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## **The Ugly as the Beyond of the Sublime**

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Even though Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome and the Pyramids of Egypt are the sole examples that Kant offers in his *Analytic of the Sublime*, it is not too difficult to identify an entire artistic realm that lives under the auspices of the Kantian sublime<sup>1</sup>. Ruins in the style of Piranesi, vast oceans, storms and floods, and snow-capped peaks, proliferate in the iconography of 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape painting; in so many dream-like spaces and dazzling lights, the forces of the dynamic sublime, as theorized by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, manifest themselves. The Kantian sublime elucidates large portions of art history, from Whistler and Turner in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to Rothko and Pollock in the era of post-war modernism. If the painters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century display sublime themes - scenes of a menacing and intimidating nature - Whistler and Turner create sublime atmospheres instead, just as abstract expressionist painters, particularly Rothko and Pollock, give to colors a certain sublime tonality. These artists are troubled by a profound metaphysical question: how to show or represent the "Whole" from fragmented experiences? This search for the transcendental experience of the "Whole," in its logic and its phenomenology, is brilliantly and scrupulously unraveled in Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*. For Kant, if the experience of the beautiful is one of measure, the experience of the sublime is that of being overwhelmed by the vast and the infinite, creating in the soul a state which mingles panic and delectation (the Burkean "delight").

Jean-François Lyotard radicalizes the aesthetics of the sublime by precisely exploiting this search for the experience of the Whole in the artist<sup>2</sup>. While Kant offers the philosophical foundation for this enterprise, it is a transposed Kant wherein the distinction between beauty and sublimity - so crucial for the aesthetics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially Burke's - is suppressed. The sublime becomes the unrepresentable,

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<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks to Dr. Frans van Peperstraten (University of Tilburg) for his precise and truly relevant comments on an earlier version of this paper. I had to take into account many of his suggestions and, moreover, he urged me to go back another time to Kant for a deeper understanding of the passages under investigation.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime*, Paris : Galilée, 1991.

and the task of art is that of presentifying [*darstellen*] the sublime which can never be totally grasped or recuperated. Lyotard casts the hypostasis of the sublime in contemporary art as exercising a beguiling and seductive impact on the subject: postmodern art provokes scandal and upheaval. Because the sublime, for Lyotard, turns away from nature, neither purposiveness [*Zweckmässigkeit*] nor the necessity of form-giving function are constitutive norms any longer. The sublime, for the contemporary artist, is the realm of the formless, the haphazard, pure matter, absolute singularity, and ephemeral events. The sublime, in its glory, is horrible. Lyotard clearly wished to capture, with the help of an aesthetics of the sublime, an essential aspect of our postmodern culture and its art: the fascination with radical Alterity, an unrepresentable Outside which destroys form and finality, and which puts into question the absolute power of cognition, intellect, and reason itself.

Kirk Pillow, in the opening pages of his *Sublime Understanding*<sup>3</sup>, points out that the Kantian conception of the sublime justifies this radicalization, since the exploration of the limits of representational thought is essential to Kant's treatment of the sublime. The sublime is precisely the limit against which the understanding and all efforts at comprehension collide. Though a painful shock, this pain points the way to the transcendent Whole, without veritable determination and conceptualization, and ungraspable by intellect and cognition. In sum, the aesthetics of the sublime evokes a vital existential territory of which art is the supreme guardian.

The question is that of knowing how to construct the philosophical "domain" of the sublime in an adequate and methodical manner, while taking into account the specificity of its "territory". How can one distinguish the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, both of which are aesthetic reflective judgments: this "genre" of aesthetic reflective judgments has a unique epistemological status whereas the beautiful and the sublime can be described separately as two *phenomenological* variants. Paul Guyer de-radicalizes the antagonism between the two Analytics<sup>4</sup>. He warns us that the epistemological complexity of Kant's aesthetic theory should not be underestimated by reducing it to a phenomenology (or psychology) of the beautiful and the sublime. However, the construction of two specific phenomenological "domains" is the path that I would like to follow, since it is the phenomenology of the

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<sup>3</sup> Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding. Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel*, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 2000, Introduction, 1-17.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Guyer, "Kant's Distinction between the Beautiful and the Sublime", *Review of Metaphysics*, 1982, 35, 753-784.

experience of the sublime which naturally leads us towards the detection of an uncertain and subversive zone: that of *ugliness*.

