

The reversed side of beauty: aesthetics of death in the visual expression of Treha Sektori

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Abstract

The relations between beauty and ugliness, as well as the thin line that separates these two phenomena as concepts, has been a matter of discussion for several decades, with the latter being always shifted to the border of academic interest. This paper will focus on the potential reasons behind the perception of ugliness, as well as on the explanation of a “pleasing ugliness.” The concept builds upon the multiple definitions of how and why we perceive a subject as ugly, while at the same time presenting the option of transgressing the notions of visual repulsion and perceiving it as a pleasurable experience. As a case study that will be used the artistic expression of the French audio-visual artist Dehn Sora and his project Treha Sektori. Despite the strong subjective experience, we can assume that conclusions drawn from this example can have a more general application in the field of aesthetic perception of visual beauty and thus help clarify several questions regarding the classification of beauty and ugliness, such as the importance of pleasing, or displeasing experience in forming opinions regarding beauty.

Keywords: beauty, ugliness, philosophy, visual art, occultism, music

Introduction

The conceptualization of beauty is not an easy task. Multiple scholars from a variety of fields have tried to build a framework, that would serve as a baseline for such a definition, ranging from antiquity to contemporary philosophy, psychology and cognitive studies. What is beautiful, and what is ugly? Where does beauty end and where does ugliness start? How do we perceive either of them and why do we feel that way? Those are just some of the questions that the contemporary research of aesthetics has tried to answer, with varying results. Most of the studies point out at a strong level of individuality in the perception, attributing it to the evaluation based on personal experience, or pleasure/displeasure felt while being exposed vis-à-vis to the contemplated object (e.g. Cohen 2013; Lomnitz-Adler 2005; Sontag 2003). I will propose the

option of a diffusing experience, where the subject (observer) experiences a negative visual stimulus, while at the same time having a positive aesthetic experience.

The research of beauty is mostly connected with the research of aesthetics, rooted in the Greek term *aisthesis*: the epistemological concept that denoted sensory perception, as well as referencing how humans make sense of their environment and themselves through their senses. The most prominent author from the antiquity on this topic was Aristotle, mainly in his work on psychology – *De anima*, *De sensu* and *Metaphysics* (Grieser and Johnston 2017). Gradually, mostly in the 80s and 90s of the 20th century, the concept shifted from a normative philosophy of art and beauty into an analytical concept for the study of sensual representation of culture (Grieser and Johnston 2017). The modern aesthetic research reaches back to the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and his work *Aesthetica*, where he defined aesthetics as *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, the science of sensitive cognition (Cancik and Mohr 1988). Similarly to Baumgarten, another influential German philosopher from the Age of Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant discussed aesthetics and beauty in his “Analytic of the Beautiful,” the Book One of his *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 1987b, 37). The third prominent figure, who marked the final transition from the perception of the historical *aisthesis* to the modern aesthetics was another German philosopher, Georg Friedrich Hegel. For Hegel the subject of research within aesthetics was the field of beauty, expressed through the senses and perception; he considered aesthetics as the philosophy of beautiful art (Hegel 1835, 2). The emergence of aesthetics marks a turning point of philosophical approach of the European thinking, leading to the “aestheticization of common existence” (Rancière 2002, 134), sometimes also described as “the aesthetic revolution” (Vietta 2008, 160). More important for the aim of this study is the research on the topic of ugliness. Surprisingly, barely anyone of the mentioned philosophers processed the concept of ugliness, and the almost only analysis we find is in the research of Karl Rosenkranz, in his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* – the aesthetics of the ugly (Rosenkranz 1853). Here, Rosenkranz defines ugliness as the negative middle point between the beautiful and the comical; a concept of “negative beauty,” where the pleasure is drawn from it he considers similar to sickness (Rosenkranz 1853, 52).

My first experience with the ritualistic, experiment audio-visual project Treha Sektori was in 2018 on the experimental music festival Walls of Solitude (Hradby Samoty). In my perception, the outstanding combination of minimalistic sounds and haunting, distorted imagery caught my attention and led me to a later interview with the artist, explaining the reasons and notions behind his work. The combination of the excursion into the artistic mind, the experience from the point of the audience, as well as the theoretical framework behind aesthetic perception, has helped form the hypothesis of the pleasing ugliness, which could serve as a ground for further discussion on this topic. The contemporary scholarly research in the field of aesthetic perception of beauty and ugliness tends to focus either on the philosophical understanding (e.g. Shier 1998; Thomson 1992a; Cohen 2013), or cognitive application (e.g. Kawabata and Zeki 2004; Zeki 1999) of beauty, while ugliness remains in a minuscule field of interest. The theory presented in this paper explores the entanglement of these two phenomena, rather than their separation.

Review of contemporary research

Contemporary researchers and commentators, interested in ugliness, focus mostly on the exegesis of Kant's lack of explaining on this topic, trying to understand if there is in Kant's moral philosophy a place for the perception of ugliness (Shier 1998), if according to Kant's theory there is a difference between dependent and pure ugliness (Thomson 1992b) or the search for pure and impure ugliness (Cohen 2013; Wenzel 1999; Gracyk 1986; Guyer 2005). An interesting approach towards the categorization of ugliness was introduced by Panos Paris in his research on the interdependence between deformity and our decision to consider an object ugly (Paris 2017). A contemporary philosophical approach towards the handling, perceiving, or fascination by the deceased body was introduced by Georges Bataille (Bataille 1962).

While addressing the topic of beauty of ugliness, there is observably a strong disbalance in academic literature covering the two subjects, mostly leaning towards the popularity of the first-mentioned, its research marking the beginnings of aesthetics as an academic discipline. First and foremost, I will clarify the difference between scholarly works on ugliness in art and the studies on the understanding of art from the aesthetic standpoint. While the first one studies the manifestations of "ugliness" (displeasing, disfigured) from the perspective of art history; e.g. the voluminous work *On Ugliness* by Umberto Eco (Eco 2011), or several studies on the depiction

of death and decay in historical and contemporary art (e.g. Ballestriero 2013; Brown 2013; Hartel 2013; Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2013; Patterson 2013) , the latter aims to understand the philosophical, as well as biological nuances that lead to the reaction of the subject (audience) towards the (ugly) object. The focus of this paper is on the second category.

