

Research article

Converting Ugliness into Beauty --- a way to the realm of freedom

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Abstract

Converting the ugliness of real life into the beauty of art consists in the essential reason why ugliness has an aesthetic significance. There is neither pure beauty nor pure ugliness, both of them are always interpenetrated in the reality. However beauty is the positive and optimist facet of life while ugliness is its negative and pessimist facet. Ugliness is the distortion of normal situation in life. Human being always prefers to praise beauty and to avoid ugliness. There are various forms to convert ugliness into beauty: “Convert ugliness into funniness”, “Convert ugliness into sublime spirit”, and “Convert ugliness into sadness” are the main forms of converting ugliness into beauty. All the kinds of converting ugliness into beauty is in order to be in a realm of freedom. Every style of ugliness has its aesthetic form after converting ugliness into beauty. Accordingly every aesthetic form has different realm of freedom. **Copyright © www.acascipub.com, all rights reserved.**

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(I) Why Ugliness Can Have an Aesthetic Significance

When people talk about beautifying the ugliness in real life, obviously it is not to convert ugliness itself into beauty. The possibility to beautify ugliness consists in the essential reason why ugliness has an aesthetic significance. The foil theory believes that beauty is marked out comparing to ugliness, which is on the contrary of beauty. I will not discuss in details in this article if this theory is too superficial or not. Most people believe in other theories: the first is that people believe it exists already ugly things in real life, and the ugliness in arts reveals the “true color of life”, therefore it has an aesthetic significance. If the theory is as simple as that, we can question it by simplifying the theory: if we take photos of the ugliness in real life, it would reveal better “the true color of the life”, wouldn't it? This simple explanation obviously does not make the point. The second is a deeper explanation of this theory, it believes that the ugliness beautified by artists is not a simple imitation of ugly phenomenon in real life, but reveals the underlying meaning of real life, which is discovered by artists using initiative imagination. Vincent Van Gogh said he depicted peasants as they really were in his painting “the potatoes eaters”. He said “You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these

folks...have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor and --- that they have thus honestly earned their food” , this is an example to illustrate the aesthetic significance of this kind of ugliness. The third theory believes that the ugly things in real life possesses unique features comparing to beauty. The ugliness beautified by artists illustrates the individuality instead of underlying the universality. As individuality is more authentic than universality, it demonstrates more realistic things. As a result, the ugliness becomes beautiful. French sculptor Rodin holds clearly this kind of view. The fourth theory believes that when an artist beautifies the ugliness in real life, even though the content itself is ugly, he creates beautiful forms to the ugliness using means of color, figure, or languages etc. Therefore the ugliness has an aesthetic value in form.

I would like to expand and deepen these theories from my new theory “All - things -being –one-body” (“All - things -being -compatible”) in order to answer the question why the ugliness can have an aesthetic meaning.

All the different things communicate with each other, as a result constitute an organic whole. This is an ontological premise of my aesthetic ideology. Under this premise, I believe that life is an organic whole composed by beautiful and ugly things which are two different factors interlinked and interpenetrated. There is neither pure beauty nor pure ugliness. These two are mutually infiltrated in real life. However beauty is positive and optimistic, while ugliness is negative and pessimistic. Ugliness is a distortion of normal situation in life. People always prefer to praise beauty and avoid ugliness. Therefore beauty always shows up in the organic whole of real life, while ugliness is hidden in it. That is why people in real life always prefer to use beauty to cover up ugliness. However when artists create works concerned with ugliness, they enter into inner side of real life, discover the ugly factors and find out the process how beauty transcends ugliness. That is the way how the ugliness in real life becomes beauty of art.

There are two keys here: the first is the creativity --- imagination--- of artists. Ugliness and beauty contrast in real life and ugliness makes people feel unpleasant easily. With their own creativity ---imagination, artists put the ugliness hidden in real life in intuition, compose with beauty which is manifest in real life and turn both of them into an organic whole. It makes appreciators discover both ugliness and beauty synthesized as a whole: Not only can people see ugliness but also understand the beauty from it. The creativity as imagination is represented in how an artist strengthens some aspects in real life while moderating some other aspects when he does the job of beautifying and how he highlights individuality while abandoning universality. That is why the authenticity of artwork created by artists is more authentic than real life. The creativity as imagination manifested in the work of artists shows that the conversion or transformation from ugliness in real life to beauty of art manifests the essence of human beings, which is freedom, i.e. subjectivity as creativity. This kind of transformation is an example of the aesthetic point of view that I want to emphasize: beauty is in freedom.

