Not all art is beautiful (and that’s good)

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Hans Holbein's portrait *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (from 1521, now in the Basel Kunstmuseum) is, although it concerns an incident from Christ’s passion and its apogee in His resurrection, is a bit too visceral for comfort. It is a strikingly graphic depiction of the putrefaction that sets in after one is dead and the finitude of death. The body in the sepulchre appears gaunt with the bones and emaciated muscles clearly evident. The only symbolism that one could perhaps read in this image as presaging redemption is the extension of Christ’s middle finger as if He is trying to arise. All this is bounded in an oblong frame that resembles a crypt and makes it painfully claustrophobic.

This image of Christ is so confronting and contrarian that as Ippolit Terentyev in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, wonders, “if such a corpse… was seen by all His disciples… by all who believed in Him and worshipped Him, then how could they possibly have believed… that that martyr would rise again? Here one cannot help [thinking] that if death is so horrible and if the laws of nature are so powerful, then how can they be overcome?” As Ippolit adds, “I believe that painters are usually in the habit of depicting Christ, whether on the cross or taken from the cross, as still retaining a shade of extraordinary beauty on his face; that beauty they strive to preserve even in his moments of greatest agony.” (Dostoevsky 391-2).

But that is clearly not the case here. While this portrait by Holbein dates to the 16th century, the disconnection between art and beauty that similar works have foreshadowed has continued apace over the centuries as evinced by works by masters like Francisco Goya and more recently by Edvard Munch and Francis Bacon. But judging by the aesthetic – and (undeniably) monetary – value placed on work by these artists, their output was and is clearly well appreciated by multiple generations of art lovers.

This seems a bit counter-intuitive too considering that in most people’s minds beauty is something which is pleasing to the eye. If aesthetics in the context of art is moreover concerned with appreciating beauty – and we stick to this rather restrictive idea of beauty – is it only about a work that most would agree that evokes pleasant sensations? This cannot be right because there are instances where a painting – like the ones above - or a poem or a play which do not subscribe to this understanding but make us feel uncomfortable in fact. They also warrant being called an oxymoron[[1]](#footnote-1), an apparent contradiction in terms, when works of both can be both beautiful and also disturb us in some way.

There must be a reason why art as a genre with such apparently antithetical qualities is still so valued and celebrated. What purpose does art’s nature as an oxymoron serve? Can we derive any benefits from art of this kind? In attempting to address these questions, I argue in this essay that we appreciate art greatly when we realise that it depicts in fact a necessary condition of reality. In other words, art as an oxymoron is a fitting demonstration of the contradictions and dichotomies that characterise our lives.

**An oxymoron called art**

A good starting point for us to address these questions would be to look at how the pre-eminence of the idea of beauty has changed over time and how beauty has been demoted by some in art interpretation. Beauty has remained for some time the central tenet of aesthetics, particularly since the Renaissance, [as argued by Derek Allan](https://www.academia.edu/39446381/The_birth_and_death_of_beauty_in_Western_art) from the Australian National University and after thinkers like Immanuel Kant equated it with morality and what it is to be human (see for instance this [Tate blog](https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-36-spring-2016/does-beauty-still-matter-art) and section 2.8 of the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/)).

Nevertheless, beauty is hard to define. The sculptor Auguste Rodin for instance agreed implicitly with Keats’s dictum that beauty is truth when he held that “there is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character, that is to say that which offers no outer or inner truth.” (Kandel,115-6). What Rodin offers is a more eclectic definition of beauty that can be applied to all phenomena around us, not just objects of art. Hence, an object that evokes a sense of beauty need not necessarily be a work of art. Many things around us trigger such sensations: a flower, a flowing river, or a child. This also resonates with our wider understanding that beauty is something pleasant to experience. Furthermore, seeking beauty and appreciating it appears to be fundamentally instinctual for us humans. Research done by the neuroscientist Thomas Jacobsen and colleagues found that 91% of respondents associated beauty with aesthetics (Chatterjee 116).