From the visual and artistic perspective, ugliness, death and dying have been addressed by several researchers: e.g. Julia Mary Banwell on the example of Teresa Margolles, Mexico's foremost proponent of corpse art (Banwell 2009); Kate Hanson, who discussed the necessity of aesthetical distance of the audience in case of repulsive art (Hanson 1998), or Susan Sontag and the fascination of pain, torment and death in religious art (Sontag 2003). The same author also addresses the issue of photography, depicting morbid or macabre subjects invoking the interest of the observer (Sontag 1977), while John Berger (Berger 1991) approaches the topic of satiation of violent and repugnant images in the contemporary visual media as a means to attract the attention of the customers.

Researching the point of social acceptance of ugliness and death relies on psychological and sociological studies processing the topic of the perception of death and decay in modern society (Lomnitz-Adler 2005; Giddens 1991; Strauss 1992), the segregation of places connected with old age, sickness and death (Shilling 2003) or the handling of deceased bodies (Berridge 2001).

Of similar importance were the cognitive studies measuring biological activity of the human body during the reaction to beauty and ugliness – the neural response to facial attractiveness (Thiruchselvam, Harper, and Homer 2016; Gangestad, Thornhill, and Yeo 1994; Fink and Penton-Voak 2002; Kanwisher and Yovel 2006), the activation of brain centers in response to aesthetic experience (Vessel, Starr, and Rubin 2012; Cela-conde et al. 2004) or the natural correlation of beauty (Kawabata and Zeki 2004).

Case study: Treha Sektori – the artist and the project

The creative mind standing behind the audio-visual project is the French graphic designer and art director, Vincent Petitjean, better known under his artistic pseudonym Dehn Sora (he will be addressed as such during the analysis of the project). Originating in the year 2005 and still active, the artistic style of Treha Sektori is usually described as ritualistic dark ambient/noise, mixed with tribal sounds and modern insights, with a strong emphasis on visual style and presentation. The artist explains that the project was born instinctively, within the need to produce music, but as a solitary experience. The name itself, as well as the lyrics and titles of the songs and albums, are expressed in a fictional, organic language, that came to him in his childhood, created from emotions. In the meantime, this abstract linguistic expression has gained its specific structure, form, and complexity. The name of the project translates as “*a place where they fall,*” which in the understanding of the artist is a place “*he’ll never understand, where he’ll never fit in*”. The feeling for creating Treha Sektori was that of a constant falling, but upside down, imagined as a reversed gravity. At the same time, it is as a place for meditation that isn’t related to the physical world, a silent, ceremonial place. When it comes to the music, he considers the language as the only way of expression; “*there are words, but they are mostly intentions, an audial way to transpose emotions, tensions, moments of resilience. It has a part of a spiritual dimension. Those kinds of languages are deep inside us and are expressed at some point. Everyone has its own.*” (Andrej Kapčár, Email correspondence, June 2, 2019). Despite, by the intention of the artist, Treha Sektori being an audiovisual bundle, where the one can’t exist without the other, it is important to approach them first individually, while trying to find the parallels between the aim of each of the expression and then perceive them as a composite performance.

While analyzing the expression and subsequent appreciation of beauty through ugliness, it is important to choose a subject manifesting both faculties for the spectator. The presented case study offers a view on the artistic expression combining both elements, not just by means of visual and auditory presentation, but also from the theoretical standpoint of the artist. The current discourse on the perception of ugliness is mostly focused on the separation of beauty and ugliness and understanding what can be understood under each one of them; defining where the stimulus of ugliness originates and how does it manifest itself (see e.g. Paris 2017; Cohen 2013;

Banwell 2009). The suggested hypothesis of this paper claims that in certain examples these two manifestations can be intertwined, and the subject can either simultaneously or in short subsequence experience a combination of both aesthetic feelings. Similar results have been reported in different research fields, e.g. by the psychological aesthetical analysis of beauty and ugliness (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912), psychological analysis of Christian mystical experience (Largier 2017), or the aesthetic analysis of Buddhist meditative practices connected with the decaying body (von Ohain 2020). The artistic project Treha Sektori was chosen as a representative of both sensations – on the one hand, the indisputably bizarre, twisted and sometimes unsettling visuals may cause displeasure in the perception of the audience, but at the same time invoke curiosity, excitement or fascination, resulting in a pleasurable, almost spiritual experience through displeasing means.

Music

The music of Treha Sektori is an intense auditory experience. Vocally mostly unintelligible expressions, tribal sounds, drumming and shifts from long silent pauses to thundering audio-shockwaves create the feeling of an ongoing ritual. In response to my question regarding the ideas and intentions coded within the music that he wishes to communicate with the audience, Dehn Sora replied that the main aim is to enforce the creativity; the audience should make their own interpretations and subsequently be inspired to start creating by themselves, disregarding if it would be visual arts, music, or any artistic expression in general. Expression through music is for him about personal balance, something that is not easily reachable and requires a lot of energy to maintain. He compares the creative process of music making to a constant research, aimed at the physical feeling in its external and internal form. Sora puts a lot of stress on the “physicalness” of the recorded sounds. No computer-generated sounds are used, but rather everything must be recorded by hand adding to the personal experience of music creation. The process, as well as the final output, should be experienced through all possible senses. Vocals, as he states, are hermetic to Treha Sektori. Despite their unintelligibility they are considered more as intentions, individual instruments, where the lyrics are taken from larger texts on each project (Kapcár, Email).

