Ugliness in the avant-garde: German expressionism and Italian futurism

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UGLINESS IN THE AVANT-GARDE: GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM AND ITALIAN FUTURISM\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstract

In this article we focus on the metamorphosis of classical aesthetic categories in accordance with social change, discussing the new perspective on Ugliness and Beauty in modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century. To this purpose, we analyze German Expressionism and Italian Futurism in the attempt of not only justifying the presence of Ugliness, but also for a more profound understanding of the way artists of the avant-garde express themselves.

Keywords: Beauty, Ugliness, avant-garde, mimesis, progress, degradation, impurity of art.

From a classical perspective, Ugliness is the opposite of Beauty seen as harmony and proportion. Ugliness is not viewed as an autonomous aesthetic category; it exists as an affirmation of Beauty, bringing it into focus and giving it shape. Ancient aesthetic theories remind us of the search for an ideal Beauty, immutable and transcendent, or of an art whose purpose was “depicting as faithfully as possible the Beauty which exists in and through nature. […] Sculpture and painting depicted harmoniously developed bodies, literature – unrestrained, heroic characters, and music – pleasant tonalities and rhythms, fortifying or stimulating” (Maşek, 1984, 11).

Therefore, besides the beauty of a body built in perfect harmony of its parts, there is also an ugliness that can be “redeemed” by a faithful representation in art, by the artist’s talent to imitate it as such. We also find this idea in Kant’s writings: “Where fine art manifests its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, and even represented in pictures” (Kant, 2007, 312).

This brings out the question: what changes took place during the avant-garde that transformed the relation between Beauty and Ugliness? In contrast to the traditional perspective, in this new artistic approach we no longer have

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beautiful representations of Ugliness, but works of art that might appear ugly by classical standards, deformations of reality. As a result of this approach, critics look upon modern painting as a triumph of Ugliness (Eco, 2007, 365). We should bear in mind that we are not dealing with a uniform aesthetic manifestation that refuses to glorify the classical view on beauty, but with a metamorphosis of classical aesthetic categories in accordance with social change. On this particular aspect we focus our attention.

The first step in answering the afore-mentioned question is to consider the archetypal classification made by Gilbert Durand in Arts and Archetypes: The Religion of Art. The author approaches painting through the three forms of the mirror concept. The **Mirror of Zeuxis** represents the art of “imitation” (Renaissance art) which was founded, as the author says, on reality perceived through senses. It is the same *mimesis* defended by Aristotle but criticized by Plato (who “does not give credence to those immediate data of senses which adorn our earthly Cave and especially to those artists who do nothing but propose the redundancy of «imitation»” (Durand, 2013, 29)). The **Mirror of Pygmalion** is the space where the work of art reflects the soul of the artist and contains the entirety of his emotions and anguishs (e.g. the modern artistic movements – Expressionism). Durand argues that the mirror of Pygmalion best applies to German art, “the torments of passion or melancholy, the uncertainties of faith, the temptations of devils or Nibelungs, the burden of the sin «of being here», *Dasein*, within the world, lends the German sensibility that lasting hallmark of the pathetic. As for the mirror of Pygmalion, it reflects the secret world of the soul’s desires and aspirations” (Durand, 2013, 42). Lastly, the **mirror of Narcissus** represents art for the sake of art (the Italian decor), which highlights the human inclination towards aestheticism and not utilitarianism. This is art conceived for the sake of art, with no intention of discovering Truth, be it general or individual.

This classification of art takes us to the conflict between ancients and moderns, the different approach to Beauty and to the work of art. Modernity opposes the concept of *mimesis* and the representations of abstract, perfectly harmonized bodies that lack individuality; the modern work of art now expresses the artist’s inner world. Against the background of modern individualism and conflict with the utilitarian society, the artist looks with inquiry upon his inner self, revealing originality through subjectivity. Consequently, artists of the avant-garde (particularly the Expressionists) analyze their own intimate experiences. Modernism in art means a gradual

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3 The Greek painter that drew grape-clusters so realistically, that birds tried to peck at them.
separation from everything that existed until then – this is what defines the avant-garde attitude.

