

Diligence and Industry: Adorno and the Ugly

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Plain and simple as it was, it enchanted me; as a matter of fact, any sort of painting enchants me, however foolish and clumsy it is, because every painting reminds me first of diligence and industry, and second of Holland.

From "The Walk" by Robert Walser

The purpose of this piece is to show how Walser's passage reveals the *a poria* within any modernist aesthetic that attempts to move beyond the seemingly closed dialectic of beauty and the ugly. Put differently: I want to use aesthetic theory and this passage to display the recent history and the contemporary status of subjectivity itself.

First, let us consider the place and status of aesthetic experience, the supposed intersection of aesthetic theory and subjectivity. The place of aesthetic experience in society, which lies entwined with an aesthetic theory that comforts and supports it, is unfortunately everywhere. That is, the place of aesthetic experience and even production is not as difficult to locate as thought. We need only not pay attention (like the character in the Walser passage); instead let us drop our guard, just for a moment before the flood of those promises of satiety, happiness, and oblivion that laps at our heels daily, to see the shimmer and hear the murmur of a desire that begs to be ours. We awake with the threat and promise of this desire, bathe with it, eat it, and unfortunately, all too often sleep with it. Our world is overstuffed with merchandise that promises not only happiness but also completion and satisfaction in the guise of a succession of moments—each complete, unique, and enduring in and of itself. That this promise is a lie is the empty but painful echo of the words from Walser, "every painting reminds me ... " That is, not even artworks can differentiate themselves from one another. Each painting is like every other. The uselessness and increasing rate of obsolescence of this merchandise, and this lie, is both a tribute to and a reminder of the real transitory nature of a former aesthetic experience.

Until the recent past, and the advent of late panic industrialism, this desire for and promise of the Other appeared to us in the guise of the artwork. Today, however, this desire and promise has been overtaken by the commodity form. The aesthetic experience par excellence is that of the commodity's eviscerated form, and this imploded form is the single defining simulacrum of modern life. Within archaic aesthetic artifacts, that is myth, we find the pre-history of the commodity as form.

It is more crucial and interesting to discern not the locale (everywhere and always) but rather the effect of this echoing absence. Aesthetic experience, unfortunately, no longer has effect. Worse still, its effects are pernicious. The history of the perversion of aesthetic experience began at the very moment when aesthetics (that is, the commodity form) became a separate (read potentially total) sphere of production, judgment, and experience. The autonomy that aesthetic activity, however, gained in its separation from the reproduction of social life is only in part illusory. A crucial question is whether aesthetic autonomy has become wholly illusory, if it has itself become a false totality.

The ambiguous independence of aesthetic activity represented not only the liberation of aesthetics, but also the creation of a mechanism of repression. The constitution of aesthetic activity within a separate realm of production and experience serves to emasculate genuine (yes, masculine) hopes and fears by displacing them to a "purposeless" realm. Aesthetic artifacts are allowed to maintain their critical, subversive, and liberating aspects as long as they remain only a commentary on their own precursors. The tension and power of artworks is tolerated because of their narcissism. The question is, to what degree has narcissism, the trajectory of subjectivity, eliminated this tension and power that may be the last refuge of hope in world gone fairly mad with self-production and consumption? This question is posed by the Walser character, for whom every artwork is merely the occasion for the self-reproduction of a form of subjectivity through nostalgia and sentiment.

The artwork no longer exists as a residue of human suffering, rather only as a blank screen and an empty field of panic in which a static and regressive subjectivity may re-constitute itself anew in the form of what it has always been — a master of self and nature, and now art, that which resisted incorporation into subjectivity and which provided the only setting for an overwhelmed Nature to threaten to disclose itself. The production of "new" aesthetic artifacts, which presupposes the reproduction of static social relations, guarantees a social context in which all experience can potentially be aestheticized (but this really amounts to anesthesia). The commodification of aesthetics, the "aestheticization" of commodities, is not perversion but destiny.