Visual Art

The visual aspect of Treha Sektori is an essential part of the whole project. Ranging from the album covers, to the suggestive music videos, the visual representation bears strong, identifiable style, typical for Dehn Sora. Surreal depictions on the topic of death, solitude, and loneliness can be perceived as unpleasant to look at (mummified remains of animals, exposed organs, twitching movement, twisted limbs, disturbing closeups) but at the same time invoke interest and fascination. According to the author, the visuals are not meant to illustrate another aspect of the music, but rather are an equally important (central) point of the whole performance. Every aspect is meant to tell a story, partially left for the audience to interpret and imagine. At first it was intended to hide the physical of the performance since the artist tried hard not to be the central point of interest. The visuals are edited around the music with the idea, that it should not be understood as a timeline, nor a succession of tracks. *“Videos are testimonies of physical experiences. Different ways of carrying a burden. Different ways to disconnect from the body, from conscience. I like the idea of reminiscences from a tribe, from a different plane. About forgetting the “I” in essence. It is always about a “we”, without named gathering or cult”* (Kapcár, Email).

Performance and SpiritualityThe described combination of ominous sounds and disturbing/surreal imagery only further enforces the possibility to classify the project as part of a ritual, hence I was also interested in the interconnectivity between Treha Sektori and ritual praxis, manifested in the spirituality of the author. According to Sora, for the performance to be perceivable as a ritual, it would require a form of intentional control from his side, but nothing similar is his goal. He doesn't plan any effect he would be able to control, instead he wishes for the audience to be able to focus their minds through the audio-visual experience. The live performance should be understood as an exchange or communication of energies between the musician and the audience. There is undoubtedly an individual spirituality contained in the form of expressionism, but not in the way of any organized faith. Despite not being religious or believing in any god, or following any ideology, faith is a concept Dehn Sora incorporates carefully in his work. It is neither faith in an entity, or a symbol, but rather a general feeling that drives him forward. Spirituality plays certainly an important role in Treha Sektori. Being always

interested in primal cultures, he feels close to the principle of facing forces, trying to appease something bigger. *“When I feel a performance, there’s this slight and short moment where I get out of my body in a way. The sensation when the performance is done is something I can’t really explain. It can last 2 seconds. But it feels like forever. I love to play in full dark, or as a shade, because I don’t want to interfere with the music, the environment of a place.”* (Kapcár, Email).

One of the first principles he is following, as was already shown on the visual aspect of the performance, is his unique relationship to death: *“I don’t fear death in itself. I’m born with the knowledge of death, so I don’t feel that I need to be reassured on a second life, in heaven, in these kinds of concepts. I’m afraid of time because I feel that this life is right now, and I won’t have time to explore everything I want before turning to dust. But I feel, that this life is right now, but on multiple planes at the same time. The goal is to explore those planes, be it conscious, other lives, connections with some forces that can come from those altered states... Music is the way to appease these forces, to appease my body, maybe appease some others I hope.”* (Kapcár, Email).

Ugliness in our lives – the sensation of displeasure

The subject of ugliness and perception of death is not an easy one to approach. Discussions across multiple scientific fields have been led in an attempt to answer some of the questions relevant also for this study – what ugliness is, where does it originate and how does it manifest itself in human behavior – are some of the most pressing. In the next chapter, I will present several leading philosophical, aesthetical, psychological as well as cognitive studies which collectively try to construct a complex answer to this complex problem. Ugliness in general is one of the most neglected aspects of contemporary analytic aesthetic studies. The two earliest studies in philosophical aesthetics which to a significant degree influenced the modern research of ugliness were by Karl Rosenkraz and Immanuel Kant.

The philosophy of ugliness

The theory of ugliness in the work of Karl Rosenkranz can be perceived as a reaction to the lack of interest in the study of the ugly, grotesque, bizarre or dark from the aesthetic studies of Hegel – an aim to fill in the gap in Hegel’s “metaphysics of beauty” through Rosenkranz’s “aesthetic of ugliness”. Parallel to the position of sickness in medicine, evil in ethics or sin in theology, also in aesthetics should be the ugliness defined as the negative middle point between the beautiful and the comical (Rosenkranz 1853, 53). Rosenkranz defines ugliness in the natural spiritual and artistic understanding through the following aesthetical categories (Rosenkranz 1853, 386):

- Formlessness – amorphousness, asymmetry, disharmony
- Incorrectness – conflicting with what is biologically considered “normal”, or with the generally accepted canon in an artistic style
- Deformation/malformation – symbolizing vileness (pettiness, weakness, averageness, savagery), unfavourableness (clumsiness, emptiness, hideousness)

Hideousness is further divided into absurdity, odiousness (repulsiveness) and evil. Subsequently, evil can be subdivided into the criminal, ghostly and diabolic. Lastly, the diabolic can be understood as the demonic, the witchy and the satanic. The last-mentioned trinity of attributes, concerning the understanding of evil, linguistically originates in the Christian demonology, which together with the negative perception of sexuality was very expressive in pointing out the negative attributes.

The second figure whose theory on beauty left a lasting impact on the scholarly research was Immanuel Kant, the influential German philosopher in the Age of Enlightenment, who in his “Analytic of the Beautiful,” the Book One of the *Critique of Judgment* evaluates the judgment of taste about beauty.

One would probably expect to find as affirmative, so the negative judgments on the topic, especially since already in his introduction he does not exclude the possibility of negative

perception, as opposed to the beautiful (Kant 1987, 3). Hence it is even more surprising that Kant dedicates all his attention to the affirmative judgments and leaves the negative out. As Kantian philosophy is well known for its attention to detail, what was the reason behind this, why did Kant behave in a complete non-Kantian way? David Shier presents an option – that within Kant’s aesthetics there cannot be a negative judgment of taste, built upon the dual condition necessary for all of Kant’s judgments of taste about beauty – the independence of determinate concepts and the universal subjective validity (Shier 1998, 413). Kant sees the judgment of taste not as a judgment of cognition, but as purely subjective and as such, the process of evaluation and determination is not logical, but rather aesthetical (Kant 1987, 38). Judgments about the beautiful are contemplative, as the perceiver is not interested in the properties of the object, that is if the object falls under definite concepts. As such, the subsequent judgment of taste should also be independent of the idea of determinate concepts (Shier 1998, 413).