*Is there a Beyond of the Sublime?*

The sublime is determined in its phenomenology, that is, according to its *pathemic effect*, by the type of satisfaction [*Wohlgefallen*] that the subject, body and soul, may feel when it judges a sublime correlate. The emotions [*Rührungen*], of which the *Anthropology* provides a rich and evocative taxonomy, are certainly not ignored in the *Analytic of the Sublime*. There are passages where Kant manifests a positive judgment of the *Rührungen*, in distinguishing them from *Reiz*, charms or passions. *Rührungen*, according to Kant, can lead to the *elevation* [*Erhebung*] of the soul. With regard to the “emotions of the sublime,” Kant is quite obviously dependent on Burke, whose analysis he extends and amplifies. *Astonishment* is said by Burke to be the supreme effect of the sublime, while *admiration*, *veneration* and *respect* are considered as lesser effects. Recall that for Longinus, it is *ecstasy* and *admiration* that pathemically mark the soul confronted with the sublime, the very *enthusiasm* that Kant rather suspiciously associates with fanaticism and delirium instead of artistic creation. In Kant, *respect* [*Achtung*], which includes *attention* and *consideration*, becomes the essential pathemic effect of the sublime, evoking a certain ethical vocation and a conception of the subject as supersensible. But if there is a call to ethics, this call does not globally determine *Achtung*. It is true that there is an air of respect in the sublime, but the sublime is not exempt from a necessary violence. Violence must be done to the imagination, for it is through its pain and the mediation of the violation of the soul [*Gemüth*] that pleasure comes about. Pleasure is only possible through the mediation of unpleasure. The least that one can say is that respect is not a pure contemplative state, but a state of the *Gemüth in motion* - the *Gemüth* that in the experience of the sublime submits to a rapid alternation of tension and release<sup>5</sup>.

There is for Kant, however, a limit to the violence done to the imagination, a limit not to be transgressed, and it is exactly this transgression that will concern us in what follows. In a famous passage from §26, Kant distinguishes the *monstrous*

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 58, 334.

[*Ungeheuer*] and the *colossal* [*kolossalisch*]. I cite this crucial text at length for my argument:

The sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor in natural things whose concept already brings with it a determinate end (e.g., animals of a known natural determination), but rather *in raw nature* [*rohen Natur*] (and even insofar as it by itself brings with it neither charm [*Reiz*] nor emotion [*Rührung*] from real danger), merely insofar as it contains *magnitude* [*Grosse*]. For in this sort of representation nature contains nothing that would be *monstrous* [*ungeheuer*] (or magnificent [*prächtig*] or terrible [*grasslich*]); the magnitude that is apprehended may grow as large as one wants as long as it can be comprehended in one whole by the imagination. *An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes* [*Ungeheuer ist ein Gegenstand, wenn er durch seine Grösse den Zweck, der den Begriff desselben ausmacht, vernichtet*]. The mere presentation of a concept, however, which is *almost too great* for all presentation (which borders on the *relatively monstrous*) is called *colossal*, because the end of the presentation of a concept is made more difficult if the intuition of the object is almost too great for our faculty of apprehension<sup>6</sup>.

The *Anthropology* helps us here in distinguishing between these two types of “magnitude”, the *colossal* and the *monstrous* [*Ungeheuer*]: the *colossal* is *magnitudo reverenda* [*ehrfurchterregende Grossheit*] and the *monstrous* is *magnitudo monstrosa* [*Grossheit die zweckwidrig ist*]:

The *sublime* is awe-inspiring *magnitude* (*magnitudo reverenda*) ... If then one begins to fear that one cannot measure up to its grandeur (magnitude), a feeling of *astonishment* is aroused ... Otherwise *reverence* [*Verwunderung*] becomes *repugnance* [*Abschreckung*] which differs greatly from *admiration* [*Bewunderung*] as an act of judgment, whereby one cannot satisfy one’s own reverence. ... Magnitude, which runs contrary to the purpose (*magnitudo monstrosa*) is the *monstrous* [*das Ungeheuer*]<sup>7</sup>.