The second key is the pleasure that people feel from the transformation from ugliness of real life to beauty of art. There are two ways how displeasure brought by the ugliness in real life is changed to a pleasure after being transformed to the beauty of art : (1) appreciators think endlessly of the organic whole of both hidden aspect and visualized aspect of life manifested by artworks and understand it. An example to show how a hidden aspect is visualized in perceptual intuition in an image composed of both hidden and visualized aspects is Rodin’s artwork “Celle qui fut la belle Heaulmiere”. Through the visualized image, appreciators can think of deeply and understand how the scenes of life is shifted from young beauty to old ugliness, and sighed with a kind of feelings. This kind of sighs with feelings after deep thinking and understanding of the hidden aspect of life through the visualized aspect of life is a kind of aesthetic pleasure. As this kind of pleasure is penetrated by an

displeasure from ugliness in real life, it is different from the pleasure initiated by a beautiful work of art. British aesthetic historian Earl of Listowel said the pleasure from the transformation from ugliness in life to beauty of art is “a kind of pleasure with bitter taste”. What is remarkable here is that this kind of aesthetic pleasure is a realm of freedom in human life. The ugliness in real life is ugly, it brings displeasure to people, it is a limitation and a bound to human beings. After the ugliness is converted into beauty of art, the appreciators understand the “whole” of both ugliness and beauty, both hidden and visualized aspect, and feel a freedom that ugliness and beauty are not separated but interpenetrated. This explains as well the significance of “aesthetic freedom” that I spoke of. Furthermore, “the pleasure with bitter taste” intensified and deepened the meaning of realm of freedom in real life.

This pleasure generated by the transformation from ugliness to beauty of art also comes from (2) the formal beauty created by artists. In this kind of work of art, although the theme is ugly, the forms used by artists to beautify possess a formal beauty and makes appreciators feel pleasant, such as figures, colors and compositions in a picture, the poetic languages used by poets, or skills of actors etc. Although the formal beauty is at a shallow level, it shows as well the essence of freedom for human beings as I already discussed in other articles. Moreover, the formal beauty here is not the same as the formal beauty of elegance in general meaning, because this kind of formal beauty is linked organically to the subject of ugliness. Therefore the aesthetic pleasure that appreciators get from this kind of formal beauty has a bitter taste.

(II) Convert Ugliness into Funniness

There are various forms to convert ugliness into beauty. Converting ugliness into funniness is one of forms to convert ugliness to beauty, because funniness is also an aesthetic pleasure. If the displeasure brought by ugliness can be played with a superior attitude of banter and an open-minded spirit, it will generate a kind of pleasure from making people laugh. Like this, ugliness is converted into funniness. For example, sarcastic comedy often makes originally humble and insignificant forms (ugliness) appear as lofty and serious faces at the beginning. However with the development of drama, the humble, small and insignificant ugliness hidden at a deeper level suddenly comes out at the end, and makes appreciators laugh. This kind of laughter comes from appreciators' own contempt of ugliness. Laughter is a free feeling when people relax after being released from the constraints and limits caused by humble and tiny ugliness. The appreciator displays in laughter his subjectivity, superiority over the comedy role, and confidence even arrogance. Obviously, this kind of pleasure from laughter of comedy is a good illustration of “beauty in freedom”.

Funniness is a type of comedy. Ar Q (a personality in Chinese novel by Xu LU) was beaten but licked his wounds by saying it was the son who beat his father in order to conceal weakness of Ar Q's heart. Audiences feel funny when they see this phenomenon. The laughter here comes not only from the mysterious feeling of abnormal phenomenon (ugliness) but also from the pity of unfairness, mainly from the subjectivity of appreciators themselves--- the free nature of human being: viewers can only empathize with Ar Q in his situation of subjectivity being crashed based on the premise that the viewer realize himself that his subjectivity is kept. Then he feels abnormal that Ar Q was beaten without fighting back. The funniness here is also an aesthetic pleasure, it displays human being's subjectivity and his nature of being free.

In general, comedy considers ugliness as a dying thing in an ever changing history where new things replace old things: the thing which used to be brilliant goes up in smoke, it seems funny. If people can use this sublime and

optimist spirit to look at the constraints and limitations that ugliness brings in history, he can free himself from the constraints and limitation and turn the inevitable thing into freedom.