But, in the light of events such as the unreasonable domination of one group over another and similar evils that have across human history become part of the “real” world we live in, this notion that art represents such a saccharine view of the world has become a bit too idealistic for some. As Theodor Adorno pointed out, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric…” (in Tate blog cited earlier). Hence, to truly reflect reality, art needs to encompass much more than such traditional concepts of beauty. Marcel Duchamp was one who clearly did not subscribe to a narrow view of art. As the art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto reveals, “Duchamp had a deep distaste for what he called “retinal art”—art that gratified the eye.” (Danto 25). It is not just coincidence that Duchamp expressed this opinion amid the carnage of World War I. In attacking concepts like beauty, moreover, Duchamp was also questioning “the central concept of aesthetic theory for such philosophical writers as Immanuel Kant, David Hume [and others] ... (ibid). This was also the period during which Duchamp had commenced exhibiting works like the famed urinal as art objects. In doing so, Duchamp had “made a work of art minus aesthetics.” (Danto 28). As Danto observed, “That something could be art but not beautiful is one of the great philosophical contributions of the twentieth century.” (ibid).

Derek Allan believes that this radical redefinition of the nature of art was sparked in fact much earlier than the first decades of the 19th century, when Edouard Manet’s painting of Olympia was first exhibited in 1865. This painting shares some similarity with Titian’s *Venus d’Urbino* from 1538 no doubt; but, as Allan explains, it “no longer aspired to create an exalted world of harmony and beauty; and it was [for some critics] incomprehensible because [until then] that, after all, was what art was, and without that aspiration, there could be no art.” Allan believes that Manet’s *Olympia* ushered in “not just painting in a different style; it was painting of a fundamentally different kind.”

It is worth noting here that while these revised visions have become more strident particularly in modern times, exponents from the past like Bosch and Goya too have expressed similar ideas in their work. Duchamp alludes to this when he notes - while claiming that “most art since Courbet was retinal…” - that “there were other kinds of art - religious art, philosophical art - which were far less concerned with pleasing the eye than with deepening the way we think.” (Danto 25). We therefore had to commence accepting the idea that art was not just about a monolithic expanse of beauty but was as replete with contradictions as many other phenomena around us. When a critic used the oxymoron “perfect ugliness” to describe Manet’s *Olympia* (in Allan, 5), he or she was perhaps unintentionally highlighting this dichotomous nature of art. This involves furthermore not merely a reappraisal of beauty but also other qualities that affect and influence the viewer. The philosopher Edmund Burke from the 18th century distinguished for instance between beauty and the sublime. As neurologist and author of *The Aesthetic Brain* Anjan Chatterjee explains, Burke believed that while beauty was primarily linked to pleasure, sublime objects – which could include natural phenomena such as mountain ranges and rivers and artefacts like magnificent cathedrals – are those that evoke awe in our minds and force us to become aware of our insignificance. (Chatterjee 117).

The American philosopher C.S. Peirce contended that for an object to be considered “aesthetically good” – with an ability to trigger kindred emotions – it

must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality… If that quality be such as to nauseate us… to the point of throwing us out of the mood of aesthetic enjoyment… - an impression of great power… inseparably associated with lively apprehension and terror - then the object remains nonetheless aesthetically good… (Danto, 152-3)

This supports our view of art as an oxymoron. Furthermore, even if we believe (as Arthur Danto does) that art embodies meaning – by, for example, reminding us of our transience when compared to sublime phenomena – the very nature of meaning too reinforces the contradictory nature of art thus: while holding this view, Danto also assigns to art “a connection with cognizance: to what is possible and, to the faithful…” (Danto 154). But meaning in a work of art is rarely if ever pellucid owing to the limitations inherent in the process through which meaning is conveyed from artist to viewer/reader, from person to person.

Take for example the act of writing. The language we use is subject to the limitations of our knowledge. We therefore employ linguistic devices such as metaphors and analogies and symbols to embellish and enhance what we are trying to convey. As Jorge Luis Borges notes (in his short story *The Aleph* on the theme of infinity),

Every language is an alphabet of labels the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors. How can I transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain? In a similar situation, mystics have employed a wealth of emblems… (Borges 118).