Aesthetic experience today is the great equalizer, not of men and women or one class and another, but of thoughts themselves. *Every painting reminds me ...*; aesthetics, as a separate abode of spirit, used to maintain the ideology of a form of life that was not subject to the power of equivalence. The semblance of this form of life is today impossible to maintain. The positive side of the constitution of aesthetics as a separate sphere was the protection it afforded against the Enlightenment demand that all experience be subject to rational calculation. Aesthetics, however, can no longer serve this end precisely because aesthetic "effect" has become the standard of measure for the whole of experience. Any sort of painting enchants me"; in coming to be the universal measure of all experience it ceases to be the measure of any experience. "Every painting reminds me first of diligence and industry ... " not of Nature or the Other, but precisely the opposite: every painting reminds me of subjectivity, of the diligence and industry that recreated Nature in the image of a dominating and hence false subjectivity. Every painting is then a tribute to the domination of Nature and the manic autonomy of the subject. "Every painting reminds me of ... Holland," where the landscape itself is not an appearance or symptom of Nature but the product of human diligence and industry; where Nature appears only in the form of that which has been dominated. Aesthetic experience is the measure of a desire that conceals itself as our own; that is, aesthetics is simultaneously the legitimation and vehicle of commodification. Aesthetic experience is the most debased and debasing aspect of modern life. What can rescue it? In a word, the ugly.

The concept of the ugly needs to be considered in the context of two separate but intimately related realms: the realm of artistic beauty, and that of nature itself, not natural beauty. Counterpoising artistic beauty with natural beauty would be fruitful had the model of artistic beauty not usurped entirely the traits that an earlier aesthetics granted to natural beauty. The following is an attempt to reconstruct the category of the ugly according to Adorno's account of it in his book, *Aesthetic Theory*.

The role that the ugly plays in art has changed radically in modernism, which is not to say that the category of the ugly has been altered in the least, but only how and where ugliness occurs, along with the form it takes in artistic beauty and nature. The transformation of this role is evidenced by the preponderance of the ugly in modernist art, which does not mean that nothing is beautiful about modern art, but rather that any beauty produced or achieved is nowadays possible only with the ugly as material. The plays of Beckett, for example, are beautiful not in spite of the ugliness that pervades them but precisely because of it. Another example is the way in which Pop Art, through a displacement of everyday artifacts to the aesthetic realm, succeeds in producing a kind of beauty by making their ugliness transparent. This result, or success, I term an ambivalent beauty.

We can account for the increasing presence of the ugly in modern art by way of a recent history of the concept of harmony. A previous aesthetic account of artistic harmony, articulated by Hegel, posited ugliness as, actually or potentially, a moment of art. According to Adorno, this sort of harmony is now bankrupt in modern art; it has become false because a stronger and thus qualitatively different impulse toward, and desire for, harmony has taken its place. The new, modern kind of harmony is one that does not give ugliness its due as a moment of art but forcibly restrains it from participating at all. Consider Mondrian's paintings, of his desire to remove any possibility of the appearance of the ugly by limiting expression to three colors, straight lines, and right angles. Mondrian was correct in discerning the impetus behind his formula for composition as a desire for "purity." In straining so completely for a purity which takes geometry as the standard of expression, and in desiring to exclude any sign of the Other or any moment of ugliness, Mondrian's compositions do succeed in producing beauty. Their beauty, however, is inhuman and thus ugly. I won't defend this claim, however, as merely a judgment of taste. Instead, I mean that his work is, precisely because of its obsession with formal beauty, objectively ugly. Even in those works which strain the hardest against it, we find a preponderance of the ugly.

This is the new harmony and it should be understood as the reflection of an alteration within subjectivity, specifically an increase in the subject's hostile relation to nature. The subjective desire for unification and the demand for increased autonomy translates, in the aesthetic realm, into the exclusion of any sign of Nature as the Other, i.e., ugliness. The result of this forced restraint and exclusion of the ugly is the return, with a vengeance, of the ugly in modernist art. This new harmony, resulting from exclusion, isn't a harmony at all. (Adorno terms this false harmony "harmonistic") Art in this modern age is both an expression of the deformation of harmony (for example Mondrian) and an attempt to return the ugly to its proper place within harmony. Cubism, I would argue, is not to be