The term *Ungeheuer* is untranslatable. The German contains both a spatial and a temporal dimension. The spatial connotation is that of a deformed or misshapen enormity. But more profoundly, there is a temporal meaning: *geheuer* means “that which always happens in the same manner throughout the year.” The *un-*, in its strong negativity, shatters familiar and ordinary time.

No doubt there is for Kant a progression from the *colossal* to the *monstrous*, i.e. towards the total annihilation of our faculty of presentation [*vernichtet*]. If the colossal can already be considered a sublime correlate, then it remains certainly inside an acceptable limit; with the monstrous, on the other hand, one has passed beyond the acceptable limit, in full terror and total unpleasure. With the monstrous we are in the margin of the acceptable where the imagination is fully blocked to function. It looks as if the monstrous is the Thing, inexpressible and abyssal. The monstrous does violence to subjectivity without submitting it to any legality. Here, there is a qualitative difference of intensity – this unsupportable limit shakes the soul [*Gemüth*]

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 26, 252-253 (translation by Paul Guyer, Cambridge U.P.).

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, § 68.

violently. Confronted with the colossal, the imagination is certainly still able to adequately present its own inadequateness in the worst case, whereas the monstrous exceeds and annihilates all possible presentation. Passing beyond the limit, the sublime correlate sinks into the monstrous. And yet, between the almost-too-much of the sublime correlate and the absolutely-too-much of the monstrous, the demarcation becomes undecidable. One could even say that the same object may be judged either sublime or monstrous according to whether the imagination aims within or just beyond the limit.

An article by Jacob Rogozinski<sup>8</sup> offers an original analysis of the *monstrous* [*Ungeheuer*] and its subversive and destructive character for the subject. What interests me in this article is assuredly not its Heideggerian and psychoanalytic overtones, but the idea that a marginal *aporia*, that of the monstrous, can overturn the entire architectonic of Kantian aesthetics, since it destabilizes not only the Analytic of the Sublime but the *Critique of Judgment* in its entirety. It is impossible to grasp the essence of the sublimity of the sublime without taking into account the monstrous, that is, as its limit and circumscription. There will always be this vanishing point of an extreme violence in the confrontation with the sublime correlate. The qualitative distinction of affects effectively marks the progression between the colossal and the monstrous: the subject “feels” qualitatively the difference between an affect marked by the pleasure mediated by strong displeasure in the canonical experience of the sublime and the purely repulsive affect of the monstrous.

### *Ugliness and Disgust*

Where then is the *ugly*? Let us return to the text of Kant. Certainly, there is no way of considering the colossal to be ugly, but it can be argued for that the monstrous is ugly, certainly if we take into account the nature of the pathemic affect of ugliness, namely, *disgust* [*Ekel*]. Could it be that the monstrous provokes disgust in us, and thereby can be said to be ugly? Only one passage in the *Critique of Judgment* alludes to *ugliness* and its pathemic effect, *disgust*. This passage in §48 states:

Only one kind of *ugliness* [*Hässlichkeit*] cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying [*zugrunde zu richten*] all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely,

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob Rogozinski, « A la limite de l'*Ungeheuer* sublime et ‘monstrueux’ dans la *Troisième Critique* », in Herman Parret (ed.), *Kants Ästhetik/Kant's Aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant*, Berlin : Walter de Gruyter Verlag, 1996, 642-659.

that which arouses *loathing* [*Ekel*]. For since in this strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination, the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting, the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation itself from the nature of the object itself, and it then becomes impossible for the former to be taken as beautiful. The art of sculpture, since in its products art is almost confused with nature, has also excluded the representation of ugly objects [*hässliche Gegenstände*], and thus permits, e.g. death (in a beautiful genius) or the spirit of war (in the person of Mars) to be represented through an allegory or attributes that look pleasing [*Attribute die sich gefällig ausnehmen*], hence only *indirectly* [*indirekt vermittelt*] by means of an interpretation of reason, and not for the aesthetic power of judgment<sup>9</sup>.

