

# The Offences of the Imagination: The Grotesque in Kant's Aesthetics

Beatriz de Almeida Rodrigues<sup>o</sup>

*In the Critique of the Power of Judgement, Kant claims that 'the English taste in gardens or the baroque taste in furniture pushes the freedom of the imagination almost to the point of the grotesque' (KU 5:242). This paper attempts to reconstruct Kant's views on the grotesque as a theoretical foundation for the modern conception of the grotesque as a negative aesthetic category. The first section of the paper considers and ultimately rejects the interpretation of the grotesque as a difficult kind of beauty. The second section contrasts the experience of the grotesque with similar experiences of sublimity and dreams. The third section examines the discord between faculties underlying the experience of the grotesque, defining the grotesque as a subclass of ugliness and addressing potential objections to its inclusion in Kant's aesthetics. The fourth and final section briefly discusses the specificity of the grotesque as a subclass of ugliness.*

In the General Remark on the Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant claims that 'the English taste in gardens or the baroque taste in furniture pushes the freedom of the imagination almost to the point of the grotesque' (KU 5:242).<sup>1</sup> This passage suggests that, in some circumstances, the free play of the imagination can become excessive and constitute an 'offence' to the understanding, breaking the harmony between the two faculties. Elaborating on this idea, I will argue that the grotesque, as Kant conceives it in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (first edition 1790), involves a sense of incongruity beyond conceptual determination that opposes the understanding's general requirement of unity and coherence, and it forms a specific kind of ugliness, which can be contrasted with beauty, sublimity, and fantasy, as well as with other kinds of ugliness.

A reconstruction of Kant's views on the grotesque belongs to the growing body of literature on negative aesthetic judgements in Kant's aesthetics, which is mostly centred on the possibility of (pure) judgements of ugliness in the theoretical framework of Kant's

---

1 Citations of Kant's work refer to the volume and page of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (KGS), Academy edition (1900–), with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which follows the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. English translations are from the Cambridge editions: *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 2000a)—abbreviated as A/B; *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Kant 2000b)—abbreviated as KU; 'First Introduction', in *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Kant 2000b)—abbreviated as FI; *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science* (Kant 2004)—abbreviated as ProI; *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Kant 2006)—abbreviated as Anth; *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Kant 2011)—abbreviated as BGSE.

philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Although my analysis is focused on the grotesque as a specific subclass of ugliness, I will try to demonstrate that the passage in the General Remark stands on the premise that disharmonious free play, which is the foundation of all judgements of ugliness, is indeed possible, even if it might not be exactly symmetrical with the state of harmonious free play underlying the experience of beauty. This passage thus constitutes important textual evidence in favour of the possibility of negative judgements of taste, although it has received scarce attention in existing scholarship since it does not directly refer to ugliness. With this paper, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of negative aesthetic experience in Kant's philosophy, opening it to a plurality of negative aesthetic categories as different modalities of the ugly.

Although Kant does not elaborate a theory of the grotesque, using the term only intuitively, his comments lay the foundation for the modern conception of the grotesque as a negative aesthetic category. In this sense, a Kantian account of the grotesque can serve to track and elucidate the historical development of the concept at the turn of the nineteenth century, when its meanings and connotations shifted radically from the joyful and amusing to the hideous and disgusting.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the analysis of the grotesque in Kant's aesthetics can help to explain the sense of incongruity and mental disorientation that is generally associated with the grotesque in modernity, providing a plausible alternative to contemporary theories.

In my analysis, I generally treat the account of the grotesque (*Groteske*) in Kant's later writings independently from his views on grotesqueries (*Fratzen*) in the pre-critical text *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (first edition 1764). There, Kant defines grotesqueries as 'unnatural things, in so far as the sublime is thereby intended, even if little or none of it is actually found' (BGSE 2:214). Although this description is, I believe, reconcilable with the passage in the General Remark, Kant employs two closely related but distinct terms—*Groteske* and *Fratzen* – and suggests that grotesqueries typically presuppose supersensible moral or religious ideals (see the examples in BGSE 2:215 and BGSE 2:252), which does not apply to the passage in the third *Critique*. For these reasons, I believe that it is better to approach the passage in the third *Critique* as referring to a distinct aesthetic phenomenon than that discussed in the *Observations*, although the articulation between them would be an interesting topic for future studies.

This paper is structured in four parts. The first section considers and ultimately rejects the interpretation of the grotesque as a difficult kind of beauty. The second section contrasts the experience of the grotesque with similar experiences of sublimity and dreams. The third section examines the discord between faculties underlying the experience of the grotesque, defining the grotesque as a subclass of ugliness and addressing Paul Guyer's objection to the inclusion of pure judgements of ugliness in Kant's aesthetics. The fourth and final section briefly discusses the specificity of the grotesque as a subclass of ugliness, noting its ambivalent effect.

2 Regarding ugliness in Kant's aesthetics, see Gracyk (1986); Shier (1998); Wenzel (1999); Allison (2001); Guyer (2005: 141–62); McConnell (2008); Küplen (2011, 2013, 2015); Phillips (2011); Cohen (2013); Feloj (2013); Buckman (2017); Coate (2018); and Clewis (2023).

3 Regarding the history of the concept of the grotesque, see Kayser (1968); Barasch (1971); Bakhtin (1984); Connelly (2014); and Semler (2019).