understood as the play of surfaces or the deconstruction of the plane of the canvas, but as a crucial moment in the history of figuration and beauty. The depiction of the human figure could no longer produce beauty, or be beautiful. The success and continuation of figuration could be achieved only with the deformation and deconstruction of the figure itself. The human figure could be beautiful if it were depicted as ugly. Subjectivity could recognize itself in the revelation of its ugliness, which is what I mean by ambivalent beauty: beauty that occurs only with the ugly as dominating element. Successful modern art contains a preponderance of the ugly in an attempt to return some semblance of harmony to a world dominated by the exclusionist and autonomy-mongering species of subjectivity. Unsuccessful art, and kitsch, which contain nothing of the ugly, and yet nonetheless are ugly, have fallen prey to the new subjectivity, are indeed manifestations of it.

The battle for autonomous subjectivity, waged between beauty and the ugly, is not as uncomplicated as it at first appears. The difficulty lies in the dialectical nature of the concepts of harmony and autonomy, which are central to any understanding of the ugly, and which issue in the concept of aesthetic form. Harmony became false when it tried to "disown" the tension between beauty and ugliness. The harmony formulated by Hegel has become outdated by the increasingly autonomous character of art that is achieved through a principle that is at once both immanent to the development of artistic form and extraneous to it. The principle within form, which prescribes aesthetic autonomy, is a principle adopted from the subject's relation to nature. This means that the principle that gives aesthetic form to material is the same principle according to which the domination of nature occurs. All artifacts, whether aesthetic or not, are given form by way of a domination whose guiding principle is the repression of expression. Form is possible only at the expense of nature. The ugly has returned precisely because of the latest onslaught against nature by subjectivity. The ugly, as we shall see, is precisely the memory of repressed nature; it is the return of the repressed, and indeed, the return of nature itself through expression.

The modern attempt to prohibit this return takes place through the harmony which excludes the ugly, that is, nature, on the subject's road to autonomy. The vehicle of subjectivity on this road is art, whose autonomy is produced by harmony. The prohibition by harmony against the ugly results in an inversion of the concept of harmony. This inversion of harmony occurs when the harmony that once was a momentary or provisional synthesis of the tension between the ugly and the beautiful is supplanted by the harmony that attempts to disown this tension by suppressing the ugly, that is, nature. This inversion delivers us to the position we now occupy in which artistic beauty is not the product of a harmonious synthesis of beauty and ugliness, but is rather just dissonance. One can say that Beckett's plays are "beautiful," but modern artworks seem less capable of presenting themselves as unified wholes. They exist as fragments.

In this inverted harmonious world, then, the art which is most harmonious is kitsch. Kitsch is pure beauty, in the sense that it is art that entirely excludes, not only the tension between beauty and the ugly, but also thereby the ugly itself. The result is, of course,

obvious: that which is kitsch, pure beauty, is empty — not just of tension but of any content or expression. Kitsch is, like Mondrian's work, pure form. Instead of excluding the ugly by reducing expression to the geometrical, kitsch achieves the same result by prescribing for itself only cliché, surface, and sentiment. This emptiness is due to the false nature of the form of kitsch; this form in turn depends on exclusionist subjectivity, and is both a product of, and is itself, pure domination. This attempt at complete autonomy can succeed only with the complete denial and exclusion of nature, which, in the realm of artistic form, is the ugly. Kitsch is not harmless or neutral, but a frightening manifestation of the current state of subjectivity.

The ugly results from the negation of nature, but this very negation allows for the autonomy of art. The autonomous character of art is nothing new, being as old as art itself; what is new is the attempt to transform art into something completely autonomous (read total).

The identity of the artwork with the subject is as complete as the identity of nature with itself must once have been. The liberation of art from heteronomous subject matter, especially natural objects, and the claim raised by art to the rightful appropriation of all objects have allowed art to come into its own, purifying it of all crudity that stands in the way of mediation by spirit.¹

Yet, there is something more than slightly contradictory about this attempt by subjectivity to make art completely autonomous, since subjectivity desires this in order to reduce the threat art poses to subjectivity, resulting in not more but less autonomy for art.