To address these constraints, to overcome the limits of language, Borges uses oxymorons - an artifice not unlike the “emblems” used by the “mystics” - as tools for revealing deeper levels of reality. Jaime Alazraki from Columbia University cites the titles of a few Borges stories (including ‘The Uncivil Master of Etiquette’ and ‘The Dread Redeemer’) as examples (Alazraki 96)). This penchant for the oxymoron gets extended too to many of the themes Borges discusses in his work. These include, also as pointed out by Alazraki, a library of undecipherable books (in ‘The Library of Babel’), a writer composing Don Quixote in the twentieth century (in ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’) or a pursuer being pursued (in ‘Death and the Compass’) (Alazraki and Lyon 424).

An oxymoron, as used by a consummate artist like Borges, is an attempt to expand our view of “reality [which is] conceptually ruled by words,” Alazraki contends. “This stylistic device best defines Borges' essay because the ideas being dealt with are evaluated or modified by theories which contradict those ideas…” Alazraki then concludes that –

At the same time those theories function as oxymoronic modifiers in a different way - they restore the ideas… to a level where they regain their validity, not as a description of the world but as marvels of human imagination. Thus, the seeming contradiction between the two terms (a theory acting as a modifier and an idea standing as a noun) is in essence a form of conciliation. (Alazraki and Lyon 426).

What’s more, reason has also imposed on us a tendency to classify objects into virtually separate categories. This includes the traditional supposition that in art there is a clear distinction between the beautiful and the ugly. Jean Arp, one of the founding members of Dadaism, claimed that the objectification imposed by rationality in fact fostered our severance from nature. As he wrote in his diary (in Chipp 367), he intended in his artistic work “to destroy the rationalist swindle for man and incorporate him humbly in nature.”

Moreover, as Kant noted in his *Critique of Judgment* (Kandel 141) what may be ugly in nature is beautiful in art. This idea was exemplified, as the Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist and writer, Eric Kandel points out, by the standpoint adopted by the art historian Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl who argued that aesthetics was not based on such inflexible hierarchies (Kandel 116). Great art is characterised by its ability to also accommodate the contradictions that are an inescapable feature of life. But what art conveys “is not a static antithesis but a tensely maintained harmony of opposites” as the American classist and critical theorist Charles Segal argued. Segal also notes the similarity between this observation and what Heraclitus expressed back in 5th century BC: “They do not understand how being drawn apart from itself it agrees with itself; a back-stretched harmonious fitting, as of a bow and lyre.” Segal alludes to the oxymoronic function of art when he contends (in the context of the Greek tragedies) that “the inner dynamics of the play show the capacity of the aesthetic form to absorb the destructiveness of the contents and the power of those contents to call into question and to disturb the beauty of the aesthetic form.” This no doubt applies to all other forms of art too. (Segal loc 991).

**Art as “an extract from life”**

What we have discussed so far is essentially the aesthetic aspect of art. For most viewers of art, however, its human facet tends to predominate over its visual appeal. This is because, as the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset has argued,

[a] work of art vanishes from sight for a beholder who seeks in it nothing but the moving fate of… Tristan and Isolde… Tristan’s sorrows… can evoke compassion only insofar as they are taken as real. But an object of art is artistic only insofar as it is not real. But… many people… look right through it and revel in the human reality with which the work deals…

Ortega believes this was especially evident in 19th century art which was “not art but an extract from life.” (in Sontag 24). The work of art is both an “object” (with its materiality) and something that holds meaning, just as a word is confined to the printed page but also offers meaning.

Giorgio de Chirico, the Italian artist and writer, also was conscious of this dual aspect of art when he noted:

The metaphysical work of art is rather serene in aspect yet gives the impression that something new must happen in this very serenity and that other signs, beyond those already manifest, must find place within the square of the canvas. This is the revealing symptom of the *inhabited depth*. The flat surface of a perfectly calm ocean, for example, disturbs us not so much by the idea of the miles that extend between us and its end, as by all the unknown that is hidden in the depth. (in Chipp 451).

