Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence

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I: Beauty and Aesthetic Value

From Plato through Aquinas to Kant and beyond beauty has traditionally been considered *the* paradigmatic aesthetic quality. Thus, quite naturally following Socrates' strategy in *The Meno*, we are tempted to generalize from our analysis of the nature and value of beauty, a particular aesthetic value, to an account of aesthetic value generally. When we look at that which is beautiful, the object gives rise to a certain kind of pleasure within us. Thus aesthetic value is characterized in terms of that which affords us pleasure. Of course, the relation cannot be merely instrumental. Many activities may lead to consequent pleasures that we would not consider to be aesthetic in any way. For example, playing tennis, going swimming or finishing a book. Rather it is in the very contemplation of the object itself that we derive pleasure. As Kant puts it:

> We dwell on the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself. The case is analogous (but analogous only) to the way we linger on a charm in the representation of an object which keeps arresting the attention, the mind all the while remaining passive.[1]

Thus contemporary philosophers have, following this tradition, defined aesthetic value in terms of our delighting in and savouring an object with pleasure.[2] An object is of intrinsic aesthetic value if it appropriately gives rise to pleasure in our contemplation of it. Of course background knowledge of particular art movements, categories or artistic intentions may be required to perceive an artwork appropriately. Nonetheless, given the relevant understanding, it is

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith, (Oxford University Press, 1951), Book I, Section 12, p. 64.

[2] See, for example, Kendall Walton, 'How Marvellous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 499–510, Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art*, (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 1–44, and Jerrold Levinson, 'Pleasure, Aesthetic' in David Cooper (ed.), *A Compatriot to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992), pp. 330–335.

in attending to and savouring what is presented to us that we are afforded pleasure.

Of course, we may delight in many things that are presented to us which are not beautiful, such as the comic and the tragic, which we still wish to characterize as aesthetic. We cannot, of course, say they are aesthetic by virtue of the pleasure deriving from their beauty. For often what is tragic or comic is far from beautiful at all. Hence if we are to grasp the essence of aesthetic value, we need a more general characterization. The standard move is to use the same form of explanation, where beauty was taken as the paradigmatic aesthetic quality, to derive a general account of aesthetic value. The classic account given by Beardsley locates aesthetic value, in qualities which vary from the beautiful to the comic or tragic, in the formal unity, complexity and intensity of an object's formal and cognitive features.[3] What unites all the various aesthetic qualities is the peculiar delight we take in the development of a theme, the elegance of the representation and so on. Thus, it is thought, we can use the characterization of aesthetic value to generate general principles of aesthetic evaluation. The core thought is that what we take delight in is itself delightful, in terms of unity, harmony, coherent structure and complex development.

II: Counter-Examples

However, this standard picture of aesthetic value seems far from adequate if we consider the following kinds of cases. Firstly, consider the case of punk. I take it that the whole point of punk, incorporating both music and fashion, was to achieve both maximal ugliness and incoherence. The point of putting studs or safety pins through noses, dying scruffy, unkempt hair in garish colours, dressing up in black bin bags, tartan zipped trousers and slashed T-shirts was precisely to achieve an incoherent, ugly look. This was, in part, in contra-distinction to the highly stylized, slick and formal emphasis on elegance that was taken to be predominant at the time. Similarly the use of discordance, guitar feedback and yelling stood in stark contrast to the overblown, overproduced formalities of concept rock and the smooth, polished rhythms and harmonies of disco. If one searches for the qualities of coherence or complexity in punk music one is not only likely to be disappointed but be in for

[3] Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), Section 24, pp. 456–470, and Monroe Beardsley, 'On The Generality of Critical Reasons', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LIX, No. 18, 1962, pp. 477–486.

a very painful and unpleasant experience. Which is why many people find it unintelligible that anyone should like punk at all. But if someone looks for and savours the sheer brute ugliness and incoherence of it all, then they will derive pleasure from it. An analogous example in the case of classical music is the work of composers like Stockhausen and John Cage. The point of their music lies in contra-distinction to the setting up and development of themes and harmonies that typified classical music heretofore.

