz’s interpretation of the ugly as the foil for the beautiful, Bosanquet’s concept of difficult beauty, and Adorno’s understanding of ugliness as the cultic presence in art are each an insightful and original contribution to aesthetics. As the common ground that unites them one could point to the dialectical understanding of the nature of beauty and the formalistic approach to art in such a way saving the possibility of an objective aesthetic judgment.

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