Our discovery of and relationship with this “inhabited depth” continues to be a cardinal component of art appreciation. Susan Sontag believes that we read a writer’s journal (for example) “because of the insatiable modern preoccupation with psychology, the latest and most powerful legacy of the Christian tradition of introspection… which equates the discovery of the self with the discovery of the suffering self.” (Sontag 42).

It is of course not always imperative – nor realistic to expect - that the artist himself or herself have experienced the suffering delineated in the work of art. But what is important is that the artist has the skill to imagine those emotions and express them aesthetically. Likewise, the viewer too may not – need not – have experienced similar adversity to be able to appreciate a work of art. And this is also how art conjoins the artist and the viewer because, as Eric Kandel tells us, art “enriches our lives by exposing us to ideas, feelings, and situations that we might never have experienced, or even want to experience, otherwise.” (Kandel 438). “When a viewer unconsciously imitates the distorted body posture in a [Egon] Schiele self-portrait, he or she begins to enter the private world of Schiele’s emotions, for the beholder’s body is the stage on which Schiele’s depiction of emotions play out…” (Kandel 389). Art thus enables us to experience other lives at a remove. By enabling us to understand what sorrow is, art may make us feel impelled to prevent suffering later, or at least attempt to mitigate it.

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One of the best illustrations of our need – and ability – to live through art (by proxy, as it were) lives very different from ours is to be found in a short essay called “The Sistine Madonna” by the Russian writer Vasily Grossman. This essay is about the eponymous portrait from c. 1513 by Raphael which had been taken from Dresden by the Red Army at the end of World War II and, when Grossman first saw it, exhibited in Moscow 1955 before being returned to Germany. The painting depicts the Madonna in the clouds with the Christ child in her arms striving towards earth. Grossman was so moved by this work he wrote that no other work of art had “conquered my heart and mind” as this one and that it “would continue to live for as long as people continued to live. And should people die, then whatever other creatures might replace them on earth – wolves, rats, bears or swallows – would also walk or wing their way to look at this Madonna.” (Grossman 181).

Why does Grossman think so? It is because he feels that what the painting represents has little to do with an event from a particular creed or belief system but is tumescent with meaning, nonetheless. It is on the contrary, as Grossman asserts, “a purely atheistic expression of life and humanity, without divine participation.” (Grossman 183). Atheistic? Some would consider such a depiction downright sacrilegious, and others will find it, at minimum, a contradiction in terms. There would of course be others who can perceive a relationship with a lack of belief that nevertheless has a spiritual core, as does Dr Zhivago’s uncle in Boris Pasternak’s novel. As Kolya Vedenyapin explains,

it is possible to be an atheist, it is possible not to know if God exists or why He should, and yet to believe that man does not live in a state of nature but in history… [And] what is history? Its beginning is that of the centuries of systematic work devoted to the solution of the enigma of death, so that death itself may eventually be overcome. This is why people write symphonies and why they discover mathematical infinity... Now, you can’t advance in this direct without a certain upsurge of spirit. (Pasternak 17-8).

In a similar vein, the “Sistine Madonna” is transmuted in Grossman’s hands into a parable that tells an essentially secular tale, one in which we all grow from child to man and are on a journey to Calvary, while carrying our individual crosses.

Grossman also extends this metaphor to address the plight of all people who have experienced oppression, whether by the Nazis, the socialist totalitarianism, or any other form of tyranny. For Grossman, the child in Raphael’s telling appears to foretell the bleak times to come and finds that “his face more adult than that of his mother. His gaze is sad and serious, focused both ahead and within. It is the kind of gaze that allows one to glimpse one’s fate… [and] perhaps… can see Golgotha, and the dusty rocky road up the hill, and the hideous… cross lying on a shoulder that is now only little and that now feels only the warmth of the maternal breast.” (Grossman 184). Grossman then finds a link between this Christ child and the Jewish children who amazed the adults with their “composure and… acceptance of fate” during the Kishinev pogrom, an anti-Jewish riot in Moldova in 1903.