It is also important to note that the positive evaluation of qualities such as ugliness and incoherence are not confined to the sphere of music or the transitory zeitgeist of fashion. In visual art there is a long tradition of the rendering of grotesques, both real and imaginary; one only has to think of late Michelangelo, the late Renaissance generally, Francis Bacon or Andreas Serrano. It seems that we do derive a peculiar delight from the portrayal of distorted physiognomies or the rendering of grotesques. Indeed, many artworks not only involve distinctly repulsive emotions, thoughts and depictions but use repellant materials as well. So even though an artwork may be constituted from repugnant materials, depict perverse scenes or people, we may be afforded pleasure by attending to them rather than being repelled by them. One reason for this might be that alluded to by John Constable:

> There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may,—light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful.[4]

Subject matter we would ordinarily find disgusting might afford pleasure if it is artistically manipulated in a certain way and we are constrained to regard it in a certain light. The peculiar orange medium bathing the crucifix in Andreas Serrano's *Piss Christ* constitutes a peculiarly pleasing, luminous light if looked at independently of the material's associations. Thus the contribution of materials we would normally consider repugnant, such as various bodily fluids, may constitute valuable features of an artwork.

But it is crucial to recognize that the appeal of such works lies not merely in the way the subjects are rendered but in the very grotesquery of the image itself. The high degree of unpleasantness involved often seems central to some artworks. We miss the entire point of Serrano's *Piss Christ* if we fail to realize what the medium is. The very fact that the urine the crucifix is bathed in is highlighted in the work's title ought to indicate its central relevance to the work. If we just looked at the luminous, aesthetically appealing

[4] John Constable as quoted in C. R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the life of John Constable* (1873), Chapter 17.

liquid bathing the crucifix without knowledge of its constituent material, we would have missed the point of the work. For the work's point lies in the juxtaposition of the meaning and associations of the medium used and the crucifix suspended in it.

Consider, in a similar vein, the 1928 Buñuel and Dali film *Un Chien Andalou* where several different parts are played by the same actor and actress, where the landscape outside the window changes arbitrarily from landscape one minute to cityscape the next and where the juxtaposition of surreal images and stark edits all contribute to the film's maximal incoherence. The very point of the film is its lack of coherence, its opaqueness to attempts to analyse and make sense of it, whilst textured images such as the grotesque slitting of a donkey's eyeball continue to haunt the mind.

The point of these examples is that we, or at least some of us, seem to value in art images or music which are assumed to fall outside the sphere of aesthetic value because they are ugly, grotesque or incoherent and that is their very point. True, aesthetic theorists such as Beardsley may deny such works have any aesthetic value at all. But then this severely weakens the force of their claim to have captured the notion of aesthetic value, since many people clearly do value such qualities in artworks and, moreover, they are valued as such in many acclaimed masterpieces. Thus, we might be tempted to conclude, the typical picture of aesthetic value must be inadequate.

III: Cognitive Value

One possible reply to such an objection is to claim that the examples cited are not really counter examples at all. For we must be careful to separate out cognitive value from aesthetic value. It seems clear that in art we value many different qualities, from the expressive to the cognitive, and not merely the aesthetic. It is crucial that we recognize that artistic and aesthetic value are not co-extensive. A game of football or chess may have great aesthetic value, due to the sheer artistry and elegance of the players, yet we would hesitate to call such things artworks. Conversely, most conceptual art, Dada artworks or the music of John Cage and Stockhausen may almost entirely lack aesthetic value and yet clearly be considered artworks due to their expressive nature or cognitive content. In these cases even if the work does possess aesthetic value, this seems almost entirely incidental to the reasons we attend to and value them as artworks.

Thus, it may be claimed, what we value in the counter-examples

cited are not any putative aesthetic qualities but rather the cognitive attitudes represented or explored through them. For example, punk took off not merely as a reaction against the slick, stylized, heavily produced music of the time but as, in essence, an anti-establishment cult which aimed to tear down the supposed walls of snobbery, materialism and bourgeois aspirations. This is why, it might be said, many people do not and cannot enjoy punk music. For only if one takes punk as expressive of a certain attitude, and identifies with that attitude, will one derive any satisfaction from listening to, seeing or being a punk. Just as in the fifties there was an angry young man syndrome underlying popular culture so too one might consider punk in the same light. For both in terms of fashion and music punk saw itself as standing against the values and aesthetics of traditional British society.

