

The bold, the beautiful, and the ugly: reflections occasioned by a beautiful book edited by Sarah Nuttall

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The book entitled *Beautiful Ugly. African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (2006) was heralded by its editor as a beautiful book. 'Beautiful' it certainly is, in a manner of speaking. The correspondence set up between its description and its title is replicated in the 'Africa' of its claimed uniqueness, which appears both as a claim to 'epistemology' and 'ontology'. This review article argues that the book does not support this claim in relation to either 'beauty' or 'Africa'; if at all, the review argues, such a claim could only be upheld in relation to the work of art

Das Buch mit dem Titel *Beautiful Ugly. African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (2006) wurde von seiner Herausgeberin als ein 'schönes Buch' begrüßt. In der Tat ein schönes Buch. Wie zwischen Titel und Beschreibung des Buches eine Entsprechung hergestellt wird, so beansprucht das 'Afrika' seines Untertitels in einer Ontologie aufzugehen, die gleichzeitig einer epistemologischen Funktion zugeführt wird. Der folgende Rezensionartikel befindet, dass das Buch diesen Anspruch weder im Bezug auf 'das Schöne' noch im Bezug auf 'Afrika' einlösen kann, denn ein solcher Anspruch kann nur dem Kunstwerk selbst gelten.

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On first thoughts, writing and publishing within boldly asserted categories of 'the beautiful' and 'the ugly' is nothing short of bold, by which 'the bold' itself attains a status on par with 'the beautiful'. On second thoughts, the boldness of the attempt is diminished by the consideration that 'the beast' has long been tamed, if we take the title of the collection of Hans Robert Jauß's collection *Dienichtmehr schönen Künste* (1968) (transl. 'The no longer beautiful arts') for it.

'The ugly' or 'the no longer beautiful arts' have long been included in the registers of art-historical and critical writing, whose legacy goes back much further than Jauß's influential collection of essays. Reflections on the role of the ugly in art are mounted in the Enlightenment's differentiation between the beautiful in art and the beautiful in nature, and then more explicitly, in Victor Hugo's Preface to his play *Cromwell* (1827). In his *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (1853), Hegelian-inspired Karl Rosenkranz conceded to the ugly its own aesthetic, albeit as a matter of the negative of the beautiful.

In most contexts of the global North and West, censorship is not brought to bear on art work described by all manner of euphemisms spawned by the unspeakable 'ugly', and galleries and publishers are not barring exhibits that would fit such descriptions. From the perspectives offered by Jürgen Habermas (following in the tracks of Max Weber - 1981), and Niklas Luhmann (1973, 1984), of a progressive differentiation of normative spheres, valorisations in terms of the beautiful and the ugly have lost any socially-pervasive orienting and binding capacity. 'The no longer beautiful arts' are no longer even 'marginal phenomena of the aesthetic', as they were still designated in the subtitle of the collection edited by Jauß in 1968. What has become marginal, instead, is the aesthetic *per se* (see Stockhammer 2002: 17).

Confrontations between 'the beautiful' and 'the ugly' have, since the second half of the twentieth century, been mounted in various contexts, both intra- and extra-aesthetic. Art-historical writing has rehabilitated the role of the ugly in the advancement of boundary-pushing techniques and apperception in a "narrative of aesthetic redemption" (Danto 2004: 49) by which yesterday's disharmony becomes tomorrow's harmony (see Kandinsky 1955: 229) – excepting the 'Intractable Avant-Garde' inaugurated with Dada (see Danto 2004: 49). Invoking 'harmony' in the rehabilitation of 'the ugly' belies a contestatory history, though. In literary and cultural studies, categories of literary value are associated with debates on the literary canon. Claims on behalf of the canon have variously referred these categories to the distinction between highbrow

and popular culture, the latter being associated with consumption, mass culture, and media technology. Counter-arguments usually revolve around the legitimacy of the role of the ugly – in the form of the grotesque, for instance –, in critiquing the making of cultural hegemony, and challenging moralising surveillance and censorship. If the ugly is the raw, the incompletely formed, or the dissonant, the elision or interdiction of the ugly is tantamount to prohibiting that which opposes the work's ruling law of form (see Adorno et al. 2004: 60). In the process of the critical formation pivoting on the role of the ugly, beauty was withdrawn from the definition of art.