Elsewhere Grossman writes with an urgent intensity when he sees another parallel between the story of Christ and more recent historical events, this time about of the fate of the persecuted in Treblinka extermination camp and Kristallnacht:

And now at last I had seen these faces truly and clearly. Raphael had painted them four centuries earlier. This is how someone goes to meet their fate. The Sistine Chapel … The Treblinka gas chambers … In our days a young woman brings a child into the world. It is terrifying to be holding a child against one’s heart and hear the roar of the crowds welcoming Adolf Hitler. The mother gazes into the face of her newborn son and hears the ringing and crunching of breaking glass... (Grossman 188).

In Grossman’s mind the Madonna and child begin to be identified with the countless mothers and children who have faced atrocities akin to those at Treblinka and elsewhere. Christ the child is personified, for instance, in a woman’s son who is

 already thirty years old. He was wearing worn-out soldiers’ boots… He was walking along a path through a bog. A huge cloud of midges was hanging above him, but he was unable to drive them away; he was unable to remove this living, flickering halo because he needed both his hands to steady the damp heavy log on his shoulder. (Grossman 189).

Grossman concludes nevertheless that “even when a man was crucified on a cross or tortured in a prison, what is human in him continued to exist.” (Grossman 185). Perhaps this is what gets resurrected and reaffirmed in Holbein’s Christ: not a soul or a body but what is human.

As Robert Chandler and Yury Bit-Yunan point out (in their introduction to the Grossman collection that includes the “Sistine Madonna”), Grossman is – by drawing these correspondences between the spiritual and the historical – “also – at a time when humanity’s very survival has become threatened as never before – questioning the nature and purpose of art.” This is also why we need to talk about the “aesthetics” of suffering where the portrayal of anguish and horror transcends the microcosm of the individual and reminds us of wider more universal verities.

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For Vasily Grossman Raphael’s Madonna – a work with a clearly religious theme – was “atheistic”. We then have a different painting (by someone who was “hardly a religious man”) which was termed “a great Protestant painting” by the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich who too appears cognizant of nuances akin to those Grossman had in mind. Tillich was referring here to Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* from 1937. But the explanation that the Guernica offers “is not the answer,” Tillich added, “that a theology, a Christian theology, would give…” (in [Lord Sutherland lecture](https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lecture/transcript/print/two-paintings-and-a-sceptic/) at Gresham College). As the philosopher of religion Baron Sutherland of Houndwood explains, Tillich believed that *any* attempt to understand what he called “the human predicament” was “an attempt to do theology, and he sees this as the outstanding way of formulating the question of who we are, what we are, and what our destiny is.” This would no doubt encompass Grossman’s human-centered interpretation of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna. Furthermore, the term “human predicament” applies equally to both individuals and to humanity as a whole. Hence - like how Grossman found a more universal tenor and meaning in Raphael’s painting - Anthony Blunt (who was not only outed as a Soviet spy in the 1960s but was also an art historian – and hence could be described as a “human oxymoron”) referred to the Guernica as “Picasso’s reaction to a cosmic tragedy”. (in Sutherland).

**Conclusion**

Talk of the Soviets then takes us to Vasily Grossman’s extrapolation in his essay on what would have gone through Stalin’s mind when he first encountered the Madonna and child:

Did he recognize her? He had met her during his own years of exile in eastern Siberia… He had met her in transit prisons. He had met her when prisoners were being transferred from one place of exile to another. Did he think of her later, during the days of his grandeur? (Grossman 190).

But does this matter? Grossman does not think so. What is more important is that

… we, we people, we recognized her, and we recognized her son too. She is us; their fate is our own fate; mother and son are what is human in man… The painting speaks of the joy of being alive on this earth… The power of life, the power of what is human in man, is very great, and even the mightiest and most perfect violence cannot enslave this power; it can only kill it… Life’s destruction, even in our iron age, is not its defeat.

(ibid).

Is this what Holbein was trying to convey? The body in the tomb is destroyed but not defeated. The coming miracle is perhaps more symbolic than real, but it is a case where the signifier embodies more meaning than the signified. This is also the contradiction that art appears to portray so well.

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1. Note: Although the term ‘oxymoron’ is usually employed in a literary context, I am applying it more broadly here to include all forms of art that exhibit such antinomies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)