Kant clearly considers the harmonious free play of understanding and imagination, the two faculties involved in the cognition, related to each other in a judgment, to be always pleasurable to the subject (Kant 1987, 51). The harmonious free play is always pleasurable and since all judgments of taste are evoked by the harmonious free play, it can be concluded that every judgment of taste must be connected to the feeling of pleasure and joy for the subject. Following this logic, every judgment of taste in which the subjects are engulfed in the feeling of pleasure is an affirmative judgment of taste (Kant 1790, 52). Hence in Kant’s aesthetics, negative judgments of taste about beauty are impossible. David Shier concludes that despite this logic we must not imply that Kant claims everything is beautiful because from the claim that no object can be judged as ugly it cannot be inferred that every object has to be judged as beautiful (Shier 1998, 418).

Another approach towards Kant’s perception of ugliness in his *Critique of Judgment* was presented by Garrett Thomson (Thomson 1992b) who thinks that Kant would distinguish between dependent and pure ugliness. Dependent ugliness, similar to dependent beauty, would require a particular concept specifying how objects ought to appear, which at the same time

would be considered impure, not involving a free play of the imagination and understanding, and as such be not genuinely aesthetic (Thomson 1992, 107).

In Kant's moral philosophy, the existence of pure ugliness in the natural world would preclude phenomenized morality. Similarly, the same problem arises in the question of the sublime, which does not exist in the things in nature, but only in our own mind (Kant 1987, 114) – to judge something as ugly and to feel disgusted is immoral; morality precludes ugliness. The one exemption that Kant cites as examples of pure ugliness (the devastation of war, diseases, and the furies) are what he calls “evils” (Kant 1987, 173). Towards these evils we ought to feel disgusted as they symbolize moral evil. Concluding this theory, the beauty symbolizes the morally good, so the ugly symbolizes the morally bad (Thomson 1992b, 115).

Another author who has tried to explain the lack of “ugliness” in Kant's theory is Alix Cohen (Cohen 2013), who sees the main problem in fact that *The Critique of Judgment* does not actually discuss ugliness, so the commentators are left to fill out the blanks themselves. According to Cohen, Kant's aesthetic judgment commits him to not only the existence of the ugly but also distinguishes between two forms of ugliness – the impure and pure ugliness, as counterparts for impure and pure beauty. In his theory, ugliness is something positive, not merely a lack of beauty but the existence of something opposite to beauty, which entails that there is a difference between beauty, ugliness and the aesthetically indifferent (Wenzel 1999, 418).

Impure Ugliness

From Cohen's perspective, Kant defines the essential features of the judgment of beauty on the contrast by two types of the judgment of taste – one is the gratification that the object evokes in the spectator, the other one is based on its usefulness leading to the satisfaction with the existence of the object. These two types are always combined with the interest in the object, and Kant calls them “interested” judgments (Kant 1987b, 94). In contrast, the contemplation on a

beautiful object is independent of any interest in the subject, the taste for the beautiful is a disinterested and free satisfaction (Kant 1987b, 95).

Based on this theory, we can assume that in a similar way the negative judgment is formed – if the judgment of taste involves our interest in the existence of the object, the object we consider ugly should give rise to our desire to dispose of it. Cohen, in addition, argues that there are actually four different ways in which our interest can be contravened, creating thus four different types of impure ugliness (Cohen 2013).

- Adherent ugliness - an object is considered ugly if it fails to meet the criteria of the concept that specifies how it should appear within its own kind.
- Emotional ugliness - the subject associates the object with personal inclinations and experience and leans towards perceiving it as ugly.
- Distasteful ugliness - the lack of distinction between the representation of an object and the object itself.
- Disgusting ugliness – the spectator doesn't choose to approach the subject aesthetically from a moral standpoint – he intentionally doesn't distinguish between the representation of the object and the object itself.

The common feature of all the categories, the impurity of the ugliness, is the fact that all of the objects we perceive as ugly collide with our interests, emotions or morals; the object causes a feeling of displeasure that evokes the desire to dispose of it (Kant 1987b, 105).

Pure Ugliness

As already mentioned, according to Kant, the feeling of pure aesthetic pleasure that defines the judgment of beauty involves the free play of imagination and understanding (Kant 1987b, 103). Kant himself has never explicitly mentioned the concept of a negative state, opposite to the pleasurable free play. Alix Cohen argues that from his thesis can be derived an opposing

approach, which she calls “foul play,” as a possibility of pure ugliness (Cohen 2013). This option can be found in Kant’s concept altogether, since he mentions, among others, the example of a “savage” who sees a town house for the first time – empirically he applies to it a concept of a place where people live, but at the same time reflectively, he considers it a concept different from the idea of his hut, thus creating a disharmony (or rather the lack of harmony) between imagination and understanding (Kant 1987b, 299). Reflecting this example, some faculties can be in disharmony in one respect and in harmony in another and as such it is more appropriate to describe mental faculties as dynamic functions capable of multitasking rather than static entities. It is thus easily imaginable that harmony required by cognition doesn’t have to be necessary of the same kind as the experience of beautiful. As a result, imagination and understanding can be in a harmonious “un-free” play cognitively through the determinant use of judgment, while at the same time in disharmonious aesthetical free play through the reflective use of judgment (Cohen 2013).

With the introduction of the possibility of pure ugliness in Kant’s work, we can actually find parts of his theory pointing out the two types of free play – one that is between imagination and understanding, and giving birth to the judgments of beauty, and one that is displeasing and gives birth to the judgments of ugliness (Kant describes it as counterplay, while Cohen uses the term foul play): “ugliness is thus something positive, not merely lack of beauty, but the existence of something opposite to beauty,” “counterplay is not merely something negative, but really something positive” (Cohen 2013). On this place, Cohen presents a reflective example of how an aesthetic disharmony could manifest itself – the subject is in a museum contemplating a painting. Since he has already experienced aesthetic pleasure upon the perception of visual art before, he knows what it feels like. But towards the painting in question, he rather feels displeasure and judges the painting as ugly. His judgment is disinterested and as such not a case of any of the impure judgments. The object doesn’t just leave the subject unaffected (which would be a case of aesthetical indifference) but rather causes explicit displeasure, caused by the disharmony between imagination and understanding, leading to describing the object as ugly (Cohen 2013).