Whether in the service of intensifying the apperception of the beautiful, of generating a surplus of stimulation accounting for the power of fascination, or of critique of conventions governing and channelling the aesthetic, the ugly has become firmly if conflictually instated within the aesthetic field to generate new intensities of exchanges and interconnections beyond a simple dialectical relation between the beautiful and the ugly. Only in disentangling the symmetry presupposed in any presumed dialectical relation can we account for the aestheticisation of the ugly (including the aestheticisation of violence, kitsch, stereotypes, etc.), and the de-aestheticisation of the beautiful. To retain anti-art as critical impetus within aesthetic theory, Hans Blumenberg postulated a shift from qualitative to energetic categories:

If there is no specific equivalent for the aesthetic enjoyment offered by the work of art, energetic categories will have to take the place of specific qualitative categories for the delimitation of the aesthetic field. Moments of newness and surprise, of shock and alienation, of imposition and provocation, all have such an energetic component – that is what they have in common. (Blumenberg 1968: 692)

So, on third thoughts, does the re-instatement of 'the beautiful' and 'the ugly' in the face of the recession of the beautiful from the aesthetic, to the point of imposing a critical taboo on beauty, represent a bold move after all? This is one of the questions posed within the broader parameters of the relationship between 'Beauty, Ugliness, and Sublimity', the theme of the last edition of the *South African Journal of Art History* (vol. 22, no. 3, 2007), and particularly in the opening article by Bert Olivier, entitled 'Beauty, ugliness, the sublime, and truth in art' (pp. 1-16). While this article slants this relationship towards the sublime in the condition of postmodernity, the book edited by Sarah Nuttall, entitled *Beautiful/Ugly* places the normative distinction *Beautiful/Ugly* centre stage, and visually boldly on the cover. And it indicates the central role of these categories within aesthetics, in the framing provided by the subtitle 'African and Diaspora Aesthetics'. What ostensibly complicates the insertion of 'beautiful/ugly' into aesthetics, and questions it if it is thought of as a simple 'reinstatement', is the localisation of 'Africa'. Much hinges on this geo-aesthetic that is adduced in the book as disruption of 'Western' art-historical vagaries, ideals and conventions. Provisionally conceding the possibility of disruption on these grounds, I would like to hold the question as to the critical boldness of the book open for a while.

The book is a varied and comprehensive collection, combining, as it does, descriptive and cultural-historical articles, richly illustrated and colourfully designed, on modernist painting's 'Africa' imagined in masks and sculpture, on Congolese music, (ethnographic) photography, writing, on children's crafting of dolls from waste materials, on cuisine and sumptuary rituals between the raw and the cooked, on hair styles, on transnational negotiations of Yorùbá aesthetics and ritual practices in America, on popular painting from Ghana, and on allegorical stories.

This combination is designed to break through categories and conventions that separate philosophical, anthropological, historical, art-historical, and art-critical writing on African art and aesthetics, on innovative styles, and on new cultural and ritual practices at the intersections between the local and the transnational.

However, the Introduction does not stop short of inventing its own categories in devising “registers”, “lenses” and distinct geographically demarcated, bounded, and essentialised sites of artistic-cultural production and theorisation.

Contemplating the theme of the book, “beauty in its relationship to ugliness in Africa”, the editor considers four possibilities or registers for the study of “beauty in Africa”:

- The inscription of Africa in Western aesthetic discourses in terms of figures of the ugly
- The conceptions of ‘beauty’ in Africa registered in anthropology on the one hand, and art history on the other; the question of “how to study the sign of Africa as an aesthetic category (12)
- The study of “beauty in Africa” in its locations and circulations in the marketplace of global (post)modernity
- The study of beauty and aesthetic production in Africa in contexts and contestations of poverty, violence, dislocation, and social distress

The Introduction lists three aesthetic-logical clusters that provide the rationale for the sequencing of the compilation of essays:

- “... the integral association of beauty with a form of a largely socially defined ugliness and abjection” (22) (comprising the essays by Achilles Mbembe, William Kentridge, Rita Barnard, Dominique Malaquais, and Pippa Stein)
- A “distributional and circulatory” register “in which the notion of beauty is seen to work across the senses and across space” (24) (comprising the essays by Els van der Plas, Mark Gevisser, Célestin Monga, , Françoise Vergès, and Cheryl-Ann Michael)
- “... an anti-aesthetic, that which deals with the limits of beauty, or one in which beauty remains unnamed” (26) (comprising the essays of Rodney Place and Michelle Gilbert)

