

COLLISION

The Aesthetic Force of the
Unpleasant

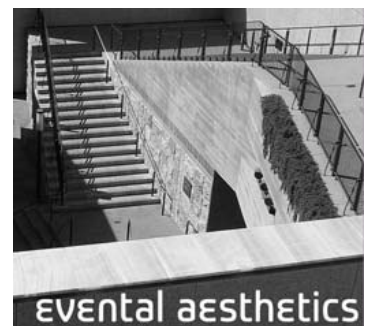
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ABSTRACT

Of the three forms of reflective judgment analyzed in Kant's third Critique, the pleasant has received the least attention because it is seen in part as purely subjective, in part as a mere foil for his theory of judgments of beauty. This paper makes a case for the philosophical consideration of this kind of judgment by focusing on its converse: the unpleasant is a form of aesthetic response that is initially negative but has great motivating power. More modest and common than judgments of the purely beautiful or ugly and more rational than our visceral responses to the disgusting, the unpleasant can capture the aesthetic tenor of our daily lives and concerns.

KEYWORDS

Kant
Aesthetic judgment
The unpleasant
The ugly
The disgusting



When I bought my current home, I announced that I simply could not live in it until the rooms had been painted. They were what one might euphemistically describe as somewhere between apricot and salmon, but to my mind they were really what in my childhood was called “fleshtone” by Crayola Crayons. Further, the walls had a slight sheen to them, making them *sweaty* fleshtone Crayola Crayon or maybe *feverish* fleshtone Crayola Crayon. Never mind the structural work required on an old wooden house exposed to Canadian prairie winters — like a new roof perhaps — it was the paint that had to go. Immediately.

Now, it should be clear that I found the walls ghastly, even dreadful. And I hope it is equally apparent that my response to them was aesthetic — albeit negatively so. But what is particularly interesting is that my aesthetic judgment was also a spur to action. I did not simply dislike or reject the walls (I did buy the house, after all); instead I strove to change them. And this kind of response — that is negative but creatively motivating — holds some aesthetic promise. As a reader of Kant, my impulse has been to call this a judgment of the unpleasant: I would like to suggest that it is an aesthetic category worthy of consideration. Of course there is a body of literature — extending back as far as Aristotle’s writing on catharsis — that deals with negative emotions in our aesthetic responses. But such *reactions*, as they are described, do not for the most part involve a direct call to creative or transformative *action*. What I seek to capture here is this peculiarly motivational force of negative emotions — as we will see.

When philosophy talks about aesthetic experience, it is most often in terms of our *responses* to art and other kinds of beauty and is largely concerned with pleasurable and positive responses as in Kant’s analysis of judgments of the beautiful. But I think that the aesthetic tenor of our lives is in fact more complex — and as such more philosophically engaging. One of the goals of the recent movement in Everyday Aesthetics has been the inclusion of *action* — not simply observation and reaction — in the scope of aesthetic experience. Yuriko Saito, for instance, considers aesthetic responses that “do not presuppose or lead to such spectator-like experiences but rather prompt us towards actions” such as cleaning, purchasing, and repairing things like dilapidated buildings, rusty cars, and dirty linens.¹ My effort to articulate the centrality of the aesthetic in our quotidian activities also drives my own interest in those moments when its force is at least initially negative. In my case, those fleshtoned walls presented an obstacle to my aesthetic enjoyment of daily life. And in seeking to change the walls, I had to

creatively reimagine the space in which I would dwell with all of its possibilities and decide what was needed instead of that color so that the space could provide me with positive rather than negative experiences. In short, I had to be aesthetically creative and active rather than merely responsive. As a philosophical concept, the unpleasant can capture this. But let me first distinguish it from two other negative aesthetic ideas.