(III) Convert Ugliness into Sublime Spirit

Converting ugliness into sublime spirit is another form of converting ugliness into beauty. Sublime spirit is different from elegance, but it is as well a type to please people by beauty. Sublime spirit is a respect, a yearning and a pursuit for infinitude. What is called “converting ugliness into sublime spirit” consists in considering ugliness as finite and sublime spirit as infinite. The main idea is to pursue infinite, namely to surpass his own finite to reach the infinite. As a result, “Converting ugliness into sublime spirit” can also be called “converting finite into infinite” in simple and common language. One important point that makes people different from animal is that people would like to realize himself, which means he is not satisfied to be ignoble animal limited by himself, but prefer to pursue infinite self. Casius Longinus (213-273) used to say: “the nature ushers us into life and into the vast universe as into some great assembly, to be as it were spectators of the mighty whole and the keenest aspirants for honor, forthwith she implants in our souls **the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we**”, “not even the entire universe suffices for the thought and contemplation within the reach of the human mind”, but “our imaginations often pass beyond the bounds of space”. What is called “within the reach of the human mind” refers to the limitation of human being; what is called “imagination that pass beyond the bounds of space” refers to the boundless infinite. Casius Longinus believes that “the striving towards greatness is rooted in human nature”, that is sublime [1].

I believe that “Converting ugliness into sublime” realizes “the striving towards greatness”. The object of sublime, either it is the “mathematical sublime” or what he called “physical sublime”, both of them overwhelm the limited subject by its unlimited huge power, and make the subject generate a kind of depressive and terrifying unpleasantness. But as saying by Kant, while we feel the limits of ourselves in sublime, we discover another “unemotional measurement” (in fact unlimited “rational idea”), as a result, comparing to unlimited “idea”, everything in the nature seems tiny, this way the subject discovers inside a superior pride over the characteristics of un-measured-ness of nature [2]. It means that the sublime arouse the resistance of the subject and wake up the subject’s rational subjectivity, as a result, it confirms the nature of freedom of subject. The unlimited admiration and praise towards the object of sublime is converted into a pride of being an unlimited subject itself: The subject is converted from limitation (being limited) into infinite (not limited, freedom). What makes sublime lofty, it does not consist in the fear that it arises, but it awakes a supernatural power which regards all the earthly things (such as property, life) as tiny and insignificant. In summary, what makes sublime lofty is not in the sublime thing itself, but in the fact that it elevates our imagination and make our heart realize that we have a lofty mission to transcend nature [3]. Based on this theory, Kant goes further and affirms: the limitation of human being cannot master the infinite whole, but human being realize that we have the mission to master the unlimited whole. Therefore “the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self- the subject” [4]. What Kant called “the idea of humanity in our own self” is in fact what Casius Longinus called “striving towards greatness”.

What Casius Longinus and Kant’s theory and statements can tell us is: sublime spirit is a resistance of subject towards object, it is the “striving” of subject. It is not as simple as making a Zhuang Zi’s “Dream of butterfly” to convert finite into infinite and to attain the aesthetic realm of sublime. It can only be attained after long term

“striving” through pains in life (“keenly feel”). In my other articles, I liked to quote the word “endurance” used by Hegel in his “Phenomenology of spirit” to describe this aspect in life’s journey. Therefore converting ugliness into sublime can be explained as well to go through “endurance”. Only “endurance” can generate sublime and greatness.

Another meaning of converting ugliness into sublime is to convert bizarrerie into beauty. The “ugliness” here refers to “bizarrerie”. Sublime object often possesses unusual forms. Some works of art often display their imposing and sublime characteristics by having unusual factors. Sublime things belong to “rational idea” because its unlimited characteristics cannot be grasped by any sensory forms (infinite can be neither seen nor felt). “Rational idea” cannot be displayed appropriately by any sensory forms, however as it (the “rational idea” mastered by the “rational power”) cannot be displayed by sensory forms, it can be, as explained previously, awaken thus [5]. When people intend to display infinite, they cannot find a limited sensory form to display it appropriately in phenomenon area [6]. However in sensory phenomenon there exist a kind of unusual thing that can more or less show the ingenious and sublime atmosphere of infinite, bizarrerie becomes a common form to display sublime in this way: bizarrerie symbolizes sublime. What the Gothic architecture features of cathedrals created is a deep and mysterious atmosphere, which leads human being’s heart into infinite and sublime area. “LiSao” (one of the works by Chinese poet Qu Yuan) full of strange and mysterious forms can display sublime features the best.