We read in this passage that what in nature is ugly can be transposed or domesticated in artistic representation - therein lies the superiority of art. In art there is no ugliness. Kant gives sculpture as an example: sculpture excludes the direct representation of ugly objects from its domain. In contrast, ugliness exists in nature in the form of catastrophes and even as radical evil (Kant invokes “the Furies, diseases, the devastations of war”). The malaise that ugliness provokes is a pain that belongs to the moral rather than aesthetic order. Once transposed into art, natural ugliness is transformed into beauty or sublimity. Consequently, *disgust* is said to be the exemplary *pathos* before an ugly object in nature. Natural objects like the Furies, diseases and the devastations of war are not aesthetic. The ambiance of a true aesthetic experience requires the spectator-subject to free himself from all moral considerations, since they threaten to divert the subject away from artistic representation itself to the represented content, as well as from the emotions which obscure the soul [*Gemüth*] by imposing interests for the agreeable upon it.

I now wish to turn to the phenomenology of the cause or the effect of ugliness, namely, *disgust* [*Ekel*]<sup>10</sup>. Once again, Kant provides few consistent definitions, and only a couple of passages inform us minimally on the status of disgust. For instance, in §48, Kant insists on the non-representability of ugliness in art: “[in] *disgust*... that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented *as if*

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<sup>9</sup> *Op.cit.*, §48, 312.

<sup>10</sup> The classical text on the nature and the various types of disgust is Aurel Kolnai, *Der Ekel*, 1929 (translation in English : *On Disgust*, with an Introduction by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer, Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 2004). This text is rich in phenomenological suggestions. Since Paul Guyer translates *Ekel* by *loathing* (§ 48, 312), I quote Kolnai on the term *loathsome* in its semantic relation to *disgust*. “It is more difficult to differentiate from disgust the tonalities of the repulsive, or even of the disagreeable or *loathsome*. Frequently, the latter connotes an incomplete and somehow more formal disgust. One can only be repelled – in the strict sense – by things that do not have the characteristic of the disgusting: for instance, food which is neither spoiled nor personally detested, but which for some unknown reason just fails to be tasty. In such cases what one might call the objective contours of disgust are missing. An object may be repugnant to me on account of some mere fleeting association, but yet I do not therefore find it ‘disgusting’” (34). This suggestion and many others should be explored for a better reading of the concept of *Ekel* in Kant’s text.

it insisted, *as it were*, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting.” This is a typically Kantian approach: in a single phrase, there is a *gleichsam (as it were)* and an *als ob (as if)*. The ugly object has no reasonable effect on the *Gemüth*. Instead, an excited and dangerously disconcerted imagination petrifies the subject *in its corporeity*. This is the very essence of disgusting ugliness: it threatens the stability of our corporeity, our body “forcefully resists” the incitement to enjoy that ugliness deceitfully imposes on us. A less frequently cited text from §52 throws some light on these causes of disgust:

... What is essential in all fine art is the form that is purposive for our observation and judging, rather than the matter of sensation (i.e., charm or emotion) [*Materie der Empfindung (dem Reize oder der Rührung)*]. In the case of the *matter of sensation*... the aim is merely enjoyment [*Genuss*], which leaves nothing behind as an idea and makes the spirit dull [*dem Geist stumpf*], the object gradually *disgusting* [*den Gegenstand nach und nach anekelnd*], and the mind dissatisfied with itself and moody [*launisch*] because it is conscious that in reason’s judgment its attunement is contrapurposive [*im Urteile der Vernunft zweckwidrigen Stimmung*]<sup>11</sup>.

The “disgust for the object” arises from a certain “enjoyment” [*Genuss*] in the “matter of sensation” which distances the subject from its purposiveness. Pleasure [*Lust*] is opposed to “enjoyment” insofar as “pleasure is culture” [*wo die Lust zugleich Kultur ist*], as Kant writes a few lines earlier. “Enjoyment” *in matter*, in contrast, provokes disgust. In addition, this enjoyment of losing oneself in the matter of “charms and emotions” has a direct impact on the health of our body: it generates disgust which manifests itself in corporeal reactions like nausea, vomiting and convulsions. Pleasure-unpleasure [*Lust/Unlust*] in the feeling of the sublime has nothing to do with that “enjoyment” [*Genuss*] destructive of culture and generative of disgust; at no time does Kant introduce such an affect in his analysis of the aesthetic experience of the sublime. It is explicitly stated by Kant that disgust in relation to the *matter of sensation* [*die Materie der Empfindung*] cannot be the pathemic effect of the sublime, and does not function in any aesthetic judgment: the “enjoyment” of the matter of sensation accompanies the *agreeable (das Angenehme)*, and can lead to disgust and negative bodily reactions. But the disgust here is the ultimate *dis-agreeable*. The question is to know if this disgust, linked to the dis-agreeable, is of the same nature of the disgust which is the pathemic effect of ugliness.