The unpleasant is not the ugly. A sick person can look ghastly without also looking ugly.² A certain shirt can look dreadful on you without thereby being an ugly shirt. And apricot, while perhaps awful on a living-room wall, is not itself an ugly color (at least when found on an apricot). We tend to use terms like “dreadful” and “ghastly” as though they were synonymous with ugliness, but there is an important conceptual difference between them. The purely ugly — or what is judged to be ugly *tout court* if one takes a Kantian approach to the matter — will have certain characteristics that the unpleasant does not have: the judgment of ugliness will be disinterested, subjectively universal, and involve the free play of the cognitive faculties. That is, judgments of the ugly will have the same logical structure as judgments of free beauty, acting as a negative mirror of them. And like Kantian beauty, ugliness will invite us to *linger*. The ugly does not provoke desire or aversion — again, judgments of the ugly are disinterested — but ugliness can fascinate us.³ Judgments of the ugly (and warty toads get a lot of press here) are made by us as mere spectators, and like judgments of the beautiful, judgments of the ugly involve no direct call to action. Saying “this toad is ugly” or “this Francis Bacon is ugly” does not imply any revulsion or desire to turn away from what we are viewing — it can indeed draw us in.⁴

The unpleasant is also not the disgusting. The disgusting, Kant writes, destroys all “aesthetical satisfaction”; when we encounter the disgusting, we “strive against it with all our might.”⁵ Disgust is visceral; it does not just repel us but physically revolts us as with rotten food or a decaying corpse.⁶ We reject the object before aesthetic judgment can even occur.⁷ What disgusts us is immediate and quite personal, but it need not be ugly: snakes, entrails, and placentas display what many would find to be beautiful colors or shapes in other contexts. But if and when we are disgusted by these things, our capacity for disinterested reflection is destroyed through their forceful imposition on our (visual, olfactory) senses: we often react with *nausea*. Faced with the disgusting, we are either simply repelled or at best attempt to eradicate the offending object as when one finds maggots in the garbage or cockroaches on the stove. But the disgusting is not an aesthetic response, and from it we are never *inspired*.

The unpleasant stands between the ugly and the disgusting — neither inviting us to linger nor driving us away — as an aesthetic response that is uniquely

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motivating. It bears a similar structure to Kant's account of the pleasant. The unpleasant is a feeling of displeasure — as the pleasant a feeling of pleasure — that is grounded in direct physical sensations rather than in the complex workings (or free play) of our cognitive faculties at some degree of distance. Even so, the story of the unpleasant is not a strictly causal one as it also involves an aesthetic judgment. We have a sensation and feel displeasure from it. Experiences of the ugly also bring about feelings of displeasure. The difference between the ugly and the unpleasant lies in the “relations of representations to the feeling of pleasure and pain” and not in the feelings themselves.⁸ That is, the displeasure which arises from the unpleasant stems from a judgment that is interested and provokes desire whereas the displeasure of the ugly is disinterested and desire-free.

Kant's examples of the pleasant are primarily gustatory, which may be why judgments of the pleasant have been seen as wholly subjective. But he also states that this kind of aesthetic judgment regards not only “the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat, but ... whatever is pleasant to anyone's eyes and ears” — that is, to the full range of our sensations, including those that have long been considered the sole domain of beauty.⁹ Still, a gustatory example may help us on our way. Black licorice, I must confess, has an extremely unpleasant taste: it gives me immediate displeasure (yuck!), and my judgment about it is negative. This judgment leads to desire: I judge licorice to be unpleasant, and when I represent it as being what has displeased me, my desire is provoked; in this case a desire to avoid not just licorice but all similar things: ouzo, Sambuca, fennel, aniseed, and so on. This is not a purely automatic response; it involves both a judgment and a mental representation. In other words, my response is not visceral but rational and results in willed actions (evasive in this case) that are “directed and described by concepts”: my *knowing* what things have that yuck-factor directs my *deciding* to avoid them and their relatives.¹⁰ Thus the unpleasant begins with physical sensations but engages our higher faculties: judgment, conceptual thought, and the generation of rationally willed desires. With the disgusting we do none of these things but are merely repelled; and with the ugly we are disinterested and our judgments produce no desires at all — which is why we can linger over that hideous toad.