Regardless, from the view of the aesthetic of religion is required to differentiate the expression of “ugliness” and understand the factors that attribute the *lowly* and *vile* to the *ugly* and *sick*. The aesthetics of horror won’t separate the symbols attributed to *diabolical* from *holy* since both of them can be attributed to *tremendum*, the expression introduced by Rudolf Otto (Otto 1958). *Taste* limits, or rather creates, social borders, *exoticness* fascinates and terrifies at the same time, *difference* outcasts from a group, *disgust* can be learned. The examples of distortion and chaoticness can be understood as a protest against uniformity, cleanness, and order. That’s why it is important, that philosophical ideas and literary sources, especially in the research of religious or spiritual behavior, should be enriched by historical, sociological and psychological aspects, which was also understood by Rosenkranz. He thought that many of the elements of myths and cults, the morbid scenes from *ars moriendi*, the depictions of the body in extasy or epilepsy in different religious contexts can’t be sufficiently explained and understood merely through Hegelian, or post-Hegelian expression apparatus (Cancik and Mohr 1988).

As we have already mentioned, the vast majority of researchers and commentators focus on the exegesis of Kant’s views rather than on the phenomenon of ugliness *per se* (e.g. Shier 1998; Thomson 1992; Wenzel 1999; Gracyk 1986; Guyer 2005). One of the main questions that are still open to debate is what can be understood under this term. Panos Paris presents an original view in his deformity-related concept of ugliness (Paris 2017).

Deformity as an indicator for ugliness

The term “ugly,” despite being used often out of its original context (ugly truth rarely describes an aesthetically displeasing truth), can be generally understood in a broad (all negative qualities) and in a narrow sense (refers to a certain aesthetic property and its subspecies). Even when the contemporary aestheticians rarely discuss ugliness, its connection with deformity is noticeable also from the linguistic standpoint, where “deformity” was once the standard term in English to refer to ugliness. Among the synonyms used to describe ugly objects we find many referencing deformities, such as polluted, diseased, spoiled, disfigured, malformed, distorted, crooked or disharmonious (Paris 2017, 3). To directly associate deformity with ugliness would be a mistake

since e.g. certain sounds (fingernails scraping a blackboard) or visuals (vomit, feces) are undoubtedly considered us ugly and disgusting, but hardly considered as deformed.

Paris understands deformity in three different form – abnormality, malfunction, and defect in form. To further accelerate his theory, he argues that only the last mentioned comes into consideration since not all abnormalities can be considered ugly (exceptional tall men can be considered attractive), as well as malfunction is not a sign of ugliness (a dead person doesn't necessarily need to be considered ugly, neither a non-functional heart can be described as such). He defines deformity as a defect through the following formula (Paris 2017, 7):

Deformity = if the object's, O's, form frustrates, inhibits, or hinders O from realizing its end(s), then O is deformed.

The somehow puzzling formulation of “realizing its end(s)” is explained as a reference to the functionality of an attribute in a combination of its functionality, as well as the perception of functionality from the external agents. Paris suggests the example of morbid obesity in contrast to just obesity. In the first case, the morbidly obese person can be considered ugly based on the appearance (external perception), but at the same time the excess of body mass prevents often basic human functions like walking, moving or breathing (deformity of function), in contrast to mere obesity that doesn't necessarily has to conflict with function and as such doesn't necessarily need to be perceived as ugly (Paris 2017, 9–10). The formula is still not complete since it lacks the last component, which is presumed to be displeasure. According to Roland Moore, we hardly call anything ugly unless we are, to some degree, displeased by the object (Moore 2014, 219). Also this bears its marks in the linguistics, where often ugliness and deformity are described through synonyms of displeasure: disgusting, grotesque, abominable, repulsive or revolting (Paris 2017, 12). According to Paris, the formula for expressing ugliness through deformity would be as follows (Paris 2017, 13):

Deformity-related ugliness (DRU) = For any object, O, if O is (i) deformed and (ii) displeases (under normal circumstances) because it is experienced (in a perception of contemplation) as (i) then O is ugly.

The statement at hand is, that as ugly can be described as anything that is deformed, and through this deformity, it displeases suitable subjects in perception or contemplation (Paris 2017, 13). Paris proves his theory through the analysis of several works such as the paintings of Peter Bruegel the Elder in Eco's *On Ugliness* (Eco 2011, 70–71), the hyper-realistic human-animal hybrid statues from Patria Piccinini (McMahon 2007, 168) or the surreal triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* by Francis Bacon (Kieran 2005, 185). Thus, the deformity-related concept explains a large body of visual stimuli perceived as ugly.

Neurological approach to ugliness

The difference in neurological display of the perceptions of beauty and ugliness in art was researched by Hideaki Kawabata and Semir Zeki (Kawabata and Zeki 2004) who measured the brain activity in response to beautiful, neutral and ugly paintings with positron emission tomography (PET)(the paintings were categorized according to the subjects, and the measuring underwent during the second screening of the pictures). The results showed that the highest activity during the perception of (considered) beautiful stimuli was experienced in the orbitofrontal cortex (appreciation of stimuli), while during the perception of (considered) ugly stimuli in the motoric cortex (execution of movement), also support Kant's and Cohen's philosophical theory of the pressure to dispose of ugly objects (Kant 1987b; Cohen 2013) (see chapter on *Impure Ugliness*).