It has to be said that even when there is for Kant a certain correlation between *ugliness [das hässliche]* and *disgust [das ekelhafte]*, the two notions do not define one

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<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.*, §52, 326.

another. One can be disgusted for reasons other than the presentation of an ugly object, e.g. by moral reasons. Even if it is true that all ugly objects are disgusting, there are other epistemological determinants which contribute to the identification of ugliness, like the role of the imagination and the particular play of the faculties in the situation of ugliness. An attentive reading of the *Critique of Judgment* must note that Kant does not really develop ethical criteria for distinguishing between the sublime and the ugly. Kant does not propose an interrogation into the *morality of disgust*. Does one *have the right* to feel or to live in disgust before a natural object? Is it not a failure of one's ethical duty to live or (even worse) cultivate the experience of disgust? To see or to live the world as ugly and disgusting - is this not a moral fault? Kant offers no such ethical criteria, and neither does he present any systematic and explicit construction of epistemological criteria for the determination of the ugly<sup>12</sup>. Here the reader of Kant's text is called upon to be inventive. Is the "appreciation" [*Beurteilung*] of ugliness, as a negative and destructive feeling, universally valid? Without universal validity, ugliness would not allow us access to the Ideas, in contrast to the sublime. The feeling of the sublime, as is well known, elevates us to the level of the Ideas in spite of its formless correlate, but the experience of the ugly would not. What sublimity and ugliness have certainly in common is the *formlessness* of the correlate. The same goes for contrapurposiveness: both the sublime and the ugly are "contrapurposive." There is friction, frustration and a great deal of uneasiness in these two "attitudes," since there is no pure pleasure in the sublime and no pleasure at all in the ugly. But all of this was obviously never thematized by Kant and, consequently, it is necessary for us to deduce and propose an argument.

How does the free play of the faculties realize itself in the sublime and the ugly? Christian Strub<sup>13</sup> encourages us to consider, through the deduction (and in all its abstraction), four possible epistemological structures: the free play of imagination and understanding, and its opposite, and the free play of imagination and reason, with its opposite. Knowing that the *beautiful* occupies the first structure (the free play of imagination and understanding), and the *sublime* the third (the free play of imagination and reason), Strub proposes the *ridiculous* as the feeling of the opposition of the free play of imagination and reason, leaving us with the fourth structure: the

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<sup>12</sup> See the very illuminating chapter on the sublime in Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste. A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001, 302-344.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Strub, "Das Hässliche und die 'Kritik der Ästhetische Urteilskraft'. Überlegungen zu einer systematischen Lücke", *Kantstudien*, 1989, 80, 416-446.

feeling of the undermining of the free play of imagination and understanding, as the position of the *ugly*. How can we understand this exercise in the deduction and its positioning of ugliness? The ugly, in this schema, would be the effect of a *disinterested displeasure*. From the experience of the ugly would emerge unpleasure in the play of the faculties, which would be *without harmony* while still free. Most importantly, this unpleasure would entail no interest in the subject. This exercise in epistemological deduction by Strub seems to me highly speculative, and in the end teaches us little about the impossibility of an aesthetics of ugliness, an impossibility that, according to me, had been sensed by Kant, but never made fully explicit.