Indeed, the phrase anti-aesthetic used of such movements may be a telling one. For it seems plausible to hold that what is valued about punk is the underlying attitude rather than any intrinsic aesthetic merits possessed by the music. Similarly it might be said that the grotesqueries of late Michelangelo are valued because they express a disenchantment with the religious order of the world after the fall and sacking of Rome. Moreover grotesque, ugly and incoherent artworks may be valued by virtue of the way they enable us to explore our cognitive attitudes, beliefs and desires. So, in the case of a Francis Bacon, though horrifically ugly and repulsive, the work may have great appeal and artistic value because it enables us to confront and explore what it would be like if humanity were rotten, diseased, corrupted and distorted. Through engaging with such artworks we may learn and develop our cognitive understanding of what certain human possibilities would or could be like.[5]

Our pleasure in such cases may arise from the provocation of certain attitudes or our cognitive curiosity. Artworks or movements devoted to the grotesque or incoherent are concerned to provoke certain attitudes or explore our fascination with certain anomalies which violate our standard social and moral categories. Francis Bacon's creations violate the natural order, the way humanity appears to be, and for this very reason compels our curiosity, interest and thus attention. Yet, at the same time and for the same reasons, we find them aesthetically disgusting and repugnant. The abrogation of society's standard categories may be where both the fascination and aesthetic repugnance of such works lies. Therefore, though they lack aesthetic value, such works may be of great artistic value.

[5] Noel Carroll makes a similar point about the value of horror films in his *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp 158–195.

So cognitive value may explain why we attend to intrinsically unpleasant things in art and value them as such. Furthermore, in engaging with artworks, we can afford to explore repulsive, grotesque and incoherent apparations and situations in a way we could not in the real world. For we cannot be threatened by an imaginary state of affairs in the way we could be if what we were imagining was actually happening. Hence we may enjoy contemplating the ugly or incoherent in art, a matter which might not so readily give rise to pleasure if the situation represented were part of our everyday world and constituted an actual threat to ourselves. After all, the threat of chaos and incoherence in our lives hardly gives rise to pleasurable delight. By contrast, in art we can experience what sheer chaos, ugliness and brutality might be like, and perhaps what it would be appropriate to think and feel, without the potentially terrible cost which would follow in the real world. Therefore we can consider, provoke and satiate our curiosity about the grotesque, the ugly and the incoherent in art in ways we could or would not do in our everyday life. Perhaps then, by divorcing aesthetic from artistic value, such an account can completely explain why we value such artworks.

Even as a psychological matter, it is often difficult for us to explore our curiosity about creatures, possibilities and events which challenge the way we categorize the world. This may be due to social taboos or real emotional and physical threats. However, in art these constraints fall away and we can provoke, extend and indulge our curiosity. So the cognitivist can claim to resolve the challenge to the traditional picture of aesthetic value. For he rejects the notion that we aesthetically value the disgusting, ugly or incoherent, whilst nonetheless recognizing their cognitive virtues in works of art. The unpleasant appearances, thoughts and feelings are conceived of as unfortunate by-products of the cognitive pay-off. If we are to explore the ideas, concepts and categorial violations which give rise to the value distinctive of such artworks, the unpleasant by-products are unfortunate but necessary. Thus our interest in the ugly, incoherent or obscene lies in the curious violation of our social norms and conceptual framework. The fact that they are aesthetically unpleasant and repel us is the price we must pay.

Consider, in this light, the appeal of the Dada art movement. The use of and delight in radical artistic practices used to subvert attempts to impose sense upon art, literature and the world was associated with a radical political standpoint. The reaction against figuration and artistic attempts to render the human world intelligible suggests that Dada saw itself in direct opposition not merely to the artistic but, more generally, to the broader political and social

status quo. Perhaps without the use of these radical techniques which fractured the audience's ability to make sense of what was going on, Dada would not have been able to question or stand against the way society was conceived to be. Thus it is not that ugliness and incoherence are themselves intrinsically valuable in aesthetic terms, but rather that under certain circumstances they can be used to make us confront and explore certain possibilities about our own society, possibilities we would not otherwise think about:

> The word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colours and spiritual rhythms, which is taken unmodified into Dadaist art, with all the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality. This is the sharp dividing line separating Dadaism from all artistic directions up until now ... Dadaism for the first time has ceased to take an aesthetic attitude toward life, and this it accomplishes by tearing all the slogans of ethics, culture and inwardness, which are merely cloaks for weak muscles, into their components.[6]

Indeed the whole point of foregrounding the construction of the artwork, in Dada, Brechtian theatre or new wave French cinema, is to make us stop and think about the ways in which we can be lead into thinking certain institutions, social practices and structures are 'natural' and therefore cannot be changed. Thus the usually negative value of incoherence can have a positive value when it is artistically used to get us to see things in a new light. One key means of doing so in twentieth century art clearly involves the fracturing of our experience of the work, thereby foregrounding the very ways in which we attempt to impose sense upon our world.

IV: The Appeal of the Grotesque

Yet though the cognitivist's explanation is partially adequate it cannot prove wholly so. For what is left out of the cognitivist account is the actual delight we feel in attending to repellent, ugly and incoherent artworks. It obviously makes sense to claim of a Dada piece that it is just not incoherent enough, of a Stockhausen performance that it was just too harmonious or to say of a punk that he is just not as grotesque as he should be; and in all these cases we are disap-

[6] Richard Hülsenbeck, 'First German Dada Manifesto ("Collective Dada Manifesto)"', pp. 254–255, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900–1990* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1992).

pointed. The cognitivist equates these claims to the demand that they should explore more fully the relevant categorial violations. But the assimilation is a false one.

Imagine *Piss Christ* had the same title but did not in fact use urine as its medium. Since we can treat the work *as if* constituted by urine this would hardly lessen the work's exploration of the divine as a being both of our human world and yet violating our standard categories. Yet, for some at least, this would significantly diminish the force and appeal of the work itself. On the cognitivist account, *Piss Christ* would be a better artwork with a different medium. Yet this is the exact opposite of what is the case. If the original medium was replaced then many would deem it to be of lesser value as art. This is precisely because we enjoy and value the uncomfortable oscillation between the beauty of the image and the repulsive material it is actually constituted out of, independently of whether it extends our curiosity about the image violating our standard conceptualization of the world.

Secondly, the cognitivist's account works far better for our appreciation of Francis Bacon or Andreas Serrano than it does for ugly, brutal, chaotic images of war or grief. Whether a depiction of war or grief is valued as art does not seem to depend upon its violation of our categorial schemes at all. For example, the work of Goya, ugly, brutal tribal sculptures of various war gods, Picasso's *Guernica* or *Weeping Woman* seem, if anything, to confirm and extend, rather than abrogate, our understanding of violence, war or grief respectively. Thus Picasso states:

> If someone wished to express war it might be more elegant and literary to make a bow and arrow because that is more esthetic, but for me, if I want to express war, I'll use a machine-gun![7]

The value of *Guernica* or *Weeping Woman* lies not in their confronting us with searing, repellent violations of our standard concepts. Rather, their value lies centrally in their exploration of the vicious nature of grief and war respectively; which we can all recognize and whose sheer raw power we should find discomforting, animalistic and repugnant. Moreover, the pleasure we feel does not just derive from the fact that the ugly, grotesque subject of the work is not a threat or open to our apprehension in everyday life. For in everyday life we sometimes do come across those unfortunate enough to be deformed, horrific conflicts or vicious forms of grief upon which, rather unfortunately, people are inclined to dwell. No

[7] Picasso as quoted in a conversation on *Guernica* recorded by Jermoe Seckler in 1945 excerpted in Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 488.

doubt we are all familiar with the fact that pedestrians and traffic habitually slow down to take a good look at some unfortunate accident victim. The cognitivist account fails not only to recognize that we may enjoy and savour the fundamentally repugnant, ugly and incoherent in art but, just as significantly, that some do so in their everyday lives.