(IV) Convert Ugliness into Sadness

One of ugliness is in the sense of aesthetics, another is in the sense of ethics: the contrary side of the first is beauty; that of the last is evil, contrary to good. The “ugliness” mentioned in previous discuss of several types of “converting ugliness into beauty” means sometimes the ugliness in the sense of aesthetics, sometimes in the sense of ethics. What I will talk about later in the article is tragedy, it is one type of “converting ugliness into beauty” as well, but the ugliness here mainly refers to the ugliness in the sense of ethic and morality. It refers to evil, “ugly and bad” as is called in Chinese. Tragedy talks often about the struggle between good and bad in an ethical society, the nature does not have tragedy itself. Tragedy regards evil from an aesthetical view: ugliness is evil and the suffering and disaster caused by evil. The effect of tragedy is to convert ugliness into sadness and obtain an aesthetical pleasure from the sadness, this is the converting ugliness into beauty in tragedy.

If aesthetical status in **comedy** is laughing at the humble and transitory tininess behind the phenomenon and let it go to display the essence of freedom from open mind of human being, the aesthetical status of **tragedy** is to show the essence of freedom from heroic spirit of human being when he stand still and cool to accept the challenge in front of the fate ---this huge power out of control of individual ability. Even though human being is rational and is capable to choose what he wants, he can not control completely his fate --- the huge power adapted to the external necessity---as he has limited power. Consequently it comes suffering and disaster. The suffering and disaster are not rooted from actions chosen by human being but from the fate. This is why this kind of suffering and disaster are tragic.

“Tragedy” is sad because the suffering and disaster is rooted from the fate, but suffered by individual human being. This is particularly pitied and sympathized by the audiences. Different from compassion and sympathy in ordinary daily life due to the fact that the person suffering is the same as me, the compassion and sympathy here is due to the great pressure highlighted intentionally or unintentionally by the tragedy author in his process of

creation. That is also why audiences feel that “the Lord of heaven is unjust” after seeing a tragedy. “The Lord of heaven” is the Fate. This feeling is a kind of tender feeling to reduce the stress caused by “evil and ugly”, it is a kind of aesthetical feeling as well, I call it “sympathy” which is a kind of “sad pleasure”. Sure, we can not only feel in tragedy but also feel the same (“The Lord of heaven is unjust”) about the suffering and disaster of some people in ordinary daily life. But people who can have such feeling has more or less sense of aesthetics.

Furthermore, the “sadness” of tragedy consists in the feeling of tininess of individual facing the great power of the fate in tragedy (intentionally or unintentionally) through the suffering and disasters in the tragedy, just like what people feel in sublime. This kind of feeling is called in general “fear” in tragedy. But this kind of fear is not the same as the fear in sublime which is a mixture of respect, reverence and yearn towards unfinite, it has a connotation of the “sadness and anger” towards “evil and ugliness”. “Sadness and anger” is also a soft fear to reduce the stress caused by “evil and ugliness”, it is also a kind of “sad pleasure.” “Sympathy” “Sadness” and “anger” are not frustrating or disappointing, they arouse furthermore people’s sense of grandeur and sense on his own. This is displayed at first in heroism of the hero in most tragedy. Hegel said when the hero of tragedy is subjected to the fate, they still show a mind (das Gemuet) of keeping cool (das einfache Beisichsein), as if he says “that is it” (Es ist so !) Like this the subject is always loyal to himself; he give up the things taken away from him , but the objective he pursues is not taken away, furthermore while suffering the lost, he has not lost himself. “people subject to the fate can lose his life but cannot lose his freedom” (Der Mensch, vom Geschick unterjocht, kann sein Leber verlieren, die Freiheit nicht) [7] . The object of the heroes in tragedy failed in front of “Fate”, but he keep his subjectivity and essence of freedom in spite of this. Of course this is shown as well by the admiration and shock that this kind of tragedy can arouse the audiences. This kind of admiration and shock is the arousing of people’s subjectivity, it is the summit of “sad pleasure”).

Furthermore, the “sadness” of tragedy can be displayed in the cause of suffering and disasters ---- the fate is not superficial, individual, therefore it cannot be looked through at one glance, it is instead social and historical, even rooted in the deep side of human nature, and appear mysterious. This way, tragedy always makes people think seriously after suffering of the root cause of suffering and disasters. That is why when audience finish the tragedy, they are absorbed in meditation for a long time. What Chinese said “we cannot stop talking about Dreams of the red Chamber”, it can be understood as “we cannot stop thinking of Dreams of the red Chamber”: “cannot stop talking” has a realistic significance, it means that we cannot stop thinking of the cause of suffering and disasters in “Dreams of the red Chamber”--- cannot stop talking thus. This kind of meditation is both rational and not completely rational, but full of sad feelings, we can call it “pondering sadly”, it makes people feel the austerity of life, and makes the connotation of objectivity itself deeper and more abundant. The tragedy stimulates people into being stronger. The essence of human being’s freedom is displayed as deep, determinable, solemn and stirring. This kind of “aesthetic pleasure” is in distinct contrary to the pleasure in laughing while seeing comedy.