*Lessing and Kant: Is there an Aesthetics of the Ugly?*

Indeed, is an aesthetics of the ugly possible? Is an aesthetic experience of the ugly possible? It seems that for Kant an aesthetics of the ugly would be meaningless. This is not the opinion of all commentators on the *Critique of Judgment*. Before diving again into Kant's texts related to this problem, I would like to make a short detour via Lessing who, some decades before Kant, explicitly posed the question of a possible aesthetics of ugliness. Lessing, in some chapters of *Laokoon* (1766)<sup>14</sup>, states that the ugly and the disgusting pose a constant menace to poetry and the plastic arts, on the level of both their content (the themes and subjects represented) and their form; yet at the same time there always seems to be recuperative strategies to "domesticate" the ugly and the disgusting. One discovers in Lessing a tendency to de-dramatize and a desire to create continuity between aesthetic categories. His numerous subtle analyses, above all literary, from Homer to Shakespeare, demonstrate the existence of mechanisms for domesticating the ugly. The poet can use ugliness for provoking complex feelings like the ridiculous [*Lächerliche*] and the terrible [*Schreckliche*]. An ugliness that becomes *ridiculous* is perfectly innocent [*unschädliche Hasslichkeit*], while one that is *terrible* can only be harmful [*schädliche Hasslichkeit*], like the character of the Duke of Gloucester, later Richard III, in *King Lear*. Before the harmful ugly, the effect is different: the aesthetic attitude spontaneously transforms

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<sup>14</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und der Poesie. Sämtliche Schriften*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Leipzig, Vol. IX, 1886-1924, Chapter XXIII. The sublime is only once mentioned in the *Laokoon*. Lessing notes in Chapter XXII, in a very orthodox way, that the experience of the sublime results from a certain "baroquisation" (exaggeration of dimensions), i.e. by a deviation from the "right proportion" which essentially marks beauty (XXII). It is true that the author of the *Laokoon* does not offer any fully sketched theory of the sublime, like Burke and Kant have done.

into an ethical attitude and the *harmful ugly*, rather than exasperating our sensorial sensibility to the point of disgust and vomiting, makes an appeal to moral judgment. This is, consequently, another way to neutralize the menace of ugliness. In the domain of the plastic arts, Lessing develops his thought in discussion with Moses Mendelssohn, and appears caught in uncertainty and ambiguity. He distinguishes directly between the ugliness of forms (painting *as art*, writes Lessing) and the ugliness of contents (painting *as method of imitation*). A decomposing cadaver, a face covered with blood and dust, bodily deformities and hairs stuck together are all ugly contents in nature. But what about their representation? It is at the level of *painting as art* that the question arises: “does ugliness retain its power once it is manifested in one or another artistic form?” Lessing seems quite aware that “an impression of an image [of an ugly form] produces a shocking sensation of disgust, in line with the laws of the imagination,” and that the ugliness of forms “offends our eyes, contradicts the taste we have for order and harmony, and awakens aversion irrespective of the actual existence of the object in which we perceive it.”<sup>15</sup> The very possibility of the disgustingly ugly is expelled from the aesthetic domain. The aesthetic signifier, in this case, would be *formless* [das *Unförmliche*], and furthermore *disagreeable* [*unangenehm*], *horrible* [*abscheulich*] and *harmful* [*schädlich*]. Lessing adopts the radical solution suggested by Mendelssohn: “Strictly speaking, there are no objects of disgust to our sense of sight” [*denn eigentlich zu reden, gibt es keine Gegenstände des Ekels für das Gesicht*]. This is a bold affirmation, and Mendelssohn’s remarkable text is cited by Lessing in the following manner:

... only the dullest of our senses, taste, smell, and touch, are exposed to disgust. ‘The first two,’ he says, ‘through an excessiveness of sweetness and the last through the oversoftness of bodies that do not offer sufficient resistance to the nerves that touch them. Such objects then become unbearable *to the sense of sight* also, but only through the association of the idea in that we recall the repugnance which they cause to our sense of taste or smell or touch. For, strictly speaking, there are no objects of disgust to our sense of sight’<sup>16</sup>.

“There is, properly speaking, no such thing as an object disgusting to sight...”<sup>17</sup> To summarize, Lessing considers the *ugliness of contents* as belonging to the axiological or ethical domain, and hence expelled from the field of aesthetics, while *forms of expression* can be perceived as ugly only when the aesthetic gaze imaginatively

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.*, XXIV.

<sup>16</sup> *Op.cit.*, XXV. The English translation, 130 (E.A. McCormick) mentions Christian Adolf Klotz as the source, but the content would refer more to Mendelssohn than to Klotz.