The main issue with which the studies in the neurological examination of beauty and ugliness struggle is the problematic and complex definition of art and aesthetics, especially in the field of aesthetic perception. The experimental studies are forced to reduce the complex aesthetic perception for the studying of simple variables (stimulus-reaction). It is assumed that humans

share a “common denominator” that predates all the aesthetic experience (Zeki 1999), but the broad scale of factors influencing the aesthetic criteria (e.g. culture, society, history, personality) spread the experimental results in all the researches of aesthetic perception. One possible suggested solution is to aim the focus at perceivable categories (e.g. beautiful, pleasant, mysterious, original) classified under the semantic differential introduced by Charles Osgood (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1978) and used e.g. in the study of perception of beautiful paintings by Camilo Cela-Conde et al. (Cela-conde et al. 2004).

Another parallel can be drawn in the matter of how the perception of beauty relates to the depictions of human figures and human faces. The question of why some faces or facial features seem more appealing than others right to the point where some are evaluated as ugly can be partially explained through cognitive research. According to the “hypothesis of facial specialization”, the cognitive processing of facial proportions is dependent on the existence of a neural network between the temporal and occipital gyrus (*gyrus fusiformis*), an area known as the *fusiform face area* (FFA) (Kanwisher and Yovel 2006). After that we identify the subject as a human face, the neural cortex responsible for the detection of faces is noticeably stimulated. If the face is evaluated as attractive, the medial orbitofrontal cortex is activated (Gauthier, Behrmann, and Tarr 1999). We can assume that the perception of an obscured, or intentionally disfigured face (for example through pigments, as Dehn Sora uses in his performances) causes a displeasing reaction to the visuals (stimulation of the motoric cortex). One of the significant decision-making stimuli in the evaluation of beauty is facial and bodily symmetry – the human body is bilaterally symmetrical and most cases of fluctuating asymmetry (bilateral asymmetry that can't be genetically expected and is partially random) are evaluated as unattractive, unappealing or displeasing (Palmer – Strobeck 2003, 318). From the scope of evolutionary psychology, the explanation lies in the natural selection of a genetically suitable partner, where the low level of fluctuating asymmetry points out at stable genetical predispositions of the individual, as well as his ability to eliminate pathogens (Kišoňová 2013). As was already discussed, the bodily asymmetry can also be perceived as deformity, thus evaluating the visual stimuli as ugly.

The figural depictions in the work of Dehn Sora, mostly consisting of himself appearing in the videos, are intentionally recorded in a disfigured and distorted way. This distortion is achieved either through extreme close-ups and camera angles or through the body and limb position, manifesting in grotesque poses typical for the expression of mortuary crams or diseases. Besides, the artist intentionally conceals his face, either by pigment, cloth, or masks, hiding his facial feature, thus appearing less human, while simultaneously preventing the observer from identifying possible attractive features.

The aesthetics of death

The depictions of death and dying have a special place amongst the separation of beauty and ugliness. In general, the depiction of death can't be associated with any of the categories introduced by Rosenkranz (Rosenkranz 1853, 386), nor can they be approached as being ugly *per se*. Despite all this, death tends to be perceived as a taboo subject for depictions and invokes several unpleasant feelings in the audience. According to Claudio Lomnitz (Lomnitz-Adler 2005, 36), the rejection of death is a phenomenon typical for the dominant Euro-American culture since the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The life preservation has become one of the main trends not just in medicine, but at the same time it is one of the crucial principles of the state. Antony Giddens (Giddens 1991, 162) assumes that it is the orientation of modernity aimed at controlling every possible aspect of daily life. The decline of modernity reflects the rise of abstract systems leaking into everyday activities. Death is one of the external factors of existence that can't be associated with the internal reference system of modernity, but at the same time, all of the processes leading to her can. Death becomes the "point zero," the moment where the control over existence experiences its external borders (Giddens 1991, 162). The trauma of this realization can be seen in the attempts to regulate all direct contact with death and her symptoms. The evolution of modern hospitals can be seen as a parallel to older systems of asylums and incarnations facilities – places meant for the segregation of people in an attempt to hide the manifestations of death and sickness form the general sight, where they are taken care of by specialized staff, thus effectively creating a barrier between the "world of the living" and the "world of the sick" (Giddens 1991; Banwell 2009). On the other hand, another interesting phenomenon of modern society appears: the dichotomy between the personal processing of death

(death in family, or near friends) and the fascination of death in the cultural-reflexive view (violent, anonymous death) (Strauss 1992, IX; Shilling 2003, 166). The change in the social approach that has led to the relocation of sickness and dying out of public sight into specialized facilities and hospices, away from the family, has been also observed by Philippe Ariès or Kate Berridge (Ariès 2000a, 2000b; Berridge 2001).

The reaction towards dead bodies is according to Georges Bataille (Bataille 1962, 16) based on a duality of impulses – the perception of death as a threat to the individual identity and the perception of death as a taboo subject. On the one hand, the subject perceives death as a threat since it shows the inescapable demise and decay, something that is under normal circumstances hidden. It marks the end of the personal identity, a critical concept especially in the individuality driven, contemporary society. On the other hand, the rejecting of death is often accompanied by a feeling of fascination, grounded in the taboo of interaction with a deceased body (Bataille 1962, 48). This taboo was established to prevent unacceptable and antisocial behavior, predominantly related to violence and murder. A side product of social restrictions is automatically stimulated efforts to reject and overcome them, represented by the urge to tear down the social barriers and carry out the “forbidden deed,” accompanied by a strong feeling of fascination and arousal (Bataille 1962, 48). Susan Sontag sees in Bataille’s dichotomic relationship between repulsion and fascination a form of religious thinking. She assumes that the perception of suffering and pain associates it with victimization, and victimization is subsequently associated with superiority despite the modern paradigm of associating suffering preferably with accidents and crime (Sontag 2003, 88). Christianity has a long tradition of depiction death and suffering. The image of the crucified Christ mixes the expression of agony and extasy, symbolizing the borderline negative and positive emotion. Sontag finds a parallel in the interest of the audience in pain and macabre scenes in the interest in eroticism and naked bodies, a topic similarly ostracized in the modern society (Sontag 2003, 36). Of similar importance is the difference of a direct and indirect visual experience which can be understood as a form of artistic distance (Hanson 1998, 204). Whereas the direct contact with the visual material causes more intense reactions, enhanced by the sensual experience, the indirect contact, mostly through photography, film or performance creates a secure psychological barrier between

the object and the subject. On the one hand, the visual impulse is visible, but at the same time the subject feels a level of defamiliarization leading to a lesser emotional involvement. At the same time, for the artist this is on many occasions the most intimate communication channel with the audience without breaking the moral and social norms (Hanson 1998, 204).