Departing from its lofty theoretical aims of developing an “African and Diaspora Aesthetics” (thus the subtitle), the Introduction then locates the vistas of the book in relation to three separate formulaically presented literature surveys. The first one lists “recent theories of beauty in the Northern academy” (by reference to the work of Elaine Scarry, Denis Donoghue, Wendy Steiner, Arthur Danto, David Hickey, Peter Schjeldahl, Bill Beckley & David Shapiro, Susan Bordo, Michael Taussig, and Martin Jay). The second survey summarily presents African philosophers’ writings on beauty (Simon Gikandi, Okwui Enwezor, Achille Mbembe, Mariane Ferme) in terms of ‘influences’ of, and ‘differences’ from, “Anglophone and Francophone traditions of thought”. The third survey outlines the essays compiled in the book in terms of the three “lenses” listed above.

Its listing of alternative categories notwithstanding, the *Beautiful Ugly* book does not quite know whether it wants to be coffee-table book or a collection of illustrated descriptive essays. Its placement on bookshop and library shelves, as well as its slot in domestic interiors speaks to its uncertain location. The book ostensibly attempts to dismantle this opposition along with other oppositions pervading writing on art, keying into academics’ underdeveloped aesthetic sensibilities and aesthetes’ conceptual gropings. While this may be welcomed as an opening of interfaces in which art-creative and reflective practices can connect with one another, the innovative force of this gesture does not carry the book. The unresolved tension between art chat and critical theory of art is apparent in the discourse of the book’s framing in the Introduction. The Introduction veers between coffee table chat, more or less art-full, art cataloging, art historical jargon’s propensity for vacuity, and philosophical gestures. In the absence of a consistent analytical vocabulary, and epistemologically-committal review, it remains descriptively and conceptually impoverished in its proliferation of the adjectives ‘powerful’, ‘potent’, and ‘capacious’; in the evocations of ‘power’ and ‘energy’ that so neatly dovetail with

the ideologemes of 'Africa'; in its privileging of substantivised adjectives that do not have to designate anything in particular, along with an entire range of –nesses – whiteness, strangeness, edginess, interwovenness (21), social appropriateness, (21) racial being, slipperiness (25) that would seem to be authorised by talk of 'the beautiful' and 'the ugly' or 'ugliness' – along with the "unpredictability, mutability, and volatility of beauty and its relationship to ugliness in Africa and its intersections of the world": "the power of the African image" (21) "African ontology" (21).

What remains uninterrogated is the essentialised geo-aesthetics that pervades these attributes and epithets. To the extent that the Introduction does not adequately theorise these, it gives licence to stereotypical mythologisations of 'Africa' and the 'African diaspora' that resonate particularly in the essay by Els van der Plas ('The Love of the Body: Ousmane Sow and Beauty') and in the conclusion of Patricia Pinho's essay 'Afro-Aesthetics in Brazil' that casts the African diaspora in Brazil in organicist metaphors (289).

A welcome antidote to some of the assumptions that have found their way into van der Plas' essay, is provided in the essay by Simon Gikandi, entitled 'Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference' and reprinted in the *Beautiful Ugly* book. Gikandi's essay shows Picasso's treatment of African masks to be of a piece with the artist's assumption that these belong to a unified tradition, through which 'primitivism' could be annexed to form part of the 'tradition' of modernism, rather than being recognised to be constitutive of or correlative to modernism.

Geo-aesthetics of a different kind is evident in Achille Mbembe's essay entitled, 'Variations of the Beautiful in Congolese Worlds of Sound'. The essay provides a history of Congolese urban music, a perceptive "experience of listening" (63), and a nuanced account of performances and choreographies. While detailed attention is given to the local and transnational blending in the creation of unique genres, styles, and musical media, the writing of this experience mobilises, among others, concepts derived from the *Birth of Tragedy*, from theories of the object, and from psychoanalytic attempts of capturing the death drive, to characterise "Congolese musical experience" and "the African subject" in particular.

