BOOK REVIEW

An Ugly Book Tasting:
Jane Forsey & Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (Eds.) *"On the Ugly: Aesthetic Exchanges"*

Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019, 129

In 2004, the Irish rock group U2 agreed to endorse a new Apple product *for free*. Back then, Apple was just starting, but U2 was already established as a "band that has a huge global following" (Doyle 2011). Bono, the lead singer and frontman of U2, explained this move to Steve Jobs's biographer, Walter Isaacson (2011): "These men [Apple] have helped design the most beautiful art object in music culture since the electric guitar […] The job of art is to chase the ugliness away." Bono was referring to the first-generation iPod, the classic rectangular white device with the even more iconic click-wheel that saved the entire music industry from the ugliness known as illegal downloading.

However, what is "ugliness"? Is the ugly a mere opposite of the beautiful? If the iPod was considered "beautiful," and another object, say a transistor radio, was considered "ugly," does that mean that the latter lacks properties of being "beautiful"? Or is it a complete denial of the aesthetic properties (e.g., sound, shape, color, functionality, texture, etc.) present in the iPod? If, for Bono, the function of art is to expel ugliness, what is the role of ugliness then? Is it that useless? How does "ugly" compare with other negative emotions, such as "disgust"? Does it make sense to say that "An object is *not* beautiful but not necessarily ugly; it is however disgusting"? Is it possible to extend aesthetic ugliness to ethical ugliness, such as music piracy?

Understandably, since aesthetics is very much bewitched with questions about beauty and the sublime, problems about ugliness, like the ones mentioned, seem to be unattractive to be noticed. In the field transfixed by problems of the beautiful, there are few notable works that give full attention to the ugly. Karl Rosenkranz, a German philosopher who mostly disagrees with his mentor Hegel, published the *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853). Here, Rosenkranz weaves aesthetics with ethics and axiology in the discussion of the ugly. According to him, "ugly" is not merely the opposite of "beautiful," "ugliness is inseparable from the concept of beauty" (Rosenkranz 2015, 32). Hence, the importance of incorporating the evaluation of negative judgments (i.e., ugliness, monstrosity, revulsion, etc.) in aesthetics. After more than a century, Umberto Eco takes a second look at the ugly and publishes *On Ugliness* (2007). As the sequel to his *On Beauty: A History of Western Idea* (2004), Eco traces the historical

narrative of how we reject the ugly yet beasts, death, monsters, apocalypse, hell, centaurs, witches, devils, etc. are ubiquitous in literature, art, and even religion.

This dearth of discussions about the ugly in aesthetics most probably inspired the publication of *On the Ugly: Aesthetic Exchanges* (2019), a sequel to the previously published *On Taste: Aesthetic Exchanges* (2019) (henceforth OT) by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The editors, Jane Forsey and Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (2019), promise "an original and innovative collection of fresh approaches" on the evaluation of ugliness. Just like their past project, the blurb proclaims that "there is no other book available that collects the latest research in the field." The editors carefully selected authors from diverse backgrounds not limited to the academe, using different philosophy methods and traditions. However, unlike OT, the book has three sections forming "the first collection of papers that explore the ontological and axiological problems of the ugly, from a rich diversity of perspectives" (2019, x). Following the thematic division of the collection, this (ugly) book tasting is divided into three parts corresponding to the different sections of the book: (1) the idea of the ugly, (2) Kantian concepts about ugliness, and (3) the ugly and art.

Sunday Bloody Live Show. Some of the controversial issues about ugliness are these: Is the ugly the complete opposite of the beautiful? Can a negative evaluation – horrible, repugnant, grotesque, garish - exist independently? How about negative emotions, such as pain or abhorrence? These ontological issues serve as brainworms that welcome readers in the first set of essays. So for Chapter 1, which is entitled as the *On the Aesthetic Gaze, Beauty and the Two Sources of Ugliness*, author Verschaffel (2019, 6), who also teaches architectural theory and philosophy, responds: the concepts of the ugly and the beautiful are not two separate ends of a pole. Yes, these two are different aesthetic appraisals but not exactly opposites; rather, they "isolate" objects being referred to. This separation is what Verschaffel (2019, 6) calls the "aesthetic distance," wherein "Aesthetic appreciation – whether positive or negative – is a form of individualization: both appraisals accord the object a status that transcends the ordinary of normal." Hence, the "ugly" plays a two-part role: (1) it makes the transistor radio different from but not necessarily the opposite of the iPod and (2) it isolates the former from other objects bearing different aesthetic appraisals, such as pretty, boring, magnificent, monstrous, etc. Conversely, Parret's (2019, 23) *On the Beautiful and the Ugly* takes on a different route as the essay extends Rosenkranz's aesthetic theory of the ugly by examining the "Kantian suspicion": is it possible to have an aesthetic experience of ugliness? He responds with four interesting concluding statements that can be summarized as "The ugly is not considered as opposed to the beautiful but as a continuation of the sublime: the *extremely-sublime* is the *ugly*," just as how Kant initiated it (Parret 2019, 28). One important implication of this claim is how contemporary arts can be valued not from their own aesthetic properties "but according to the *intensity of the impact on the interests of our faculties*" (Parret 2019, 28). Parret (2019, 28) adds that it can be ironically and paradoxically called the "new beauty." Lastly, this first batch of essays ends with one of the most gripping articles in this book with Meng-Shi Chen's (2019, 29) *The Seductive Allure of the Macabre: Challenging the Pleasure Principle.* In his (2019, 29) article, it examines what is coined by Jerold Levinson (2014) as the "paradox of negative emotions" or the "paradox of horror." It is often easy to understand that people choose pleasurable experiences rather than

painful ones. Still, there are those who enjoy horror movies, creature flicks, and even torture videos. Why? How can they derive pleasure from disturbing or horrible scenes of murder, war, monsters, zombies, etc.? Unlike traditional articles in aesthetics that evaluate works of art, the author addresses this problem by investigating live public executions. Chen (2019, 30) then cites both Nietzsche and Foucault, who are both concerned about these "live shows" and how they provide "good entertainment accompanied by good pleasure." Through Nietzsche, Chen dilutes the hedonistic principle as the force that drives human beings to watch these bloody executions; "pleasure and pain are not opposites" these public executions have "seductive allure to life" that mirror the human condition as the will to power.