## I

In a thing that is possible only through an intention, in a building, even in an animal, the regularity that consists in symmetry must express the unity of the intuition, which accompanies the concept of the end and belongs to the cognition. But where only a free play of the powers of representation (although under the condition that the understanding does not thereby suffer any offense [*daß der Verstand dabei keinen Anstoß leide*]) is to be maintained, in pleasure gardens, in the decoration of rooms, in all sorts of tasteful utensils and the like, regularity that comes across as constraint is to be avoided as far as possible; hence the English taste in gardens or the baroque taste in furniture pushes the freedom of the imagination almost to the point of the grotesque [*bis zur Annäherung zum Grotesken treibt*], and makes this abstraction from all constraint by rules the very case in which the taste can demonstrate its greatest perfection in projects of the imagination.

(KU 5:242)

This passage is part of Kant's discussion of the harmonious free play of the imagination underlying judgements of beauty. Here Kant contrasts free play with the regularity of cognitive judgements and refers to English gardens and baroque furniture (or, more precisely, gardens designed in accordance with the English taste and furniture designed in accordance with the baroque taste) as examples of beautiful things. Yet Kant characterizes these things as *almost grotesque*, due to the extreme freedom of the imagination they display, suggesting that the grotesque lies beyond the proper limits of beauty and taste.

The conjunction 'hence' at the beginning of the clause connects the extreme free play to an exaggerated attempt to avoid regularity, which likely results in its opposite, an *exaggerated irregularity* in the representation of an object. Although things (or representations of things) that exhibit 'stiff regularity' (KU 5:242) are not suitable objects of aesthetic contemplation, since they do not entertain the free play of cognitive powers, beautiful objects exhibit a regularity that is not constrained by concepts, which allows them to satisfy the requirement of harmony between imagination and understanding while maintaining the freedom of the imagination. Thus, in §40, Kant explicitly associates free harmony with regularity, claiming that the understanding 'without concepts, sets the imagination into a regular play' (KU 5:296). Although Kant does not specify what makes the freedom of the imagination excessive, it seems to involve the violation of the condition stated in the previous sentence, namely 'that the understanding does not thereby suffer any offense'. According to this interpretation, the excess of free play in the contemplation of the grotesque presupposes the collapse of harmony between cognitive faculties.

If we recognize the grotesque as one of the 'offences' to the understanding to which Kant alludes, which is the most natural way to read the passage, then the grotesque must be considered a *negative* aesthetic category. Nonetheless, here, as in other passages from his published works, Kant uses the term 'grotesque' intuitively, without specifying its meaning, and, from a historical standpoint, the connection between grotesqueness and negative aesthetics is far from evident, since the term originally designated a style of decorative art that was widely enjoyed and regarded as beautiful, and, until the late-eighteenth

century, despite the expansion in meaning and increasingly negative connotations, it was still commonly associated with pleasurable experiences of sensuous delight and amusement (see Barasch 1971). We might, therefore, question whether Kant attributes a negative aesthetic value to the grotesque in this passage. Due to their formal irregularities and extravagances, English gardens and baroque furniture might resemble or incorporate grotesque ornaments, entertaining the free play of the imagination without thereby constituting an offence to the understanding. Kant could, perhaps, regard the grotesque as an extravagant, difficult kind of beauty, which stimulates, instead of hindering, the free and harmonious play of faculties.

If we examine Kant's references to the grotesque in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (first edition 1798), it is clear that he is acquainted with the original meaning of the word. Kant refers to the grotesque in a broader sense, as an aesthetic quality (along with other aesthetic qualities), as well as in a narrower sense, as an objective descriptor of a decorative style (along with other styles):

There are men whose faces are (as the French say) *rebarbatif*, faces with which, as the saying goes, one can drive children to bed; or who have a face lacerated and made grotesque by smallpox [*von Pocken zerrissenes und groteskes*]; or who have, as the Dutch say, a *wanschapenes* face (a face imagined as it were in delusion or in a dream).

(Anth 7:298)

The grotesque, the *gout baroc*, the *a la Grec*, and the *arabesque* are all a false taste [*ein falscher Geschmack*].

(Anth 7:409N)

Despite bearing distinct meanings, both references involve a negative aesthetic evaluation. In the first case, in association with '*rebarbatif*' and '*wanschapen*', 'grotesque' means something like 'extremely deformed and repulsive, in a seemingly unnatural way'. In the second case, 'grotesque' has no intrinsic negative connotation, yet Kant discredits it as an improper object of taste, excluding it from the domain of beauty. Although the textual evidence in the third *Critique* is not enough to completely rule out the possibility that, at least in this particular passage, Kant might have regarded the grotesque as (potentially) beautiful, this would contradict his references to the grotesque in the *Anthropology*, which presuppose a negative aesthetic evaluation. Therefore, even if, in the General Remark, Kant refers to the grotesque as an objective descriptor of a decorative style, such a reference is likely not value-neutral or positive, but rather embedded with a negative evaluation, setting the grotesque in opposition to beauty.

One might still argue that the grotesque is merely non-beautiful—that is, aesthetically indifferent or neutral from the standpoint of a pure judgement of taste (even if otherwise determined by impure sources of displeasure). According to this interpretation, the excess of free play in the experience of the grotesque would presuppose, not disharmony between cognitive faculties, but merely a confrontation with the absence of free harmony where free harmony was expected, which would likely result in the interruption of free play (see Clewis 2023: 185–86). Yet Kant associates the aesthetic-indifferent with perfect regularity, in which there is nothing characteristic in the

form of the object, since it is in full conformity to a determinate concept of the understanding and cannot afford any additional elements beyond what is required by the concept to entertain the free play of the imagination (KU 5:235; see Küplen 2015: 68). In this case, the only feeling that the representation could occasion, if it happened to be aesthetically considered, would be that of boredom—neither pleasure nor displeasure. However, Kant construes the grotesque in exact opposition to this description of the aesthetically indifferent, as the result of an exaggerated attempt to avoid regularity and of the extreme exercise of imaginative freedom.