Photography as an artistic medium for the depiction of death

Despite being a form of visual communication, photography has a specific position in the artistic perception. In her famous work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag thinks that paintings and drawings are manually created visual statements of the artist. On the other hand, photography creates the illusion of objectivity and stops being a statement about the world and is rather its miniature part (Sontag 1977, 4). Considering the year of publishing, we can assume a slight distortion in the perception of photography as a medium. A broad scale of photographic techniques, from the chosen angle, through composition to direct photomanipulation, not to mention the intention of the author, are used in similar ways to communicate a subjective message. The question relevant for this study is how can photography depicting death, violence or decay be considered as beautiful (Sontag 2003, 68). The French philosopher Roland Barthes tried to find the answer to this problem through the identification of two phases of the reception of the object – *stadium* and *punctum*. *Stadium* can be understood as the reception of details and symbols that are noticeable on the photography – clothing, accessories, environment, figures (it is always coded and thus can be named). *Punctum* can be described as all the nuances influencing the subject's emotional side, in this case that what can be perceived as disturbing (it is not coded and thus can't be named). The inability to name *punctum* is the reason for the negative reaction to the visual stimuli; the inability to approach part of the object linguistically creates a state of chaos in the mind of the subject (Barthes 1993, 51). Interestingly, Barthes sees a direct connection between photography and religion, manifested by the rise of popularity of photography in the 19th century negatively mirroring the decline in the importance of religiousness in personal life. Photography incorporates the *symbolical death*, existing outside of religion and its rituals. The relationship between life and death is changed from the gradual transition into the sequential difference between two forms of existence. The shock from the perception of death originates from the ability of photography to bring in the state or action that

was performed in the time of capturing the photography, but at the moment of the display is already concluded. Death is thus always current, captured in the moment of endlessness; photography becomes the living image of a death object (Barthes 1993, 92)

Through displeasure to beauty

In the analysis of the visually coded information in the work of Dehn Sora and the project Treha Sektori, the main material was provided by the music videos “AH ESTEREH KOMH DERAH,” “SAHA FERHAN,” the promotional video of the album “ENDESSIAH” (all of the videos are freely accessible on the website YouTube) as well as the static graphic art (album cover art and individual art pieces) created by the artist himself. Based on the knowledge described in the previous chapters, we can classify the topics of the visuals into three major themes – death, deformity, and disturbing objects, often diffusing one into another.

Death is by far the most prominent theme in Treha Sektori’s visual depictions, represented either directly or symbolically. Among the examples for direct representation, we can mention the mummified remains of a cat and a skeletal mask in the music video SAHA FERNAH, the withered tree branch from the split between Treha Sektori and Innerwoud, or several performance and festival promo posters with bone constellations. The music video AH ESTERAH KOMH DERAH begins with a quote “We’re born with the knowledge of death,” reflecting the already introduced philosophy of the artist. Death can be also perceived indirectly, in symbolic depictions of emptiness of the landscapes.

Dehn Sora provides his explanation on one of his artworks – a menorah made from bones: “it is a symbol of light, of inner light. I don’t necessarily connect it to Judaism, but this is the first time I came with an already established symbol. I’ve been fascinated by its symbolic. There is light in organic remains. I don’t accept it as an end. Gather those remains in a light symbol; it is a combative way of facing death. I’ve actually dreamed about this image, a giant chandelier made of bones, above a dry desert.” (Kaplár, Email).

Similarly, to death, the **deformity** can be also perceived directly and indirectly. The most noticeable displays are the figural depictions (acted by the artist himself), mostly shown in unnatural poses (cramps, fetal poses in the promo to ENDESSIAH) or the unnatural tallness in the music video AH ESTERAH KOMH DERAH, where the figure towers almost motionlessly over the vast landscape, shot from angles enhancing the effect of deformity.

Under the category of **disturbing objects** can be found examples that contradict the idea of norm - head painted black, a detail of the same black pigment dripping from fingers on a close-up shot (the video is filmed in black and white, and as such, the image evokes the feeling of blood), symbolic opening of wounds (presented also by the black pigment dripping from the wound), inner organs hang on tree branches or vomiting blood.

Two other examples that can further add to our understanding of perceiving beauty (truth) through ugliness and death are Sora's side project – the art exhibition “This has gone too far” and the photographic project “Faces and black feathers.”

“This has gone too far” is a series of surrealist paintings depicting bizarre, dissolving, skeletal animals walking across a mostly plane, deserted landscape. The creatures themselves are a combination of animal bodies, skeletons, muscle tissue, and exposed internal organs.

“Faces and black feathers” is a photographic project where next to the human subject is placed a taxidermized crow. The presence of the dead animal, according to the artist, reveals the truth fragility, or the true self of the subject. Some people don't care, others feel uncomfortable.

From the artistic style, all the visual works of Dehn Sora are leaning towards surrealism with a strong notion towards the dark and macabre. The skillfulness and imagination behind each

creation add to the suggestiveness of the art towards the subject. Despite the description involving exposed organs, dead bodies, or skeletal remains, all the works (subjectively) induce the feeling of aesthetic appreciation. Since the symbolism of each depiction is superimposed to the substantiality of the naturalistic feeling, even display of objects meant to invoke disgust (bodily fluids, exposed organs) are not perceived as vulgar, but rather disturbing, still arousing curiosity. In this case, curiosity is the key element to appreciation of beauty through ugliness.