(V) All Kinds of Conversion from Ugliness to Beauty aiming at the Realm of Freedom

There are various states of ugliness, of aesthetics and of realm of freedom after converting ugliness into beauty. How many states of ugliness are there, how many aesthetic states to convert ugliness into beauty accordingly, and how many realm of freedom accordingly furthermore. (graceful aesthetic state shows a comfortable, free and peaceful free spirit. However as the aesthetic state of graceful beauty is quite pure and there is no conflict, nor block, nor tremor and thus nor deep significance, therefore the aesthetic pleasure that it brings is not

“pleasure with bitter taste”, I do not classify it into the series of “converting ugliness into beauty” to talk about. Sometimes the discordant noisy tones are used in music to describe the conflict of characters, and sometimes the incompatible colors are used in paintings to display the complexity in life, etc, it cannot be called graceful beauty). Limited ugliness can be converted into sublime aesthetic state. The free spirit displayed is an aspiration and pursues towards infinite possibilities. The ugliness of lowliness can be converted into aesthetic state of comedy, the free spirit that it brings is open, confident and arrogant. The evil and ugliness in the sense of ethic can be converted into aesthetic state of tragedy. The free spirit that it displays is heroism. The three states of ugliness, beauty and freedom that I discuss here are just general states that people talk about in general. How many states of ugliness are there ? How many states of beauty ? Estheticians talk often about them. However the according states of realm of freedom are not often discussed particularly, except the three states I talked about previously (open, confidence and arrogance of tragedy, aspiration towards infinite in sublime, and heroism of tragedy) plus the comfortable, free and quite due to graceful beauty.

In the order of people’s subjectivity and free development levels, Hegel classified comedy on the top of all arts. He believes that comedy regards some event in real life as accidental, insignificant and subject to subject as it pleases, therefore subject becomes “subjectivity” having “unlimited confidence”, and pays carefree manner to failures. This kind of “subjectivity” destroys the appearance of “absolute truth” in real world. The confidence and independence of object are too impractical and become arrogance ! Then, the art ends, enters into philosophy conception ---- the stage of “absolute idea”, and it attains the “absolute subjectivity” the highest subject --- the absolute freedom [8] . This theory of Hegel has already been criticized by western contemporary philosophy, the idea of freedom of “absolute subjectivity” that he advocates is too abstract. In fact, the subjectivity and abstract of freedom of Hegel including the state of all the art states’ freedom in his whole artistic system are the products of western traditional “subject-object dichotomy” theory, therefore it has a limited characteristics. I believe that what I propose the meditation of “all -things -being –one- body” is the highest and the most concrete realm of freedom. More detailed discussions in this area can be referred to my article “ aesthetic consciousness’ three level of transcendence ” (“philosophy analysis” magazine, 2011, No. 3) Of course, the state of freedom after converting ugliness into beauty concludes the meaning of improving ethical state to aesthetic state, especially in the sense of converting the “evil and ugliness” in sense of ethics and morality into beauty. Even though the “must” (must follow the good and avoid evil) in state of ethics and morality is volunteer, it is still mandatory in some sense (volunteer enforceability). Only when people enters into the realm of aesthetic freedom, he can practice naturally the “must” in the state of ethics and morality. This kind of aesthetic state of freedom does not talk about morality but matches morality naturally. That is why I believe, the problem of aesthetic education that everyone likes to talk today is in principle a problem to improve ethical state to aesthetic state, a problem how to convert ugliness (“evil and ugliness”) into beauty. If we understand aesthetic education as using beauty as a tool to attain the object of morality, we degrade beauty into something utilitarian and lose the truth of beauty, far from entering into the highest realm of spirit in life. The ugliness-beauty and the bad-good in ethic realm are in opposite position. The pure morality is to teach people to use good to restrain bad but not to convert ugliness into beauty. It does not pay attention to improve the spirit realm. Not to mention the result if we do not pay attention to improve the spirit realm but to moral didacticism.

References

- [1] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Penguin Books, 1965, P.146
- [2] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Chapter 28
- [3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid Chapter 27

[5] Ibid. 23

[6] Hegel Werke 13, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, s.467

[7] Hegel Werke 13, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, S.208-S.209

[8] Hegel Werke 15, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, S.527-S.529