Therefore, a plausible interpretation of the text must accommodate the differentiation and possible divergence between free play and harmony: the judgement of the grotesque presupposes the free play of cognitive faculties (even if it may not sustain it for long), yet the outcome of that free play is neither boredom (as in the aesthetically indifferent) nor pleasure (as in the beautiful), but rather an 'offence' to the understanding. In what follows, I attempt to reconstruct Kant's conception of the grotesque as referring to a *negative* aesthetic quality, which disrupts the free harmony underlying the experience of beauty.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Since Kant's description of the mental state underlying the experience of the grotesque resembles in some ways his description of sublimity in the *Analytic of the Sublime* and of fantasy in the *Anthropology*, a comparison to these two kinds of experience can elucidate the specificity of the grotesque. According to Kant, the sublime 'appear[s] in its form to be contrapurposeful for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination' (KU 5:245). It can be found in 'a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it' (KU 5:244) and often presents nature 'in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation' (KU 5:246). Like the grotesque, the sublime concerns disorderly representations that conflict with and exceed our cognitive powers, affording a model of subjective contra-purposiveness (at least at the most immediate level), which could possibly accommodate the grotesque.

However, the two aesthetic qualities differ in important ways. First, in the sublime, the idea of limitlessness of the object arises from the confrontation with the limits of the imagination, which cannot comprehend the object in its entirety, in each of its parts and, as a whole, due to its magnitude or power. Nonetheless, the object can still be conceptually grasped by the understanding, for which the object's apparent limitlessness poses no problem (KU 5:251–52). In the experience of the grotesque, on the contrary, the imagination can comprehend the manifold of intuition in a single representation, but, insofar as

---

4 Another possible ambiguity in the text is whether Kant refers to the imagination *of the artist* or that *of the viewer*. Nonetheless, the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, in which this passage is contained, much like Kant's aesthetic theory in general, is centred on aesthetic experience, and the paragraphs that precede and follow the passage explicitly refer to the viewer's perspective. In what follows, I assume that there is no hidden shift in perspective and Kant is referring to the imagination of the viewer.

it is in free play, the result is an incongruous unity, formed by the seemingly arbitrary assemblage of parts, which contravenes the general conditions of the understanding. Thus, while the sublime object is regarded as *formless*, extending beyond the limits of intuition, the grotesque object is regarded as *deformed*, with a discernible spatiotemporal form whose unity seems to conflict with the understanding due to its irregularity and incoherence.

Moreover, although the sublime confronts us with the inadequacy of our physical nature, it leads the mind to contemplate ideas of reason and makes us recognize our value as rational and moral agents (KU 5:255, 261–62; see Guyer 2005: 227). In this way, even though we regard the sublime as contrapurposive to the reflective activity of judgement, its effect on the mind is felt as purposive, forming what Henry Allison calls a ‘paradoxical conception of a *counterpurposive purposiveness*’ (Allison 2001: 310). In contrast, the experience of the grotesque, like that of ugliness in general, fails to awaken a moral feeling, confronting us instead with the unexpected hostility of nature to our cognitive abilities without allowing the recognition of our freedom from natural forces.<sup>5</sup>

Imaginative activity in the experience of the grotesque seems to be more akin to fantasy, which, according to Kant in the *Anthropology*, consists in the involuntary production of images by the imagination and is the source of dreams and delusions (Anth 7:167). Recalling a common analogy in the early modern period between grotesque works and dreams (see Semler 2019: 195), Kant notes: ‘if he [the artist] produces forms according to images that cannot be found in experience, then the objects so formed (such as Prince Palagonia’s villa in Sicily) are called fantastic, unnatural, distorted forms, and such fancies are like dream images of one who is awake’ (Anth 7:175). Fantasy resembles the free play of the imagination in judgements of taste since it is productive, that is, an original source of representations that is not limited by prior experience, and free, that is, unconstrained by a determinate empirical concept. However, in contrast to the ‘free lawfulness’ of beauty, fantasy organizes sensory impressions randomly, in disregard of previous experience and the general rules of concept formation. Thus, Kant writes in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (first edition 1783):

The difference between truth and dream ... is not decided through the quality of the representations that are referred to objects, for they are the same in both, but through their connection according to rules that determine the combination of representations in the concept of an object, and how far they can or cannot stand together in one experience.

(Prol 4:290)

Since fantasy transgresses these rules, combining representations in a way that cannot be found in experience, its images constitute, in Kant’s words, ‘the offenses (*vitia*) of the imagination’ (Anth 7:181), which are directed, so it seems, at reason and understanding. Thus, fantasy and its products, delusions and dreams, provide a model of a non-exemplary

---

<sup>5</sup> Küplen draws a similar contrast between sublimity and ugliness based on these two aspects. She adds that sublimity is attributed to the subject, while ugliness, like beauty, is attributed to the object (Küplen 2015: 102).

free activity of the imagination, which is analogous to the excessive free play underlying the judgements of the grotesque.