Judgments of the unpleasant are indeed subjective rather than universal. As we learn from Kant's famous canary wine example, when I say licorice is unpleasant, I really ought to say it is unpleasant *to me* as I relate the sensation to my own feeling of displeasure. This “taste of sense,” as Kant calls it, “lays down mere private judgments” which are empirical.¹¹ However, what is often overlooked is that, like many other empirical rules, these judgments can make claims to general validity. Kant notes that “actually there is often found a very extended concurrence in these judgments” as we can see from cultural preferences in gustatory tastes —

pigs' feet for some, goats' heads for others — and with historically changing trends in fashion and decorating: from bell bottoms to skinny jeans, shag carpeting to hardwood floors.¹² The unpleasant is more modest than the universalizing demands of ugliness and beauty but need not be completely personal: it can speak to at least relative, general trends.

The preceding gives us a basic account of the unpleasant. My desire to avoid licorice is a desire for less just as a judgment of the pleasant (as of chocolate) provokes a desire for more. But there is little creativity or inspiration associated with food aversions except of a very simple kind: if there were nothing to eat but licorice, I might be prompted to creatively mask its flavor as when children use ketchup to cover the foods they don't like. Yet this is hardly the positive aesthetic engagement I first proposed. A basic account of the unpleasant involves a largely negative outcome of a negative judgment: what I am after is a *positive* outcome, one that provides a more interesting aesthetic response. For this, let me return to the more complex example of the walls of my house. They brought about immediate displeasure but having bought the house, I could not merely avoid them. To live in the house was to encounter those walls on a daily basis. Nor could I eradicate them: a house needs walls after all. And to get rid of the fleshtone was not to get rid of color altogether: whatever I did, I would still have walls, and they would still have visual impact in my house.

The question that emerged was what I wanted instead of fleshtone, and here the creative space opens up. This “instead of” is open-ended and rife with possibility. To attend to my desire to be free of fleshtone, I had to consider what would please me, what I could replace it with. And this could be a great range of things: a different color of paint, rolled, sponged, or splashed on the walls; wallpaper; hung fabrics; wood paneling — even shag carpet, I suppose. But whatever it would be, I would have to engage imaginatively with the problem that the unpleasant posed to me and produce a positive solution to it.

How creative and engaged I was in response to the walls is also open-ended: I could have undertaken a study of color theory, taken courses in interior design, experimented, or simply hired a decorator. But even in the last instance, I would still have had to choose from suggestions posed to me. If I did not — if I simply said “do *something*” — I would have been no more engaged than I am with the avoidance of licorice. The unpleasant provides an *opportunity* for aesthetic action: it is not one that we are compelled to accept. But when we do accept it, when our initial negative judgments give rise to an imagining of what the “instead of” could be, we are, I think, more aesthetically engaged in our lives than we are when we simply survey the beauty or ugliness that we see around us. The

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unpleasant brings with it — in fact, initiates — creative action, and the unpleasant is perhaps the only form of aesthetic judgment to do so.

As a catalyst of aesthetic action, the unpleasant provides a particular problem that focuses our attention. In so doing, it gives rise to complex and nuanced aesthetic decisions. With the walls, just as mere avoidance was insufficient, so too was simply choosing another color that I liked better than fleshtone: some colors which I like — black for example — would not have improved the walls of the house at all. How to fix the fleshtone problem involved considerations of the style of the house, the size and shape of the rooms, the amount and direction of the light, the color of the hardwood, and so on. These forms of engagement are open-ended yet at the same time quite specific to the problem at hand. They involve choices, desires, and actions. They are constrained by the negativity of the original judgment but also by the physical, logical, economic, and even conceptual limitations of the problem. But they are free and open-ended in that within these parameters, our activities are guided by our imagination and creativity. Either that or we hire decorators.