As we shall see, this feeling of revolt was not aimed solely against classical aesthetic categories but stands for the entire cultural mentality at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Leonardo da Vinci,
_Mona Lisa_, c. 1503-1506

Marchel Duchamp,
_L.H.O.O.Q._, 1919

_Mona Lisa, a symbol for the classical art, reinterpreted during the avant-garde as a revolt against tradition and the past, is proof for the dialog between ancients and moderns_

What led to this change of perspective? One of the contributing elements was, of course, the social and political circumstances. We are dealing with an industrial revolution that fully transformed the European society: the invention of the locomotive that sped up the development of railways and transportation (economic development), the scientific progress in mathematics, physics and biology (a scientific spirit that instills a feeling of power and control in the nineteenth century man), the development of industrial production,

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4 It is important to mention the difference between modernism in philosophy and modernism in art; the latter corresponds to post-modernism in philosophy.
demographic growth and urbanization, the emergence of the proletariat. New materials, such as glass and steel, are available to artists and will be used to build the industrial Beauty of the machinery.

The effects of the industrial revolution are also noticeable in painting. In the article Revolution in Art (Hart, 2013) Perry Hart reviews these aspects in detail: during this period more than twenty pigments were invented, and their production at an industrial level made the painting much more affordable. Most pigments were sharper and opaque, which made works of art more dramatic and at the same time sped up the artistic process (the academic method of overlapping thin layers of paint was no longer necessary, painting became a matter of days or weeks rather than months or years). Paint tubes also had a large impact; besides the practical advantage of preserving paint for a longer period of time, these portable tubes enabled artists to paint outside their studio.

The status of art changes, there is a new Beauty and a new Ugliness. Modernity introduces us an artist who does not represent ugliness and beauty in a classical manner, based on mimesis, and from this point of view we can understand why a certain triumph of ugliness and abstract forms takes shape. The concept of Ugliness is seen differently.

Another explanation for the presence of this ugliness can have as a starting point the impurity of art, a notion introduced by Ion Ianoşi. He argues that “the work of art is the live, diverse, multilateral, complete, individual phenomenon, the phenomenon as the organic totality of countless characteristics, which demand to be portrayed, assimilated and studied precisely in their totality”. In order to analyse the work of art we must look at it as a whole, the art is not pure, it is tightly connected to ethics, religion and philosophical themes. “Art is bound to incorporate in its web countless foreign bodies by which it can regenerate itself. Thus the aesthetic organism is structured on biological, psychological, scientific, economical, political and ethical cells, on infinite extra-aesthetical elements; without which it does not exist and cannot be understood without their knowledge” (Ianoşi, 1985, 17).

Therefore we can understand why artists searched ways to emphasise the ugly, which is partly due to the fact that the art and the social are interlinked. Artists attempted through art to take up a moralizing stance, and in many cases they consciously emphasised the ugly. Umberto Eco indicates the important influence of Baudelaire’s maxim épater le bourgeois – “artists endeavoured to astound the bourgeois, but the general public was not only astounded but actually outraged” (Eco, 2007, 136).

It might be said that the avant-garde art is a “declarative” one, in the sense that it asserts its ideas openly and verbally, not necessarily through

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traditional artistic mediums but sometimes through manifestos and similar documents as well. Avant-garde brings into focus the symbiosis between art and the socio-political, idea underlined by Matei Călinescu: “socio-political phenomena and artistic manifestations are organically interconnected” (Călinescu, 2005, 158). Consequently, Ugliness – an avant-garde aesthetical category – is perceived as a way to express the severe anxieties faced by the modern man.

Therefore, we cannot conceive art outside its socio-political context; understanding the works of such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, George Grosz, Umberto Boccioni, Otto Dix, Salvador Dali requires immersing in the cultural view of the time.