However, there are limits to this analogy. During a dream, we are usually unaware that we are dreaming and do not question the veracity of dream images, whereas we only perceive something as grotesque if we are aware of its incongruity. A judgement of the grotesque requires the recognition of irregularities in the appearance of the object, whereas dreams typically involve a naïve adherence to dream images. In that sense, the grotesque is more like a dream in which we are aware that we are dreaming.

Moreover, unlike fantasy, the judgement of the grotesque is bound to a specific object. According to Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (first edition 1781, second edition 1787), this prevents 'our cognitions [from] being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily' (A 104). As a reflective judgement, the judgement of the grotesque is also guided by the principle of purposiveness of nature, according to which we must regard nature as forming a systematic whole, amenable to our cognitive abilities (FI 20:203)—even if the form of the object ultimately frustrates this principle. Fantasy, on the contrary, is not bound to an empirical object, nor guided by any principle. This suggests that our response to the grotesque is, if not universally valid, at least based on intersubjective grounds, whereas fantasy rests solely on private grounds.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, unlike fantasy, the workings of the imagination in the experience of the grotesque are not completely arbitrary, but are rather attached to an empirical object, guided by a transcendental principle, and require an awareness of incongruities in the appearance of the object. Also, in contrast with the sublime, the grotesque is directly connected to a discernible form, although one that defeats the understanding's general requirement of unity and coherence, and it fails to stimulate our awareness of our moral vocation and independence from natural forces.

### III

Admitting that the passage in the General Remark describes the experience of the grotesque as one in which the freedom of the imagination conflicts with the understanding, we still need to understand the source and nature of this conflict. Why is free play, in the experience of the grotesque, pushed to such an extreme that it becomes offensive to the understanding? Perhaps the most intuitive response is that the representation of the object produced by the imagination contradicts in some significant way our concepts and expectations of what the object should look like. Noël Carroll defines in this way the 'structural principle' of the grotesque: 'something is an instance of the grotesque

---

6 According to a saying cited by Kant in the *Anthropology*: 'When we are awake we have a world in common, but when we are asleep each has his own world'. (Anth 7:190) Noting that 'the only universal characteristic of madness' is the replacement of *sensus communis* for a *sensus privatus* (Anth 7:219), Kant further describes fantasy as a power that 'plays' with us, leading us, if unrestrained, to madness: 'ruleless fantasy approaches madness, where fantasy plays completely with the human being and the unfortunate victim has no control at all over the course of his representations' (Anth 7:181; see Frierson 2009: 276).

only if it is a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms' (Carroll 2009: 297). The literary theorist Wolfgang Kayser similarly argues that, in the experience of the grotesque, 'the categories which apply to our worldview become inapplicable' through the fusion of separate realms, the loss of identity, the distortion of 'natural' size and shape, and other mechanisms (Kayser 1968: 185). However, such an explanation cannot be straightforwardly applied to Kant's aesthetics, since it binds the feeling of displeasure to concepts and, thus, precludes the free play of the imagination. Also, the explanation put forth by Carroll or Kayser cannot account for cases in which we *can* classify the object under an appropriate concept, perhaps a concept that presupposes some form of incongruity or hybridity, like 'monster' or 'chimera', even recognize the object as a perfect instance of its class, and still find it grotesque. Think, for example, of a goblin shark or a decompressed blobfish: although the classification of these creatures according to determinate concepts could conceivably attenuate their perceived grotesqueness (assuming that our judgement is adherent to concepts), the ascription of grotesqueness is neither dispelled nor explained by the use of such concepts.

According to Kant, the imagination serves an intermediary role between the sensory and the intellectual elements of perception through the synthesis of the manifold of intuition (A 77/B 103). In determining judgements, concepts serve as rules for imaginative activity, assuring the 'necessary unity of the synthesis of all appearances' (A 108). In reflective judgements, however, the synthesis of the imagination is not entirely governed by determinate empirical concepts: 'The powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation are hereby in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition' (KU 5:217). Judgements of taste differ from cognitive judgements because they are neither based on an antecedently grasped concept (as determining cognitive judgements) nor do they lead to the acquisition of new empirical concepts (as reflective cognitive judgements) (KU 5:190). If the feeling of displeasure in a judgement of the grotesque was negatively determined by concepts (or by a departure from convention that could be conceptually determined), then the activity of the imagination would remain subordinated to the understanding. However, Kant suggests that the grotesque is based on an *excess*, not a deficit, of freedom of the imagination, so we must seek another explanation for the conflict between the two faculties.

The best way to understand this conflict is through a comparison with the state of free harmony underlying the experience of the beautiful. According to Kant, in a judgement of beauty, free play is conditioned by a requirement of harmony with the understanding. Kant qualifies the freedom of the imagination in terms of 'free lawfulness' or 'lawfulness without law' (KU 5:240–41), specifying that the imagination agrees with the 'understanding's lawfulness in general' (KU 5:241). Rather than being guided by a determinate empirical concept, imagination follows 'the rule concerning a perception on behalf of the understanding, as a faculty of concepts', in such a way that 'imagination and understanding are considered in the relation to each other in which they must stand in the power of judgment in general' (FI 20:221).