The cognitivist response fails to hit the target. Even though part of the reason grotesquery, ugliness and incoherence are valued in art concerns their relation to our categorial schemes, this cannot be the whole story. For many people just do delight in the presentation of the grotesque, ugly or incoherent features themselves. Hence the appeal of the *Grotesque Old Woman*, after Quentin Massys, c. 1520, to be found in the National Gallery, London, or Christian Schad's depiction of *Agosta the Pigeon-chested Man and Rasha the Black Dove*, displayed in the Royal Academy's German Art in the Twentieth Century exhibition. If a beautiful, coherent, non-grotesque and elegant subject and artistic means could be found to express the same attitudes a work would not necessarily be better, as it would have to be according to the cognitivist. If *Un Chien Andalou* expressed the same point, the possible incoherence of the world, but was edited in such a way that it did so coherently and devoid of horrific images, we would have lost rather than improved the work's value

Of course, perhaps a certain attitude or disposition is required to delight in such features. One might even think that those who are petrified by the possible meaninglessness of the world will be unable, psychologically speaking, to cope with attending to works and features which manifest this possibility or delight in it. But the fundamental point is that we do not value ugliness, grotesquery or incoherence in the examples cited merely because they are taken to represent an attitude. For those who value them, the works and their typically repellent features are delighted in and savoured. Thus we can make sense of the complaint, made of a portrait of a grotesque, Dada piece or a punk rock track, that it is just not ugly, repugnant or incoherent enough.

V: Relational Value

A different response would be to claim that although we do delight in the sound or look of features such as ugliness or incoherence it is only by virtue of their relation to other features of a work or other artistic movements. Consider the following quotation from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*:

> O! what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
> In the contempt and anger of his lip.[8]

Part of the point of Shakespeare's lines is precisely that the normally distorted and horrific features of scorn and contempt themselves become beautiful and pleasurable to dwell upon when manifested in the features of one who is both beautiful and beloved. Thus what is normally repellent and harsh to look upon may, given a certain context and relation to other features, become beautiful and pleasing. So, following Sibley, it may be claimed that the aesthetic value of features such as ugliness and incoherence may be, properly speaking, relational and wholly context dependent rather than being, as is the case with beauty, of autonomous aesthetic value.[9] Take away the relation and we would not savour these features at all. For example, the deliberate incoherence and ugliness of punk rock or Stockhausen were valued in contrast to what had gone before. Namely, a highly polished structural coherence and development of themes and harmonies which seemed too slick and empty. Thus, in contrast to the formal elegance and beauty of prior music forms, punk and Stockhausen were enjoyed precisely because they were not polished, slick or finished but grating, raw and apparently uncontrolled.

It is a general feature of our understanding of art that it is necessarily comparative.[10] Our understanding of the nature and point of an artwork depends not just on attending to a work in isolation but, necessarily, to its place in an artist's *oeuvre* as a whole, the relation of the artist to a particular movement and the relation between the movement to which he belongs and the movements he conceives himself to be reacting to; whether it be in terms of repeating, extending or repudiating particular artistic traditions. A work's artistic value is intelligible if and only if we grasp its various relations to the works and movements that preceded it.

Consider once more the Dada art movement. Only in the light of a classical art tradition and attempts to capture the essential, unchanging, eternal values of art which reasserted itself after the catastrophe of World War I, with which the avant garde's glorification of war and machine aestheticism had been associated, can we make sense of the assault attempted by Dada on the cultural practice of art. Only given the predominant classical conception of art

[8] Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (1601), Act 3, Section 1, l. 159.

[9] Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 68, 1959, pp. 421–450.

[10] See David Hume's essay. 'Of the Standard of Taste' in his *Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1993), S. Copley and A. Edgar (eds), pp. 133–154.

can we make sense of Marcel Duchamp's readymades as a jokey attempt to refute the presumption that good art must manifest an essential property or transcendent value. Only in the light of a reasoned, traditional conception of art do the essentially irrationalist and deconstructive techniques of Dada make any sense. For if the classical tradition had not existed prior to Dada then far from constituting an art movement what was produced would, in the most literal sense, have been nonsense. Similarly, only in the light of a great classical tradition stretching from Monteverdi through Mozart and Beethoven to Elgar, does the music of John Cage or Stockhausen make any sense. For such movements are essentially negative in a deep sense; they are essentially repudiations of the artistic traditions that had evolved and developed previously over many ages. Take away the tradition that is being repudiated and such music or art makes no sense.