Setting such geo-aesthetics in motion is the essay by Kamari Maxine Clarke, entitled 'Yorùbá Aesthetics and Trans-Atlantic Imaginaries'. Far from 'rooting' Yorùbá aesthetics in Nigeria, the essay charts the re-classification of national belonging through investigating the production of African cultural communities in the Americas. In the process, the essay arrives at "... an approach to understanding the production of black racial difference which is deeply embedded in articulations of blackness is complexly routed through both a modernity of national origins and vectors of economic and territorial networks. Its power lies in historical discourses of post-slavery suffering and through the narrating of such suffering as the basis on which authentic rights are claimed." (293)

Far from ontologising 'Africa', or attempting to "understand an African ontology" (which the Introduction attributes to Mbembe), such an approach analyses the "imaginary conflation of race and culture" that produces "Africa as symbolic home of black people" (296).

If any talk of 'ontology' would be pertinent in this context, I would argue, it would not be in relation to 'Africa', or 'the African subject', but in relation to the work of art. This is the upshot of the work of Arthur Danto, whose more recent book is cited in the Introduction. Danto's celebration of the return of beauty (in as much as it is internally connected to the content of the work – 2004: 113) is systematically related to his earlier work (Danto 1986; see also Horowitz & Huhn 1998: 22, 26). It is in incorporating a definition of itself in its own work, Danto argues, that (post)modernist art internalises its own history, and comes to its own philosophical self-consciousness. As its consciousness of its own history comes to form part of its nature, it ceases

to dictate and be dictated to by art history as history of ideas. Art comes to pose the question of the philosophical nature of art, of what it is and what it is not, from *within* itself, rendering external definitions and valuations of art and non-art irrelevant. This is not in contrast to “the power of the gaze”, nor is it in contrast to judgement of taste (even as Danto is intent on freeing beauty from “taste”). Kant’s notion of reflective judgement (1790), taken through Schelling’s formal criteria for cognition as self-cognition of method (1794), paves the way for a changing status of art. In Kant’s hands, ‘taste’ becomes the prototype of judgement that reflects on its own conditions, thereby inaugurating the process by which the question ‘what is art?’ becomes the constitutive feature of the work of art itself. For that reason, too, the beautiful in the work of art does not need to be defined in relation to ‘the ugly’ as its external limit (in which position it is installed in the Introduction as well as in the design and title of the book) – it is incorporated within the work of art itself.

It is in that sense, it would seem, that Gikandi postulates the role of African art *qua art* in relation to early modernism: African artefacts, he claims, acted as intercessors, “instruments for mediating the kinds of forces ... needed to break through the edifice of modernity” (40) – not as a matter of style, but as a matter of ontology unsettling symbolic forms and representation itself.

An external delimitation of the apperception of ‘beauty’ through the notion of ugliness would also not have become a central point had the Introduction consistently analysed and heeded the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, which finds mention in the survey of “recent theories of beauty in the Northern academy”, but is abandoned subsequently. Kant’s innovative (and, for psychoanalysis, consequential) libidinal economy of the sublime and of the imagination, instantiating the pleasure-unpleasure series, is glossed over in other parts of the Introduction that tend to treat the beautiful and the sublime as synonymous. What is forgotten along with this conflation, is the anthropology of the senses that is uniquely mobilised by the aesthetic – a capacity that sets the sublime at odds with representation, with concepts, with reason and with understanding, while performing important functions for the latter.

To the extent that the book ostensibly derives its uniqueness from viewing beauty in Africa “as that which works across the senses”, as opposed to “Western thought”, that is said (with Achille Mbembe and Mariane Ferme) to have “always shied away from interpreting beauty within the framework of an anthropology of the senses” (p. 22), the claims of its Introduction ring somewhat hollow for as long as it withholds a consistent philosophical argument for the case that it wants to make for an African aesthetic. To make that case, it would have needed precisely those elements that it emphatically rules out from the start (8): a universal history of art, aesthetic theory, and a philosophical anthropology of art.