How can the imagination simultaneously satisfy these two conditions? How can it be in harmony with the understanding yet free from concepts of the understanding, which



provide the rule for imaginative activity? This is widely recognized as one of the main puzzles of Kant's aesthetics. For the present purpose, I rely on the solution proposed by Paul Guyer, which allows me to track the limits of free harmony and elucidate, by contrast, the negative value of the grotesque.<sup>7</sup> According to Guyer, ordinary empirical cognition precedes and accompanies the free play of faculties in a judgement of taste as a necessary condition to identify a manifold of intuition as a particular unified object. However, cognition of the object does not determine the feeling of pleasure we experience. Instead, pleasure emerges because the understanding's general requirement of unity and coherence is satisfied 'in a way that goes beyond anything required for or dictated by satisfaction of the determinate concept or concepts on which mere identification of the object depends' (Guyer 2005: 99). For Guyer, free harmony is, therefore, an excess of cognitive harmony, since it involves 'an excess of felt unity or harmony' or a 'further degree of unity', which extends beyond the unity required by ordinary cognition (Guyer 2005: 149).

Assuming that the grotesque presupposes the discord between cognitive faculties as a result of free play, it falls into the broader category of (pure) judgements of ugliness, which, as most Kant scholars agree, are grounded in a state of disharmonious free play between the imagination and understanding.<sup>8</sup> Alix Cohen calls it a 'displeasing "foul play"' (Cohen 2013: 203), defining it as 'the *hindered [instead of facilitated]* play of the two mental powers (imagination and understanding), *inhibited [instead of enlivened]* by *reciprocal disharmony [instead of reciprocal harmony]*' (Cohen 2013: 207). The possibility of the grotesque is therefore conditioned by the possibility of ugliness in Kant's aesthetics, which is itself conditioned by the possibility of disharmonious free play. Based on this, could Guyer's interpretation of free harmony be applied to explain the excess of freedom underlying the grotesque? If the 'free lawfulness' of the imagination can be described as an 'an excess of felt unity or harmony', beyond the requirements of determinate concepts, what would a 'free offence' of the imagination amount to? Guyer himself would reject this application of his theory, since, in his view, the possibility of disharmony between cognitive faculties is 'blocked by the entire epistemology of the *Critique of Pure Reason*' (Guyer 2005: 146). As he explains:

---

7 I refer to Guyer's metacognitive theory mostly as an expository device to develop a more detailed characterization of the interaction between imagination and understanding in a judgement of the grotesque. As Guyer himself acknowledges: 'it should be implied precisely by the fact that the harmony of the faculties must be a free play that there cannot be a single, concrete description of this state' (Guyer 2005: 103). My choice in this paper does not, therefore, exclude the possibility of following other descriptions of free harmony, from which we might arrive at alternative but complementary descriptions of the grotesque. The full treatment of Guyer's theory naturally lies outside the scope of this paper: I am concerned only with a specific aspect of Guyer's views, for a purpose that Guyer himself, as a denier of the possibility of negative judgements of taste, would likely reject.

8 McConnell is one of the few exceptions, arguing that 'the pure judgement of ugliness must be based on the feeling of displeasure that arises from the *harmonious* free play of the imagination and the understanding' (McConnell 2008: 207, my emphasis). For a critique of McConnell's proposal, see Küplen (2015: 24) and Buckman (2017: 12).

for Kant, we can always recognize a particular object of our experience, and any time we can recognize such an object there must be that degree of unity between imagination and understanding that is necessary for the subsumption of our manifold of representations of the object under a determinate concept, even if that *further* degree of unity that might lead us to experience the object as beautiful is lacking. But this is just to say that our experience of an object must always involve a harmony between imagination and understanding with a concept, even if it does not involve a harmony between these two powers that is free of any concept, and thus that while many objects will certainly be aesthetically indifferent, they cannot be felt to be ugly simply on the basis of any complete absence of harmony in our experience of them.

(Guyer 2005: 150)

In Guyer's view, the lack of a *further* degree of unity can only result in the *normal* degree of unity that is required for empirical cognition, since our cognitive faculties must be in harmony with each other for our experience of the object to be possible in the first place. As he summarizes: 'So harmony without a concept or harmony with a concept, but no simple absence of harmony: this, in a nutshell, is why Kant cannot allow a purely aesthetic origin for ugliness' (Guyer 2005: 147). Following Guyer, ugliness is necessarily impure, negatively determined by sensations or concepts, rather than based on the free play of the imagination (Guyer 2005: 151).

However, we can circumvent this objection while maintaining Guyer's initial description by noting that judgements of ugliness do not necessarily require a 'simple absence of harmony' (Guyer 2005: 147). Following Mojca Küplen, free play, along with the resultant sense of harmony or disharmony, refers to those features in the representation of an object that are not required or specified by determinate empirical concepts, but are rather unique and distinctive to the particular combination of the perceptual manifold (Küplen 2015: 64). This means that the difference between *cognitive harmony* and *free harmony* cannot be one of degree, but rather a *qualitative* difference. Insofar as the imagination is in free play, synthesizing elements in the presentation of the object that are not required or specified by the concepts applied, it can theoretically be in harmony or disharmony with the understanding, depending on the degree of felt unity and coherence of the representations thereby produced (Küplen 2015: 67).

Considering the grotesque in particular, we can see that Kant does not regard English gardens and baroque furniture as almost grotesque because he can hardly apprehend the form of these objects, as if they eluded experience, but rather because the form that is indeed apprehended is highly irregular and occasions the extreme freedom of the imagination. This indicates that judgements of the grotesque, like judgements of beauty, accompany and follow ordinary cognition, presupposing the harmony and unity between cognitive powers that is necessary for the application of concepts to any object of experience. To the extent that we regard the grotesque object as a unified object of empirical cognition, it must exhibit the necessary unity for the application of empirical concepts and stimulate the harmonious interaction between imagination and understanding. However, to the extent that our faculty of the imagination is in free play, attempting to find a rule for the elements of the representation that are underdetermined by determinate concepts, we

regard the form of the object as an arbitrary assemblage of incongruous parts, conflicting with the understanding's general requirement of unity and coherence.