On this story, then, features such as ugliness and incoherence may possess intrinsic aesthetic value but, unlike beauty, this value is only parasitic. Their value is wholly supervenient on their relations to and the negative evaluation of other works and artistic traditions. Take away the prior works and traditions and the relation to what is being repudiated disappears and, consequently, what merits the works have would vanish. Hence, one might suggest, punk music died a predictable death once popular music became vital once more instead of slickly pursuing empty disco formulas. Moreover, for those who continue to delight in the classical tradition, the appeal of Cage and Stockhausen remains deeply puzzling and unintelligible. The point is that features such as ugliness and incoherence may have an intrinsic aesthetic value only in certain contexts; where such features are used to react negatively against other artistic traditions. But beauty and coherence, by contrast, have an independent aesthetic value which is not reducible to particular contexts and relations, though what makes something beautiful may well be context dependent.

VI: Freakish Delights

Nonetheless, although an appreciation of artistic traditions is required to understand how certain works or artistic movements came about, and thus grasp a large part of their value, it cannot be the whole truth. For in the case of Stockhausen, *Un Chien Andalou* and the portrayal of grotesques, we do consider the ugly and incoherent features of the work to possess a certain positive aesthetic worth, independently of their relation to and our negative evalua-

tion of other works or artistic movements. Hence, for example, we might like both soul music, Elgar or Hollywood films and the kind of works typified by punk, Stockhausen's music or *Un Chien Andalou*.

Of course, part of the value of the ugliness and incoherence manifest in representational works which bear these features lies in their artistic rendering and the oscillation between the work and what it depicts. Moreover, part of the enjoyment of these features arises from a contrast between the way the artistic object is and the way it could have been. For example, *Un Chien Andalou* works precisely because it sets up all sorts of expectations and then proceeds to frustrate them at every conceivable turn. The characters change, just as a narrative line suggests itself it is cut off, the images clash and so on. Similarly, part of the attraction of grotesques lies in the very disjunction between what, had they been normal they would have been like, and the distorted, corrupted, freakish physiognomies we see before us. We look at what is presented to us and value it at the meta-level for its frustration of our expectations and the oscillation between what we see or hear and what we would normally expect such works or people to be like.[11]

Yet the attraction cannot entirely rest at the meta-level. For we may just delight in and savour what is ugly and incoherent, which ties in with a certain kind of human fascination for the freakish or horrific. Indeed, consider Leontion's story as recounted by Plato in *The Republic*:

> he noticed some corpses lying on the ground with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, and yet at the same time held himself back in disgust. For a time he struggled and covered his eyes, but at last his desire got the better of him and he ran up to the corpses, opening his eyes and saying to them, 'There you are, curse you,—*a lovely sight*! Have a real good look.'[12]

The point is that Leontion's delighting in the corpses, analogous to punk's delight in complete ugliness or incoherence in both style and music, suggest that it is the grotesque features which are themselves delighted in. Of course, one might hold that it is a purely contingent matter as to whether people actually savour intrinsically

[11] This kind of line is suggested by Jerrold Levinson, 'Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1992, p. 300.

[12] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D. Lee, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 2nd edn, Book IV, pp. 215–216, 1. 439e–1.440a. The italics are my own, to emphasize that Leontion *delights* in the sight of the corpses.

unpleasant features such as ugliness.[13] The thought is that it is not the intrinsically unpleasant features and our subsequently unpleasant response that are delighted in but, rather, only the features of the object which give rise to an unpleasant, unsavoured response.

Recognizing that delighting in the grotesque, ugly and incoherent may be aesthetically rewarding does not entail that what is ugly, grotesque or incoherent is a contingent matter. For there are certain ideal human standards by virtue of which it is appropriate to derive pleasure from certain things and be repelled by others.[14] Certain tastes or sensations are pleasurable under certain standard and normative human conditions. In normal cases where someone fails, say, to delight in quenching their thirst or in being reunited with a friend we look for an explanation. If the failure to derive pleasure from such cases is beyond the standard limits of taste or desire variation, then it must be explained in terms of the subject's divergence from our norms of desire. However, in secondary cases, where we can inhibit or modify the standard conditions through interference or convention, then sensations which are typically unpleasant may become pleasant and vice versa. Thus, a delight in our reponses to ugliness, incoherence and the grotesque may constitutively include negative or positive evaluative thoughts and are individuated according to their formal object.