<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit.*, XXV.

associates the “intimate senses” (taste, feeling, smell) with sight, itself incapable of disgust.

The *Laocoon* dates from 1766. Does the *Critique of Judgment*, written twenty-four years later, advance the discussion? This brief discussion made clear that Lessing and Kant in fact defend the same perspective on the impossibility of an aesthetics of ugliness. This perspective might seem dated and inapplicable to contemporary art where ugliness is present not only in the represented contents, but equally in the material manifestation of artworks, i.e. their formless, abject character. From this point of view, one could argue that contemporary art and its “presentifications” of ugliness could find a more adequate theoretical foundation in the aesthetics of Hegel rather than Kant. As is well known, according to Hegel’s dialectical approach to the beautiful and the ugly, Karl Rosenkranz published in 1853, *Ästhetik des Hässlichen*, which offers the first systematic aesthetics of ugliness<sup>18</sup>. Rosenkranz explicitly criticizes Lessing’s conception of ugliness while passing in silence over the *Critique of Judgment*. It is evident that Rosenkranz’s thinking takes its point of departure in Hegel’s aesthetics where the formless [*Formlosigkeit*] (as amorphous, as asymmetrical, as disharmony), in a gesture of global aestheticization, is integrated into the dialectical Whole.

*Is the Experience of the Ugly the Experience of a Limit or of a Presence?*

We have thus far privileged the phenomenological path in focusing on the discontinuity between the experience of the sublime and the experience of the ugly, and in arguing that the *disgust*, provoked by the *monstrous* [*Ungeheuer*], which is close to the *ugly*, is a totally different pathemic reaction than *respect* [*Achtung*] before the *sublime*. We could just as well deploy a more epistemological strategy in showing how the specific play of the faculties generates either the displeasure [*Unlust*] that is felt in the experience of the sublime or the displeasure that is felt in the experience of the ugly. Kant often follows this path since it provides epistemological consistency to his *Analytics*<sup>19</sup>. However, he does not explicitly discuss what kind of displeasure

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Hässlichen*, Königsberg, Bornträger, 1853 (photostatic edition: Stuttgart, Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1968).

<sup>19</sup> See Renée Ryan, *The Beautiful, the Ugly, the Sublime and Beyond: Kant and Postmodern Aesthetics* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Institute of Philosophy, University of Leuven, 2001). Ryan offers some statistics: 40 occurrences of *Unlust* [*displeasure*] in the *Critique of Judgment*, mainly discussed in relation to *Lust* [*pleasure*] without any reference to the sublime.

might be caused by ugliness. In fact, he hardly offers a definition of displeasure as such. We learn in §10, in the Third Moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, that *displeasure* [*Unlust*] “... is that representation that contains the ground of determining the state of the representations to their own opposite (hindering or getting rid of them)”<sup>20</sup> - a rather abstract definition suggesting only that unpleasure is a *disharmonious* state of the soul, that its correlate *has no purposiveness*, and that it can lead only to *disagreement* in the community. If there were a difference in the displeasure before the sublime and the ugly, it would quite simply be that the unpleasure of the sublime is transposed into pleasure, while the unpleasure of the ugly is wholly and definitively painful. It is evident that no attitude which had such a pain for its cause or effect could be qualified as aesthetic.

Is the ugly a limit case of the domain of the sublime? Is the experience of ugliness the experience of a *limit*? Or is ugliness a *presence* that has identifiable formal properties, not allowing of any *aesthetic* experience? Kant is not clear about this issue. First of all, there are, as I already mentioned, very few references in Kant to “the ugliness that provokes disgust” [*Hässlichkeit welche Ekel erweckt*]. That ugliness has a real presence and a specific determination, that ugliness is not the mere absence of beauty, that the ugly is not the “unbeautiful,” is confirmed in a note from *Logik Philippi*: “Ugliness is something positive and not simply the absence of beauty but rather a *presence* totally contrary to beauty.”<sup>21</sup>