In other words, beautiful things awake in us a sense of unity and harmony *beyond* the unity required for the application of determinate empirical concepts, while grotesque things awake in us a sense of conflict and incongruity *despite* the unity required for the application of determinate empirical concepts. The two cases involve a surplus of meaning that cannot be conceptualized—which corresponds to Kant's notion of *aesthetic idea*, as a representation of the imagination that 'stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept' and 'aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way' (KU 5:315). Yet, in the case of beauty, this surplus of meaning retains, nonetheless, some semblance of unity and harmony, while, in the case of the grotesque, it appears contradictory and absurd, expanding the meaning of the determinate concept applied in a way that potentially undermines it. The freedom of the imagination becomes excessive in the sense that, in its playful activity, the imagination combines the elements of a representation in an apparently incongruous and arbitrary manner, and this generates a sense of discord with the understanding.

There are other objections to the possibility of disharmonious free play beyond that raised by Guyer. Some authors argue, for example, that this state is intrinsically unstable, with disharmony interrupting free play, because the feeling of displeasure is tied to a negative interest of 'hindering or getting rid' of the troublesome representation (KU 5:220; see [Clewis 2023](#): 188), tied to the frustration of our expectation of beauty (see [Ginsborg 2015](#): 108), or determined in some other way by sensations, emotions, or concepts (see [Guyer 2005](#): 151). Also, even acknowledging that a judgement of ugliness, like any reflective judgement, is guided by a transcendental principle, one might still question its universal validity since, according to Kant's 'key to the critique of taste', the universal communicability of the mental state is itself the source of pleasure in a judgement of taste (KU 5:217; see [Ginsborg 2015](#): 96; [Shier 1998](#)).

For the present purpose, a weak account of disharmonious free play suffices, according to which the judgement of the grotesque may be partially determined by concepts, sensations, and emotions without thus achieving the same degree of disinterestedness and universality as the judgement of beauty. This does not undermine the fact that it is primarily grounded in free play. Following Allison's views on adherent beauty, we could say that even if the grotesque is 'no longer *purely* a judgement of taste' ([Allison 2001](#): 141), it is still based on a purely reflective aesthetic response (a free play of faculties), which is conditioned by or combined with impure sources of pleasure or displeasure. This allows us to establish a conceptual and phenomenological distinction between the grotesque, on the one hand, and negative aesthetic responses based exclusively on impure sources of displeasure, such as those associated with painful sensations, without any form of free play.

Consider a paradigmatic case of the grotesque, the third panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500). Among the myriad of bizarre creatures, one of the most striking is a humanoid, wingless bird sitting majestically on an elevated throne or toilet, with a cauldron for a crown and two vases for shoes. With its beak wide open, the demonic bird is gorging a human being, from whose anus black swallows fly, and defecating two others, apparently alive and intact, into a dark hole where the faces of the

damned loom. First, we may note that this figure is composed by the fantastic arrangement of disparate parts, mixing human and non-human, super-human and sub-human, majesty and excrement, horror and humour. We can refer to more adequate concepts to identify and classify the figure, concepts that presuppose incongruities and irregularities in the thing's appearance, such as 'demon', 'monster', or 'fantastic hybrid', and we can appeal to Christian religion and theology to contextualize it. Nonetheless, such conceptual apparatus would still fail to fully specify the unique combination of elements in the actual perception of the figure. Following Kant's characterization of judgements of taste, grotesqueness cannot be pinned to an objectively identifiable departure from convention, which is determined (even if negatively) by concepts, but must involve instead the perception of incongruity beyond conceptual determination.

Although from a contemporary perspective, English gardens and baroque furniture sound like quaint examples of almost grotesque objects, they are appropriate models of exuberant and irregular freedom of the imagination by the standards of eighteenth-century sensibility. The two movements (especially the Picturesque in the case of English landscape gardening) involve unique, extravagant compositions of heterogeneous elements, with the playful exploration of asymmetries, irregularities, and contrasts in form. Contradicting neoclassical conventions and their underlying rational view of the universe, English gardens and baroque furniture were designed to stimulate the imagination of the audience and appeal to subjective responses.<sup>9</sup> A certain object may be identified as a perfect instance of an English garden or baroque furniture, yet, insofar as its form goes beyond what is contained or specified in the concept of 'English garden' or 'baroque furniture', it presents an abundance of elements that are assembled by the imagination in an incongruous manner, impressing a sense of disarray.

In sum, in the experience of the grotesque, free play becomes excessive and offensive to the understanding because the imagination synthesizes the conceptually undetermined elements of the perceptual manifold into apparently arbitrary and incoherent wholes, thereby generating a feeling of discord with the understanding. The sense of mental disorientation underlying the experience of the grotesque cannot be explained by the violation of determinate concepts, since this would compromise the free play of the imagination, but must rather pertain to those features in the representation that are not specified by the application of determinate concepts. The conflict between imagination and understanding is, thus, compatible with the unity and agreement between these faculties required for ordinary cognition of the object. Just as beauty, according to Guyer, affords a sense of unity and coherence that goes beyond what is required for the application of determinate concepts, so the grotesque affords an indeterminate sense of struggle and incongruity that cannot be conceptually determined.