One of the oldest scientific definition of curiosity comes from the philosopher and psychologist William James (James 1899), who described it as the impulse towards better cognition. The most common contemporary view on curiosity is that it is a special, internally motivated form of information-seeking (Loewenstein 1994, 94; Oudeyer and Kaplan 2007, 13). By this approach, curiosity is strictly an intrinsic drive, while information-seeking is more generally a drive, that can be intrinsic, as well as extrinsic (Kidd and Hayden 2015, 3). The function of curiosity is described as a cognitive induced deprivation that arises from the perception of a gap in knowledge and understanding (Loewenstein 1994, 84). This information gap functions like other drive states, like hunger, or thirst, and a small amount of information serves as a priming dose, greatly increasing curiosity. Consumption of information is rewarding, but eventually, when sufficient information is consumed, satiation is reached, and additional information serves to reduce further curiosity (Kidd and Hayden 2015, 4). So far, four main domains that curiosity influences has been identified (Kidd and Hayden 2015, 14):

- *Function* – curiosity serves to motivate the acquisition of knowledge and learning
- *Evolution* – improves performance, yielding fitness benefits to organisms with it; it is most likely an evolved trait
- *Mechanism* – augments internal representations of value, and as such biasing decision-making towards informative operations and actions
- *Development* – is critical for learning; it reflects both external features and internal representations of our knowledge

The most important features of curiosity for the perception of beauty through ugliness are the reward for consuming information and biasing decision-making.

Implementing the aspect of curiosity into the presented theories of ugliness and pleasure, we come to the following conclusion:

According to Paris, ugliness through deformity can be explained as a state where the object is deformed and displeases the subject (Paris 2017). Displeasure, building on Cohen's example (Cohen 2013), is caused by the harmonious "foul play" between the understanding and imagination – the subject is disinterested towards the object but perceives it as ugly, since he has experienced positive aesthetical judgment before. This time we assume that the object is remaining in the state of displeasure, but since he perceives this displeasure simultaneously as a lack of information ("I don't like it, because I don't understand it"), his curiosity forces him to contemplate upon the art further. In the case of a subtle ugliness, caused by symbolic disfigurement or deformity the state is not interfered by repulsion (or possible impure ugliness), so curiosity has a better opportunity to enforce the gathering of additional aesthetic stimuli from the object. With artistic representations of death and dying through photography or cinematography, the subject can experience a case of fascination with the socially perceived taboo subject (Bataille 1962, 48), arousing the curiosity even more. Subsequently, after the phase of reevaluation, the subject feels he is starting to be "closer" to the object, not necessarily understanding it, but feel to be drawn to its aesthetics, despite the content of the object is not changing. In the last phase, the subject finds it aesthetically pleasing, thus finding beauty in an object that should a priori cause repulsion.

The process of aesthetic reconsideration from ugliness to beauty can be summarized in the following diagram:

Perception of ugliness => curiosity => reconsideration => appreciation => pleasure

=> depreciation => displeasure

We can find parallels between the appreciation of beauty through ugliness, death or displeasure, and reconsideration of the visual stimuli indirectly also in the theory of Niklaus Largier (Largier 2017) concerning the ecstasy in Christian expressionism. On the example of the Christian mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila, he presents the intense moments of her experience, concerning both the realms of affects and sensation – joy and sadness, sweetness and bitterness or sensation and affect (Largier 2017, 147). In the dramatic descriptions of Teresa's experience before the crucified body of Christ (Teresa 2015, 80), Largier identifies several constitutive moments: leaving behind the established worldly, natural order (leaving behind the old world), configuring new life in the imitation of an exemplary figure, exploring the spiritual or bodily struggle as a way of martyrdom, and finally, transforming sensations and emotions by means of contemplative practices in order to gain a feeling of heaven (Largier 2017, 150).

The process of figuration (concentrating on the image of Christ and his followers), disfiguration (seeing the negative face of the world, the pain and sorrow) and transfiguration (perceiving the world in light and eternal sweetness) is centered primarily around the teaching, that the experiential knowledge of God is not just metaphorical, but can be experienced through the (inner) senses. Several of the prominent theologians, ranging from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa (Largier 2017, 153) to William of St. Thierry, Albert the Great or Bonaventure (Largier 2017, 154), were trying to bring the practice of prayer and contemplation through visual determination into coherent shape. Another important aspect arises with the theological question, how can the devotees differentiate if the intensive sensual experience is of divine origins, or if it comes from the devil? One way of reacting to this doubt was to perceive the practice of figuration as self-formation process with the necessity to battle the demonic figures or the negative judgment; or in other words, put the surrounding world into a light that makes it look disfigured, monstrous and full of temptation – the world will manifest itself as full of horror, violence and temptation, before it can be turned into the redeeming light (Largier 2014).

Conclusion

This paper presents a new view of the phenomenon of ugliness and beauty within contemporary art. The study of ugliness especially has been a marginalized topic by the research community, omitting its effect on the visual perception of the audience. As was shown in the example of relevant studies, ugliness is difficult to approach from any field of scholarly perspective based on its strong individual values. While the most studies have focused on the identification of what is considered ugly, how do people react to the stimuli or ugliness, or on the commentary to the theory of several profound philosophers, the aim of this paper lies in exploring the mutual relations and interconnection between beauty and ugliness. The main argument that the subject can consequently experience the feeling of pleasure (beauty) even based on the visual perception of unpleasant motives (ugliness) was grounded in the artistic expression of the experimental audio-visual project *Treha Sektori*. Disregarding the subjective experience of the author, the findings aim to have a broader universal application in the research of religions. Relevant publications from several research areas provided the background knowledge that helped identify curiosity as the possible defining aspect of aesthetic transformation from displeasure to pleasure, thus introducing a new possibility to approach visual appreciation. Because of the relative novelty of this issue, further research is required to either approve, disapprove, or lead this research into a new and beneficial direction.

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