In our daily lives and activities, experiences that summon what Kant calls “pure” judgments of beauty are just not that common (unless we are very fortunate). We are more often mucking about with what pleases and displeases us, what to preserve or have more of, and what to avoid, eradicate, or transform. We are concerned with and affected by questions of how and where to live, of gardens and homes and offices, cars, kitchens, and fashions — of making these spaces and things those that give rise to experiences of comfort and pleasure. This mucking about, I think, constitutes the larger part of our lives and activities and has an important aesthetic element. To make something better, good enough, or just right, as Saito has noted, begins with a judgment that it is somehow lacking and needs our attention and care.

If I have made the beginnings of a case for the unpleasant as an aesthetic category, does it not still remain private and purely personal? After all, the previous owners of my house clearly chose and favored fleshtone for their décor. Was all of my creative activity directed only at pleasing *myself*? If so, how much philosophical interest can the unpleasant have? I'd like to end with a suggestion that the unpleasant has a broader reach than the wholly subjective, that it can extend to others even if it cannot achieve the kind of universality that Kant hoped for with pure judgments of taste. Both Saito's and Kant's examples are in fact unhelpful for a more robust account of the unpleasant: hers, because judgments about dilapidation, dirt, and so on are what she calls “moral-aesthetic” judgments, which have an objective aspect that involves all of us; his because his examples of gustatory taste involve each of us alone.¹³

Let me return to the gustatory for a moment: instead of focusing on choosing or avoiding foods because of my own palate, where there is indeed no arguing about taste, let us imagine that I am cooking for others who have been invited to dine. Of course I want them to have a pleasant experience — I want to arouse their desire to return; therefore I want to please their palates too. That is, my creative activity in the kitchen concerns a community of others — even if it is not a universal one. Kant did note that the unpleasant and the pleasant can make claim to general validity and not mere personal satisfaction. There are historically and culturally specific gustatory norms that we follow when entertaining: the time at which we have dinner, the courses served and in what order, the utensils used, and so on. These norms are decidedly not universal, but neither are they merely personal idiosyncratic choices. Having “taste” here refers not merely to our own but to a taste and pleasure that is, however locally, shared.

Similarly, my own actions in countering the unpleasant can be seen in a wider context. Painting the walls of my house was not an act intended merely to bring me private pleasure but also to make my home a welcoming place for friends and family, a space of hospitality and enjoyment. It is not that I expect guests to share my taste in color or that I “impute” or “ascribe” the same judgments to others — as Kant claims that we do in judgments of beauty.¹⁴ But my striving, I wish to suggest, was also not wholly self-regarding, and the aesthetic force of the unpleasant lies in part in the way that it involves us in a community of others, however small or local that community may be. What we are aiming for in making something better or good enough or just right for ourselves is the hopeful possibility that that something will be better or good enough for others too. Even such a modest notion of the unpleasant can have this effect: it points to the power of the aesthetic in our lives. 

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Notes

1 Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 10, 51.

2 G. P. Henderson, "The Concept of Ugliness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 6 (1966): 219–229; 222.
Henderson uses the term "ugliness" throughout his paper but distinguishes between *kinds* of ugliness in a way that is similar to Kant's distinction between the ugly, the unpleasant, and the disgusting.

3 Christian Wenzel, "Kant Finds Nothing Ugly?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39, no. 4 (1999): 416–422; 418.
An anonymous reviewer of this article described this fascination as "it's horrid, but I can't stop watching," which well captures what I seek to describe here.

4 There has been a great deal of debate in recent years about whether ugliness can be made consistent with Kantian aesthetic theory. I will bypass this debate and note only that *if* there is such a thing as pure ugliness, it will have the features that I have described.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard, New York: Hafner, 1951, §48, Ak 312.

6 Henderson, 220.

7 Mojca Kuplen, "Disgust and Ugliness: A Kantian Perspective," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 9 (2011): 1–21; 12.

8 Kant, §5, Ak 209.

9 *Ibid.*, §5, Ak 212.

10 Rachel Zuckert, "A New Look at Kant's Theory of Pleasure," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 3 (2002): 239–252; 246.

11 Kant, §7, Ak. 212.

12 *Ibid.*, §7, Ak. 213.

13 Saito, 208.

14 Kant, §8, Ak 216.

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