---

9 Regarding the English garden, see Bassin (1979) and Symes (2019). Regarding baroque art, see Martin (1977) and Lyons (2019).

## IV

Admitting that the grotesque is grounded in a state of disharmonious free play, it can be defined as a subclass of ugliness or, in other words, as possessing ugliness as one of its properties. To prevent the conflation between the two aesthetic categories, I would now like to briefly consider what distinguishes the grotesque as a specific kind of ugliness. If ugliness in general corresponds to a general state of free disharmony between the understanding and the imagination, the grotesque can be distinguished by the specific way in which disharmony arises, namely through an excess of freedom in the play of the imagination (as described in the previous section). Within the category of disharmonious free play, we may theoretically find different degrees of disharmony and different degrees of free play, which intersect in various configurations of ugliness, with various affective tones. Thus, in addition to disharmony caused by an excess of free play, in which there is a preponderance of the imagination over the understanding, disharmony could also arise from an excess of regularity in which the understanding constrains the imagination while still allowing a minimal degree of free play, or it could be unrelated to the degree of free play with a conflict between the two faculties without the preponderance of one over the other.

Another way to understand this difference is by reference to Matthew Coate's characterization of ugliness in terms of 'the absence of any "deeper significance"' (Coate 2018: 61). Following Coate, we could argue that the ugly always involves a sense of meaninglessness and absurdity, of the incommensurability of the world (or some aspect of it) with our cognitive faculties. Yet this feeling can either be occasioned by an object that 'says nothing', apparently devoid of meaning and value, or it can be occasioned by an object that 'says too much', with an overwhelming surplus of meaning that cannot be conceptualized and turns into nonsense. While the first case could appropriately describe our response to something kitsch or gaudy, for example, the second would be more closely aligned with our response to the grotesque.<sup>10</sup> As a kind of ugliness that involves a particularly high degree of free play, the grotesque has the capacity to generate multiple ideas and to hold our attention perhaps even more than the beautiful, even if the experience of disharmony and consequent aesthetic displeasure produce a disincentive to continued attention (see Küplen 2015: 115).

In the General Remark, Kant claims that English taste in gardens and baroque taste in furniture make 'this abstraction from all constraint by rules the very case in which the taste can demonstrate its greatest perfection in projects of the imagination' (KU 5:242). This assertion suggests, on the one hand, the proximity between beauty and grotesqueness—that some of the greatest achievements of beauty, like English gardens and baroque furniture, lie on the verge of the grotesque, since they involve the bold exercise of artistic freedom. Along these lines, the grotesque can be regarded as an excess of beauty, the exaggeration of an aspect of beauty, freedom of the imagination, to the point that it ceases

---

10 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this idea, one of several thoughtful suggestions that greatly helped to clarify my argument.

to be beautiful. English gardens and baroque furniture are *almost*—that is, *not yet*—grotesque because they expand the freedom of the imagination without crossing this limit.

On the other hand, this passage also suggests the deceptive allure of the grotesque, which is reasserted by Kant in the *Anthropology* when he remarks that the grotesque, as a decorative style of art, is a ‘false taste’ (Anth 7:409N). Regarding its opposite, ‘genuine taste’, Kant says in the third *Critique*: ‘As for the opinion that the beauty that is attributed to the object on account of its form may well be heightened by charm, this is a common error and one that is very detrimental to genuine, uncorrupted, well-grounded taste’ (KU 5:225). Following this passage, a taste for something becomes false when the liking is primarily determined by reasons that are extrinsic to a purely aesthetic response—for example, based on pleasurable sensations or emotions.

The appeal of the grotesque can be explained in reference to the abundance of meaning, originality, and novelty produced by the exaggerated freedom of the imagination: despite their displeasing and ugly forms, grotesque things can be and often are perceived as profound, fascinating, and thought-provoking. In the *Observations*, Kant also associates the taste for grotesqueries with the melancholic’s tendency towards superstition and fanaticism [*Schwärmerei*] (BGSE 2:221–22), as well as the choleric’s tendency to assert his superiority over others through contrived appearances (BGSE 2:223–24). These writings support the idea that the enjoyment of the grotesque, with its novel and bizarre forms, can be motivated by obstinacy or vanity. Since, in this case, it is founded on private, idiosyncratic preferences, a taste for the grotesque deviates, in Kant’s perspective, from the proper exercise of taste and can only produce a false semblance of beauty.

In the General Remark on the Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant lays the foundation for the understanding of the grotesque as a subclass of ugliness, grounded in the disharmonious free play of cognitive faculties. In the experience of the grotesque, the extreme irregularity of the object stimulates the imagination into an incongruous and arbitrary combination of perceptual elements, which lacks the unity and coherence required by the understanding and thus generates a conflict between the two cognitive faculties. Although the grotesque has traditionally been thought in analogy with dreams, it differs from dream images and other products of fantasy in that it presupposes the viewer’s awareness of incongruities, is bound to an external object, and guided by the principle of purposiveness of nature. Grotesqueness cannot be assimilated to sublimity either since it is directly connected to a discernible form—albeit one that is highly irregular—and fails to awaken a moral feeling. As a subclass of ugliness, the grotesque can be distinguished from other kinds of ugliness by the specific way in which disharmony arises, namely through the excess of freedom in the play of the imagination, and the sense of an overwhelming and incongruous abundance of meaning that is thereby produced. Due to its novel and bizarre quality, the grotesque can be an especially ambivalent kind of ugliness, as fascinating and thought-provoking as displeasing, yet Kant suggests that the taste for the grotesque is typically based on private inclinations and interests and must, therefore, be strictly distinguished from a genuine appreciation of beauty.