Ugliness, incoherence and grotesquery which give rise to a response of disgust may intrinsically afford great pleasure, though we might evaluate them as undesireable.[15] For we may delight in what we (ought to) desire not to desire.[16] The attractions of activities such as sado-masochism are not reducible to the controlled ritualistic role play which enables people to engage in and enjoy activities that, outside such a controlled artificial context, would both be highly dangerous and socially threatening. The fact is that such activities are pursued because they focus upon and afford a pleasurable delight, which is savoured, in the infliction of pain and brutality. But such a delight is intrinsically perverse since our evaluation

[13] See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 257, and Alex Neill, 'On a Paradox of the Heart', *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 65, 1992, pp. 53–65.

[14] See Alasdair MacIntyre's 'Pleasure as a Reason for Action' in his *Against the Self Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971), pp. 173–190.

[15] See Berys Gaut, 'The Paradox of Horror', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1993, pp. 339–344, makes this point in relation to our enjoyment of fearful and horrific fictions.

[16] See David Lewis, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Aristotelian Society Suppl. Vol.*, Vol. LXIII, 1989, pp. 113–137.

of such a delight resulting from a perverse desire ought to be negative: we ought to be ashamed of desiring and delighting in the painful, the brutal and the downright dangerous. Indeed, if someone were not only to take delight in such activities but evaluate them positively, then we would take this as a mark of a perverse character.

As I have argued ugly, incoherent and grotesque artworks can and sometimes do afford us aesthetic pleasure. Hence from Bacon's brutal vision of the human condition through Picasso's searing depiction of grief to Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Stockhausen or punk rock we can appreciate why many people appropriately consider them to possess aesthetic value. Typically unpleasant features, characters or states of affairs may be of aesthetic value and cannot be wholly explained away as unfortunate by-products of something else we derive pleasure from. Rather they may afford pleasure, at least to those with an aesthetic sensibility directed toward the chaotic, ugly and incoherent, in attending to them. So the standard account of *aesthetic* value holds good but only if we are careful to distinguish, as too many people often fail to do, between aesthetic and artistic value.

Hence it makes sense to complain that a punk's outfit is not incoherent enough, that the grotesque depicted in a portrait is not ugly enough or that *Un Chien Andalou* could have been more fractured. Moreover, we do not delight in these appearances merely because they confirm our responses as appropriate. Leontion does not thrill to the sight of the corpses merely because it confirms to him that he is the kind of person who is afraid of death. For Leontion's pleasure is not dependent upon him refraining from looking at the corpses but rather precisely in his dwelling upon them. The very sight of the distorted, dehumanized corpses is an essential part of the delight he takes in his enjoyment of looking upon them. Such unpleasant sights themselves can actually afford us a peculiar kind of aesthetic pleasure.

Of course we may need to have a certain attitude or disposition in order to take delight in the ugly, grotesque or incoherent. I think this is certainly true of much post-modern and nihilistic art, which places primary aesthetic value on the chaotic, incoherent and grotesque, certainly above and beyond formal elegance, grace and unity. Hence the aesthetic value here is perhaps best captured in terms of Kant's dependent beauty. But in so far as Kant's contrast between free and dependent beauty is meaningful, not all the delight we take in ugliness and incoherence is dependent.[17]

[17] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith, (Oxford University Press, 1951), Book 1, Section 16, pp. 72–74.

Sometimes, we just do delight in the appearance of ugliness. For example, in Yorkshire there is a great tradition of gurning. Gurning essentially involves competing to see who can pull the most distorted and ugly faces possible. Similarly, the pull of freak shows would be unintelligible if we did not derive pleasure from gazing on the ugly, grotesque and deformed. Thus, atypically at least, we do derive pleasure from and delight in the grotesque, freakish or chaotic.

What I have tried to show is that far from constituting counter examples to the traditional understanding of aesthetic value, if worked out carefully, ugliness and incoherence, contrary to first appearances, conform to it. What this points up, pace Beardsley et al, is the danger of deriving overall aesthetic principles of evaluation from the paradigmatic case of beauty. What we delight in, aesthetically speaking, may be far from delightful.