In terms of a universal history of art, the Introduction could have introduced the range of articles covering the spectrum of objects relevant for an art history and aesthetic theory in a context in which normative spheres have not been entirely and unequivocally differentiated and separated, and in which this relative indistinction is invigorated by the circulation of commodities. A framework could have been outlined for the social life of things, in which artefacts and commodities alike move variously within as well as between circuits of ritual, moral, aesthetic, and political economies. Their changing status in the course of such movement could have been shown to unsettle any neat, unambiguous, or permanent delimitations of their role and significance, vacillating in status, as they do, between ritual/cult objects, art objects, craft objects, gifts, commodities, and waste products. It would have been fruitful to outline the respective circuits of economic, social, and symbolic exchanges, as well as their intersections and transformations as the object variously moves through them, being embedded in, and embedding particular social-symbolic significations and values in the process.

An important part of that circulation activating different circuits of exchange governed by different formal or informal rules is the setting in motion of something new – the commodity. The social hieroglyphics of the commodity as THE form of the instantiation of the social life of things, are transformed into art in aesthetic modernism – and this is where aesthetic theory would have contributed important conceptualisations to the essays and the Introduction of the *Beautiful/Ugly* book.

Walter Benjamin remarks on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire:

Around the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted of the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself on the work of art. (Benjamin [1940] 1999: J60, 6)

The advent of that ‘something new’ disrupting the status and understanding of the role of art can be shown to have a firm location in the logics and circuits of exchange in African societies on which aesthetic modernism draws. The fetishism of the commodity and of the cult object find a common denominator in the social life of things, that inspired not only the contemplation, in modernist art, of its own relation to its indiscernible counterparts, but also the very definition of the sublime within a philosophical anthropology of art.

The objects potentially giving rise to the feeling of the sublime, for Kant, read like a replication of Charles de Brosses’ 1760 list of ‘fetish’ objects, gleaned from the descriptions by Portuguese sailors, of the object-related practices of people living on the West Coast of Africa. They include natural material objects, such as rocks, mountains, buildings; animate objects, such as human beings, and animals; natural scenes, such as landscapes, tornadoes and starry skies; and moral phenomena, such as nations, wars, warriors, and God. Kant was careful to set up barriers to prevent the feeling of the sublime from becoming “the religion of sensuous desire”, by moving the sublime out of the sphere of magic and rhetoric (as characterisation of a style) to the domain of natural objects, and from there to aesthetic judgement (G. Böhme 1999: 83). But they return from there into the work of art in the process of the incorporation of reflective judgement within the work of aesthetic modernism itself.

The libidinal economy of the sublime, in contrast to the beautiful, harbours a tension in which unpleasure threatens to gain the upper hand. Terror and the return of the phylogenetically repressed, closely linked to the ugly, are instrumental in generating such tension. The ugly, viewed from within a philosophical anthropology of art, is not simply a matter of ‘Western’ stereotyping, “damaging” and “fundamentally racist” (8; see also 9), as the Introduction suggests. Far from linking the ugly to regressive primitivism, Adorno sets the ugly in art in relation to the Dialectic of Enlightenment with its promise of freedom, thereby opening a different way of looking at some of the same elements that go into what the Introduction would put down to racist stereotyping:

The ugly is what art rejected on its path to autonomy. The concept of the ugly may well have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase. It marks the permanent return of the archaic, intertwined with the dialectic of enlightenment in which art participates. Archaic ugliness, the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces, was the substantive imitation of fear, which it disseminated around itself in expiation. As mythical fear diminished with the awakening of subjectivity, the traits of this fear fell subject to the taboo whose organon they were; they first became ugly vis-à-vis the idea of reconciliation, which comes into the world with the subject and his nascent freedom. But the old images of terror persist in history, which has yet to redeem the promise of freedom. (Adorno et al. 2004: 62)

The ugly presents the autonomy of art with the limit which becomes its critical impetus.

To return, after a long excursion, to the question of the critical boldness of the beautiful book that I had posed on third thoughts, I would venture to say that it diverts the expectation of the boldly critical to the geographical and culturalist location of ‘Africa’, where it gets lost. Only through a reconnection with questions from within those domains that find mention but

are ruled out in the framing Introduction, could the critical question be addressed. Some of the essays compiled in the book honour this subdued promise, notably those of Simon Gikandi, Achille Mbembe, and Kamari Maxine Clarke - despite the Introduction.

Sarah Nuttall (ed.) *Beautiful Ugly. African and Diaspora Aesthetics*. Durham & London: Duke University Press; The Hague: Prins Klaus Fund; Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2006)

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