Although this passage from the General Remark has not received much attention in the literature on ugliness in Kant’s aesthetics, it provides textual support for the idea of a trivalent structure of aesthetic experience, based on the beautiful, the ugly, and the

aesthetically indifferent, as well as for a differentiation of ugliness according to varying degrees of free play and disharmony. The negative evaluation implicit in Kant's account echoes the classical critique of the grotesque, prevalent from the late-fifteenth to the late-eighteenth centuries, according to which fantasy and artistic invention ought to be moderated by reason. Yet, whereas classical criticism tended to rely on moral and social conventions, the grotesque is redefined and revaluated in the framework of Kant's aesthetics solely on aesthetic grounds, as a product of the free play of the imagination. By positing the grotesque as an outer limit of taste, Kant unwittingly stresses its aesthetic significance in the delimitation of beauty, as well as the contiguity and porosity between the two categories. In this way, Kant anticipates the Romantic reappraisal of the grotesque as a central category of modern art. Kant's aesthetics also provides the basis for an explanation of the sense of incongruity and mental disorientation that characterizes the experience of the grotesque in modernity, with the advantage, in comparison to contemporary theories, that it can accommodate cases in which we find something grotesque despite recognizing it under an appropriate concept.<sup>11</sup>

Beatriz de Almeida Rodrigues<sup>o</sup>  
King's College London, UK  
[beatriz.rodrigues@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:beatriz.rodrigues@kcl.ac.uk)

## References

- Allison, H. E. (2001) *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984) *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Iswolsky H. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Barasch, F. K. (1971) *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*. The Hague: De Gruyter.
- Bassin, J. (1979) 'The English Landscape Garden in the Eighteenth Century: The Cultural Importance of an English Institution', *Albion*, 11: 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4048315>
- Buckman, C.; Philosophy Documentation Center (2017) 'A Kantian Analytic of the Ugly', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 57: 365–80. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq20179891>
- Carroll, N. (2009) 'The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy', in Connelly, F. S. (ed.) *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, pp. 291–312. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

11 I would like to thank John Callanan, Jonathan Gingerich, Alix Cohen, and the anonymous referees for their constructive feedback on previous versions of the manuscript. I am also grateful to the participants of the London Graduate Philosophy Conference (2021), the postgraduate research seminar at King's College London (2022), and the conference 'Kant and Negative Aesthetics' at University of Pavia (2023) for their sensible questions and commentaries on my attempts to articulate a Kantian concept of the grotesque. Finally, I owe a special thanks to Sacha Golob, who encouraged me to pursue this topic and patiently read I do not know how many versions of this paper. This work is part of a project funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (ref. 2020.05368.BD).

- Clewis, R. (2023) 'Ugliness and Disgust: Disagreeable Sensations', in his *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, pp. 179–210. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coate, M. (2018) 'Nothing but Nonsense': A Kantian Account of Ugliness', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 58: 51–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayx032>
- Cohen, A. (2013) 'Kant on the Possibility of Ugliness', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 53: 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayt002>
- Connelly, F. S. (2014) *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feløj, S. (2013) 'Is there a Negative Judgment of Taste? Disgust as the Real Ugliness in Kant's Aesthetic', *Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, 3: 175–85. <https://doi.org/10.13130/2240-9599/3482>
- Frierson, P. (2009) 'Kant on Mental Disorder. Part 1: An Overview', *History of Psychiatry*, 20: 267–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X08337642>
- Ginsborg, H. (2015) *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gracyk, T. A. (1986) 'Sublimity, Ugliness, and Formlessness in Kant's Aesthetic Theory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 45: 49–56. [https://doi.org/10.1111/1540\\_6245.jaac45.1.0049](https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac45.1.0049)
- Guyer, P. (2005) *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant (2000a) *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Guyer P. and Wood, A. W. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant (2000b) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Guyer, P. (ed.), tr. Guyer, P. and Matthews, E. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant (2004) *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, Hatfield, G. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant (2006) *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, tr. Louden, R. B. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant (2011) *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, Frierson, P. and Guyer, P. (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kayser, W. (1968) *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, tr. Weisstein, U. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Küplen, M. (2011) 'Disgust and Ugliness: A Kantian Perspective', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 9, Article 10.
- Küplen (2013) 'The Aesthetic of Ugliness: A Kantian Perspective', *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 5: 260–79.
- Küplen (2015) *Beauty, Ugliness and the Free Play of Imagination: An Approach to Kant's Aesthetics*. Cham: Springer.
- Lyons, J. D. (2019) *The Oxford Handbook of the Baroque*. Oxford: OUP.
- Martin, J. R. (1977) *Baroque*. New York: Harper & Row.
- McConnell, S. (2008) 'How Kant Might Explain Ugliness', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48: 205–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayn006>
- Phillips, J. (2011) 'Placing Ugliness in Kant's Third Critique: A Reply to Paul Guyer', *Kant Studien*, 102: 385–95. <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.2011.027>
- Semler, L. E. (2019) *Early Modern Grotesque: English Sources and Documents 1500-1700*. London: Routledge.



- Shier, D. (1998) 'Why Kant Finds Nothing Ugly', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38: 412–8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/38.4.412>
- Symes, M. (2019) *The English Landscape Garden: A Survey*. Swindon: Historic England.
- Wenzel, C. (1999) 'Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 39: 416–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/39.4.416>