VII: Ethical Afterthoughts

It is important to point out that a perverse fascination for and delight in the freakish is, in a significant sense, perverse. Of course, it might be pointed out that art which confronts and pushes back the boundaries of our ethical and social taboos may be valuable in challenging various prejudices. Thus confronting the viewer with the ugly, the grotesque or incoherent may usefully challenge our comfortable assumptions about normality, beauty and the ways in which we make sense of our world.

But it is far from clear that pushing back the boundaries of our ethical and social presumptions, at least for its own sake, is a good thing at all. For the corrosion of our natural human bonds may liberate us, but liberation from the self-discipline of moral and social restraints upon the violent, ugly and brutish aspects of our animal natures is clearly a bad thing. What marks out human civilization, as distinct from animal behaviour, is precisely our self-conscious suppression and sublimation of our animal natures toward what is, humanly speaking, rational. Artworks which cultivate the delight in our baser non-rational appetites are thus humanly impoverishing and bad as art.[18]

Indeed, it is interesting to note that the preoccupation with incoherence, violence and perverse pleasures in art tends to occur after

[18] See Matthew Kieran, 'The Impoverishment of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1995, pp. 15–25, and 'Art, Imagination and the Cultivation of Morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Fall 1996.

the apparent perfection of a form of a certain kind. For example, Jacobean drama's preoccupations are partly a result of the perfection reached by Shakespearean tragedy; so there is nowhere left to go but down toward pandering to our more perverse pleasures.[19] The slide toward decadence is deeply interesting. But although aesthetically valuing such things may well be the mark of a juvenile or morally bad character, this is a separate matter from the question of pure aesthetic value.

Artistic value is broader than mere aesthetic value. When people object to something as obscene they are often not disputing that the work concerned has, or can be seen by some to have, aesthetic value. Rather what underlies the condemnation is the thought that though aesthetically attractive in a certain light, what is represented and how it is conveyed is morally repugnant. A morally or religiously obscene image is not denounced merely by virtue of the subject matter, but because the focus of interest is merely the particularities of the ugly, repulsive medium used, for instance the urine in Andreas Serrano's *Piss Christ*, or the tedious, unimaginative concentration upon the perennial repetition of images of violence and death, as in Damien Hirst, or images of sexual congress, as in the work of Jeff Koons, without any distinctively artistic achievement. It is interesting to consider in this light John Ruskin's thoughts on the late Renaissance in *The Stones of Venice*. Ruskin recognized that the art of the period was devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, which we would characterize as aesthetic, but did so only given a debased delight in brutal mockery, monstrosity and deformity at the expense of insight into or the transcendence of our human condition. Hence when describing a sculpture at the base of the tower dedicated to St. Mary the Beautiful Ruskin comments thus:

> A head,—huge, inhuman, and monstrous,—leering in bestial degradation, too foul to be either pictured or described ... in that head is embodied the type of evil spirit to which Venice was abandoned in the fourth period of her decline.[20]

Ruskin is not disputing that, seen under a certain light, the sculpture may be aesthetically rewarding. Rather he is objecting to such things as 'evidences of a delight in the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm, which is, I believe, the most hopeless state into which the human mind can fall.'[21] The point is that we can give a story about the aesthetic appeal of such images,

[19] This example was suggested to me by Roger White.

[20] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1874), Vol. III, Chapter III, Section XV, p. 121.

[21] Ibid., Section XVI, p. 121.

yet the kind of interest rewarded by this form of aesthetic attention is a perversion of art proper. Perhaps, as Robert Hughes has suggested, a large part of the story may be told in terms of the degeneration of modern art coupled with an obsession with the external vagaries of fashion and the commercial marketplace.[22] What this does suggest is the extent to which, though producing aesthetically appealing works, such artists and much contemporary art has failed our culture. But this leads us into Plato's worry about the arts and that is a question that can only be addressed elsewhere.[23]

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[22] Robert Hughes, 'The Decline of the City of Mahagonny' in his *Nothing If Not Critical* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), pp. 3–28.

[23] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. W. K. C. Guthric, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), Book X, pp. 421–439.

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