There is a serious disagreement of an entire range of interpretations of the *Critique of Judgment* on this delicate point. I mention only a few protagonists of this debate. At one end of the scale lies Hud Hudson<sup>22</sup>, who pleads for an *Analytic of Ugliness*, by placing the ugly within the system of Kantian aesthetics. Hudson argues that there exist *a priori* judgments of the ugly. Though it is true that Kant believes in the existence of ugliness, Hudson goes further in upholding the possibility of an *aesthetic* experience of the ugly. He reconstructs the four moments of this analytic of ugliness through a simple analogy: the judgment of the ugly is singular in its logical form; it has a universal subjective validity; the ugly is the form of the contrapurposiveness of an object perceived without representation of an end; the ugly

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<sup>20</sup> *Op.cit.*, § 10, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Logik Philippi*, XXIV, 364.

<sup>22</sup> Hud Hudson, “The Significance of an Analytic of the Ugly in Kant’s Deduction of Pure Judgments of Taste”, *North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy: Kant’s Aesthetics* (ed. by Ralph Meerbote), Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview, 1991, 87-103.

is what without conceptualization is experienced as an object of a *necessary* unpleasure. The formulation of the third moment seems to me especially paradoxical. Since there is unpleasure in ugliness, there is a rebellion in the feeling of the subject that resists all finalization, and it is for this reason that Hudson has forged the term *contrapurposiveness*. Hudson's exercise seems to me rather gratuitous and artificial, and thus we turn to the other position on the scale. Christian Strub<sup>23</sup> takes a much more reasonable point of view. Epistemologically, there is no other way for this Kant scholar to understand and to situate ugliness than by examining the possibility of a *disinterested unpleasure*. This notion seems strongly counterintuitive, and it quickly becomes clear that nothing can come from a contradictory comparison between the beautiful and the ugly, or a comparison between *disinterested pleasure* and *disinterested unpleasure*. Hence, there is no pure taste judgment of ugliness, and Strub wisely proposes that Kantian aesthetics contains a *systematischen Lücke*, a systematic void. The "territory" of ugliness can never become, within the framework of Kant's aesthetics, an epistemologically consistent "domain".

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Better to conclude by returning for a moment to the *phenomenology of ugliness*. At the level of the sensorial and sensitive grasping of the ugly, it is still not clear if we experience the ugly *as a limit* or *as a presence*, as the beyond of the sublime, as the absence of the beautiful or as the positive imposition of a correlate, which is mediated neither by the beautiful nor by the sublime. This uncertainty could be considered as a weakness and it is due to the fact that Kant's text itself does not offer the means of deciding this matter conclusively. A distinct epistemological basis could have been constructed for the ugly and the sublime, but this *transcendental reconstruction* is not offered in the *Critique of Judgment*. We are left with the phenomenology of the pathemic *effects* of the sublime and the ugly in the subject: *Achtung* (respect) and *Ekel* (disgust).

I have defended that within the orthodox Kantian framework there is no way of constructing a theory of the aesthetic experience of the ugly. There is no Kantian

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<sup>23</sup> Christian Strub, *art.cit.* See also the contributions of Reinhart Brandt, Dieter Lohmar and Christel Fricke, in Herman Parret (ed.), *Kants Ästhetik/Kant's Aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter Verlag, 1996. These authors defend a subtle middle position.

aesthetics of the ugly and the artificial constructions, like the ones by Hudson or Strub, will not change this. However, it is absolutely true that Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* opens the way to two radical methodical strategies concerning the relationship between the sublime and the ugly. Jean-François Lyotard represents the first option: incorporating ugliness into sublimity, and making the experience of the sublime into an experience of shock, scandal and anxiety before the void of *matter*. For Lyotard, this also means the incorporation of full *aesthèsis*, the sensible and the body in their materiality, in the aesthetic experience. The "There is" (*il y a*) of the event, the *presence of brute and brutal matter*, provokes the aesthetic experience in the postmodern era par excellence, the experience of postmodernity and its art. The other option is more prudent and reserved. The second strategy would consist in not generalizing disgust as the unique pathemic tonality or coloration of our experience of the contemporary world and its artistic production. We thereby safeguard a portion of the sublime not wholly corroded by absolute negativity, by the total Differend. It would perhaps be best if we could continue to appreciate beauty, sublimity and ugliness according to their specific presences in everyday life and in our encounters with nature and art.