The continuing presence of the ugly, along with the attempt to deny it, is a testament to the falsity of a subjectivity gained and formed through domination, (Incidentally, this new subjectivity began to issue in aesthetic theory at the close of the 18th century, after Kant, when natural beauty- was no longer taken to be the model for artistic beauty. This served to locate within the subject, and not nature, the possibility of some autonomy from nature. Art was thus transformed from the autonomous to the product of an autonomous subject.)

The ugly remains the antithesis of the beautiful and in so doing continues to confront the affirmative autonomous function of art. In doing this, however, in continuing to confront the autonomy of art, the ugly in turn becomes the subject of an aesthetic taboo that condemns it. Kitsch, for example, is an object of this taboo. It is this aspect of the ugly, the aesthetic taboo against it, that holds at once the most fascinating interest for an aesthetic analysis and the most fruitful means for understanding aesthetic autonomy and art. Adorno accounts for the aesthetic taboo against the ugly by locating its origin in the birthing of mythical subjectivity- through the mimetic response to fear. He writes:

Archaic ugliness, the cannibalistically threatening cult mask was a direct imitation of fear, which it diffused around itself in the form of expiation.

As the mythical fear grew weaker through the development of subjectivity, the ugly traits in archaic art became the target of a taboo (whose instrument they had originally been). They did not emerge as ugly until the idea of reconciliation was born in the wake of the formation of the subject and its nascent freedom. But the old images of terror continue in the history which did not redeem freedom and in the subject, as the agent of unfreedom, who has perpetuated the mythical spell by rebelling against it and submitting to it at the same time.²

The fear of nature resonates in the ugly. The traits in archaic art that came to be ugly, then tabooed, were originally the residue of a fear quelled by the mimetic appropriation of nature. The mythic content of this fear was sublimated into aesthetic form, and thereby assured nature, in the guise of the ugly, a continued existence within aesthetic artifacts. This is what Adorno means by rebelling and submitting, at the same time, to the mythical spell. Or we could say that mimesis is necessarily ambivalent. Mondrian rebels against the ugly but his work nonetheless, in being ugly, submits to ugliness. To complicate this dialectic and to understand just how deeply rebellion against the ugly is entrenched, we should again consider kitsch. The desire by kitsch that only the "pretty" should become apparent is clearly a rebellion against the ugly, and yet the cultured pronouncement that kitsch is ugly is a part of the very rebellion that produced kitsch. There is no easy escape from the dialectic.

The concept of the ugly is the antithetical other necessary for the very concept of art. Art gives expression to the ugly, that is, the effects of repression; but the ugly bears witness to the rights of the repressed only within the autonomous realm that beauty offers. Art appropriates and preserves the fear of nature only as long as beauty retains within its autonomy-generating function a place from which a taboo against nature, in the form of the ugly, can be prescribed. Art is autonomous if harmony is composed of both beauty and the ugly. Nature, in the guise of the ugly, retains its presence, albeit a redoubtable one, within the autonomy that beauty provides art. Nature remains fear inspiring today only through the continuing presence and continuing threat of the ugly. "The image of the beautiful as being a unique entity emerges simultaneously with the process of man's emancipation from his fear of the omnipotent oneness and homogeneity of nature."³ There is however a price to be paid for emancipation.

Beauty, as the sublimation of nature, is that which allows the possibility of art as an autonomous realm. The ugly is the necessary counterweight to the autonomy-mongering character that beauty serves in art. The autonomy of the subject depends entirely upon the autonomy of art. The exclusion of the ugly is also the exclusion of that which is human — human in the sense of the wounds that are the traces and memories of the inhuman domination and destruction of nature in the name of humanity and progress. If the return of the ugly is to rescue the autonomy of art we need to ask if this return serves to restore a harmony composed of the tension between beauty and the ugly or if harmony itself is no longer possible. The preponderance of the ugly in modern art, the fragmented character of modernist works, is evidence of the impossibility of any return to harmony.