With or Without Kant. The next collection of essays proves how influential Kant's work is in aesthetics, especially in the discussion of the ugly. This section is for those who both believe so or think otherwise. Most Kantian scholars problematize Kant's cryptic concept of ugliness, especially in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant does not elaborate much about his account on negative judgment, and having done so excites scholars and critiques. However, the essay *Understandings of Ugliness in Kant's Aesthetic* (Johnson 2019, 47) takes a detour. Johnson (2019, 49), who is a philosopher, artist, and minister, refuses to hop into the bandwagon; instead, his goal is "to view the literature as evidence of ugliness' multifaceted nature." In doing so, Johnson does not present Kant's aesthetics but how these Kantian scholars argue for or against the complexity of Kant's account on the ugly. On the other hand, Bradfield's (2019, 67) *Kant's Sublime and Ingenious Insights into Judgements of the Ugly*, continues to address the issue of properly locating where Kant's account on ugliness is. She compares judgments of taste of the beautiful, sublime experience and judgments of taste to evaluate the role of harmony between understanding and imagination. One of her interesting claims is how our experiences of the ugly are "contrapurposive to our faculties, but purposive for our growth as critics and community members" (Bradfield 2019, 82). Just like whenever we encounter the sublime, the ugly is repulsive and disturbs us, but our exposure to it trains us in judging works of art. This discussion is continued by Forsey's (2019, 85) *This Might be Unpleasant* as it further unpacks another negative emotion related to ugliness – the unpleasant. In examining the unpleasant, she first distinguishes it from other negative ideas: the ugly and the disgusting. Throughout her article, she uses her experiences to renovate her new house, which effectively illuminates her claims. However, what is the purpose of unpleasant experiences? She (2019, 89) surmises that "The unpleasant provides an *opportunity* for aesthetic action: it is not one that we are compelled to accept." Incomparable with ugliness, which clearly does not motivate, and disgust that repels us, the unpleasant is motivational and fuels creative action.

City of Blinding Bombs. The next section is specifically about the issue of function or relationship of ugliness to art or art evaluation; in a field where beauty reigns supreme and revered, what is the role of ugliness? Silverbloom (2019, 95) addresses this using Adorno's framework in *The Critical Power of Ugliness*. In doing so, she escapes the holy trinity of traditional aesthetics of the good, the true, and the beautiful, then adapts an Adornian framework. Through Adorno, she develops a powerful thesis that "if art is to be critical and potentially transformative, it can only do so (or perhaps it does so best) insofar as it is characterized not by beauty but by

ugliness" (Silverbloom 2019, 96). To clarify, she cites Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) as an example of how ugly artworks could be a powerful social critique:

> Its violation of traditional artistic form through its rendering of existence in a fragmentary way offers a glimpse of the inability to capture, in a unitary and harmonious whole, the multiplicity of human experience; and yet as a work of art, it expresses this failure *through* the vehicle of the aesthetic whose foundation rests on that gesture of totalization and unification (Silverbloom 2019, 103).

The work is painted out of Picasso's indignation and outrage at the Nazi's bombing of Guernica, a Spanish town. Instead of using usual academic, artistic styles like realism, he used cubism – the squarish dead child is being held by a hysterical mother, the elongated horse's neck suggests that she is in agony as fire engulfs her. These images not rendered photographically are ugly, yet the work is a powerful one as it effectively exposes the horrors of war. Concluding the collection is Naivin's (2019, 107) *Andy Warhol: The Ugly Aestheticism of Post-modernity*. It discusses the works of Andy Warhol, saying that "ugliness is a central part of his work, too." His Campbell soup cans, Brillo boxes, and yellow bananas make Warhol an ugly aesthetician. But does ugly art have a function in society? Naivin (2019, 121) thinks so; Warhol exposes "a valueless society where individuals want to play with a vulnerable present menaced by crisis and by an impossible and anguished feature." Naivin even extends this account of the ugly to the prevalence of selfies and duck faces. Yes, these are self-expressions, but it also unveils a "society where the serious is definitely banished, and the old value of beauty is replaced by a funny ugliness" (Naivin 2019, 121).

Considering that the first in-depth work on ugliness is published in 1853 and Eco's followed a century and a half, the entire field is longing for a collection such as this one. Even if it has eight essays only, this sequel preserved the quality of its predecessor through its interesting subject matter, thought-provoking arguments, and remarkable selection of various authors. True to its claim, this is indeed an important contribution in aesthetics; since it is published in a time when the world is overwhelmed by this ugly uncertainty, its relevance transcends its own field. The ugly stretches itself from aesthetics to ethics to axiology – ugliness is everywhere. It is deplorable and even more pronounced when there is a pandemic. This book shows us different ways of making sense of this ugliness, reminding us that we are just stuck in this momentary ugliness and *can* definitely get out of this.

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