Oskar Kokoschka, Pietà (Poster for “Murderer, Hope of Women”, at the Summer Theater at the Internationale Kunstschau), 1908
Modern artistic movement (German Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism etc.) developed against a background of consecutive technological revolutions, of a massive industrialization that intensified class differences, drawing inspiration from a deeply pessimistic literature (Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Poe, Wilde, Ibsen, Mann). There are two fundamental directions in the evolution of the European society at the end of the the nineteenth century. On one hand there is an astonishing technological progress – “the triumph of electricity, the invention of the automobile, the cinematograph, metallic architecture” (Durand, 146). On the other hand there is a decadent movement triggered by an overwhelming feeling of discontent, an angst that surfaces when contemplating the finality of the world. Thus, progress becomes entangled with decay.

In respect to this dichotomy Durand mentions that in order to survive, a society needs the confrontation between different myths – the decadent movement and the “techno-industrial spring” – just “as Dionysus acts as a counterbalance for Apollo” (Durand, 146) in Greek mythology. The entire period is built on contrasts: decadence-progress, angst-enthusiasm, denying the values of the past-searching the new, destructive-creative.

A case in point is the German Expressionism and the Italian Futurism. They are born out of the same dimension that stands at the core of modernity – revolt against traditions and the need to separate from what is old (the Expressionists proclaim their opposition to the previous movement – the Impressionism – and the Futurists voice their denial of old values and the need to establish a new culture. In other words, they are both built on the same fundamental concept – the revolt – although their evolutions will later take different forms: Futurism exalts the need for progress whereas Expressionism denounces a state of degradation.
Considering all these, Fleming notices that German Expressionism “reveals a new emotional world in the bleak impulses, the hidden fears and the secret motivations of human behaviour.” (Fleming, 1983, 357). Therefore, it denounces the destructive elements of industrialisation, conveying an overwhelming air of disgust, and protests against the mayhem of war. On the opposite side, Futurism exalts technology and speed, glorifies war and violence, and fosters the idea of a total and liberating destruction that would open the way to a new beginning.

There is a need in Expressionism to create a style with a strong emotional force, where the work of art is a path to the artist’s inner world. Expressionism takes as a reference point the words and the works of Vincent van Gogh “I want to express with red and yellow the terrible human passions”, colour was not only the incasement of form, it conveyed a process of introspection (Grigorescu, 1969, 16).

Expressionists relinquished art “that relied on classical criteria, on mimesis; the new points of reference are the spirit and the imagination, following the Freudian pursuit of the subconscious. Fleming adds that “by describing their reactions to different physical, mental and spiritual phenomena, Expressionists modify, distort and colour images depending on the intensity of his feelings” (Fleming, 1983, 281).
Munch’s work *The Scream* is one of the most representative examples, despite being created 13 years before the first Expressionist group was established. Characterised by sharply traced lines and colours, this painting is important not only for its impact, but also for the atmosphere it conveys, dominated by tension, despondency, desolation, anxiety – themes recurrent in Expressionist works. Munch vividly described it: “One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became ‘The Scream’” (Munch in Grigorescu, 1983, 26).

Pre-war Expressionists divide into two groups that respond differently to surrounding anxieties. *Die Brücke* protested against the mechanised world, using ugliness to denounce society. Figures were absorbed into the background, form and cromatic value were distorted by a dramatic intensification, the dark colours accentuated the feeling of alienation and malaise brought on by the new industrialised society.
Der Blaue Reiter advocates the escape from reality by building a dream-like land, refusing the mechanised society and protesting against it through simplicity and naturalness. The feeling of inadequacy in a world based on questionable values finds finality in the quest for an inner truth. Revolting against materialistic interests, we can find purity in an art that renounces mimetic representations.
Franz Marc, *The Dream*, 1912

Wassily Kandinsky, *Garden of Love (Improvisation 27)*, 1912
“The artist who could not bear the sight of people crawling through dust during the long and torrid hours of military instructions, the intellectual who thought war was a «shame of the human species», they all searched a realm of beauty and purity. Marc’s dream encompassed those fairytale lands where all is possible, horses were blue or purple, strangely coloured fantastic plants sprouted from all sides, bringing a fresh air to his paintings.” (Grigorescu, 1983, 59).