If it is not beauty or harmony or unity that modernist works achieve, what *do* they achieve? What is their affect on us, on subjectivity? What, in a word, is aesthetic experience today? In order to have the least presumptuous concept of aesthetic experience, rather than presume that aesthetic experience is a particular sort of experience, assume instead that only one experience exists.

If at this point, there is only experience, then it is easy to assume its opposite: the cessation or interruption of experience, which we can characterize as death. An interruption or break with experience, nevertheless is the very experience of art. Strictly speaking then, aesthetic experience is not an experience at all but its interruption, and therefore it has no real content, though it has plenty of false content.⁴ The illusion in art is not the illusion that it represents something else, but the illusion that in presenting itself as a copy it somehow is something. This deeper illusory aspect conceals the fact that the artwork is nothing more than a gap in experience.

The interruption of experience by the artwork has been discussed by Walter Benjamin in terms of a shock and by Adorno as a shudder. This break with experience, which the successful aesthetic artifact achieves, is prompted by the memory of an experience that was not produced by the squelching of expression or the domination of nature. This characterization implies more than a profound imprint on the subject of an aesthetic experience; indeed, it points to the obliteration of the subject, the individual who has an "aesthetic experience." An artwork effects a shudder through its form; it has no positive content. Artworks lack any true, specifiable content, and this makes their identification and definition difficult to posit except when examining what they claim to be and why this claim is illusory.

The false content claimed by an artwork is the means by which the artwork presents itself as embodying the material for an aesthetic experience. False content is the means of seduction. The artwork's presentation of itself as the bearer of meaning is likewise the source for the illusory notion of aesthetic experience as an experience of something. There is some truth in the artwork's claim; although it is not the carrier of meaning, it is nonetheless an occasion for an aesthetic experience. The false claim by the artwork that it is meaningful provides an authentic aesthetic experience that would be the experience of the negation of the artwork's false claim, and, simultaneously, the negation of experience as false. Unfortunately, there is as yet no content and thus no positive meaning to this interruption.

Why are artworks false to begin with? Why can't we construe them as being truthful insofar as they negate the false claims of social reality? The answer to these questions lies in the ambiguous ontology of aesthetic artifacts. Artworks embody both social and anti-social aspects, what is at once both the most social and the most anti-social. Complicating the ontology of artworks even further, this dualistic ontology has a dialectical nature; for example, in some instances the radical anti-social aspect of artworks serves as the most social. In this case, I am thinking of Marcuse's early essay on the affirmative character of culture, in which he shows that the most radical anti-social impulses are not only negated

when they occur in a separate sphere of aesthetic experience, but become affirmations of the very status quo they originally attempted to subvert.

The only authentic aesthetic experience is thus a content-less interruption of experience produced by and through the ugly as the dominating anti-formal element. I do not want to imply that an interruption of experience must remain without purpose or use. An aesthetic experience can be given some content and value if it is completed by thought. It is only ugly aesthetic artifacts that arrest experience; this interruption completes itself through reflection. What that reflection might consider or conclude I cannot speculate.

The truth of the Walser passage, then, lies in its ironic acceptance of the impossibility of experiencing the content of the ugly. The character admits that a particular painting is ugly by calling it "plain and simple" and further explains that no matter how "foolish and clumsy," (i.e., ugly) any painting might be, it's ugliness in no way prohibits beauty, or better, enchantment. That is, no degree of ugliness can break the mythic spell unless it can at the same time break the spell of dominating subjectivity itself. Therefore, in reading "The Walk" one feels a great deal of affection for this character who rejects and embraces the ugly, and who is himself foolish and clumsy. The beauty of "The Walk" — the harmony of beauty and the ugly that it achieves, is in a large part due to its humor; but if we want to propose humor as a possible reconciliation, as a potential means of recovering a lost harmony, we would have to first contend with Adorno's statement that humor is "more repulsive than all the ugliness there is."⁵

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NOTES

1. T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Letlhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Kolf Tiedemann (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1984) p.93. Translation amended. German: p.99.
2. Ibid., p.70, Translation amended. German: p.76.
3. Ibid., p.76. German: p.82.
4. See my "Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44(2): 181-189, Winter- 1985.
5. *Aesthetic Theory*, p.72. German: p.78.