It can be seen that the two artistic movements rely on contrasting principles. On one hand, we turn to Ugliness as a means to revolt against the overwhelming industrial society; on the other hand Futurists exalt a new type of Beauty, inspired by machinery as a symbol for a new order.

The general state of mind among the Futurists was the revolt: against political leaders, social inequality, the past, and the viable solution was to reshape values and concepts. Moreover, they were convinced that a new art would help build a new world, but in order to reach progress degradation through war was necessary. Therefore, a process of destruction was necessary in order to create, “to destroy means to create” (Călinescu, 120).

This idea lies at the center of Italian Futurism, and it was translated into a need for change and nationalism, phenomena that gained momentum at the time. We can trace the origins of this stringent need to take action and to abolish all that is old and obsolete, to interpretations of Nietzsche’s works that greatly influenced the cultural movements of the time.

Umberto Boccioni, Charge of the Lancers, 1915
Filippo Marinetti initiated the *Futurist Manifestos* that exalt speed, force, race cars, war, the slap and fist, the fight against the “moonlight”, against museums and libraries. To make room for the future, one must destroy all that belongs to the past (the past is death) and build a new art meant for a mechanistic age, an art that dissolves the barrier between politics and culture (Hofmann, 1977, 61-70).

Giacomo Balla, *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, 1912

These are in short the fundamental ideas of Futurism. Besides the social challenges and the general revolting spirit, Futurism coagulates around the concept of movement. Futurists wanted to introduce a forth element – time – in the works of art (like Cubists), a concept that would prove essential to the artistic movement. “The world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car, whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like a serpent of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grape shot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace” (Marinetti, 2009, 75). A new Beauty and a new Ugliness take shape, aesthetical categories are viewed from a different perspective. The desire to separate from the classical beauty does not stem only from the need to build a new art; from the Futurists’ point of view,
classical beauty is a static one and contradicts the active spirit they encourage, this is why they revolt against the passivity and apathy of the bourgeoisie.

Considering the following extract from the *Futurist Manifestos*, we can clearly see the change in attitude towards Ugliness and Beauty. “They shout at us, «Your literature won’t be beautiful! Where is your verbal symphony, your harmonious swaying back and forth, your tranquilizing cadences?» Their loss we take for granted! And how lucky! We make use, instead, of every ugly sound, every expressive cry from the violent life that surrounds us. We bravely create the “ugly” in literature, and everywhere we murder solemnity.” (Marinetti, 2009, 104). Therefore, if we apply classical standard to Futurist work of arts, even to modern creations in general, we would conclude that they are ugly. Nonetheless, seen through the lenses of the new perspective and axiological framework, Ugliness transforms into Beauty.
In light of these ideas, we can see that art is not pure. The artistic dimension sometimes blends with the social one and in the modern society from the beginning of the twentieth century, art became an answer, a solution or a means of sanction, with a strong moralizing nature.

As a result, we can suggest an answer to the question why would avant-garde be considered a triumph of Ugliness. It seems there are two types of ugliness: one which breaks away from the old traditions and values, from the classical aesthetic principles, and a provocative one that aims at astounding the bourgeois, at sanctioning a corrupted society with questionable values. The change in perspective on aesthetical categories explains the presence of both ugliness and beauty in a society which undergoes progress and degradation at the same time; from this new perspective Ugliness transforms into Beauty.

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6 It is important to mention that the two artistic movements are more nuanced and complex; I choose nonetheless to emphasize those features that serves to our current endeavour.
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