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Author(s): Mark Cousins

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# THE UGLY

Mark Cousins

Ugliness, I argued in the first part of this article,<sup>1</sup> can be thought of not simply as the negation of beauty but as having a real and independent dimension in which it is experienced as that which is there and which should not be there. Rather than a lack (of beauty), it is an excess – an excess which comes to threaten the subject. The source of this threat, I argued, was a change in the balance between the existence of an object and its representation. For an object to accord with the safety which is implied by classical notions of beauty it must accord with a certain law of proportionality,<sup>2</sup> not the kind which can be found in architectural discussions of proportion but a proportionality none the less. If we grant that an object exists twice – firstly as a representation of itself and secondly as its existence, then the outside of a thing (representation) must enclose the inside of a thing (existence). This proportionality, in which the exterior ‘overcoats’ the interior, in which the object as representation contains the object as existence, has the necessary consequence of changing the nature of the distinction between the exterior and the interior. This is a notorious problem, in any case. So many discussions of interiority and exteriority build a wall between the two categories and so cannot think about the problematic character of a wall. Some discussions abolish the distinction between interior and exterior and so cannot think about the problematic character of the abolition of a wall. But from the point of view of this question of ugliness the question of exterior and interior has to be reframed as the distinction between representation and existence. The ‘exterior’ of a building, then, is not a simple empirical reality – the ‘outside’ of a building. Indeed, it is important to recall that the outside of a building can never be reduced to an empirical fact. The exterior of a building is not the last spatial moment of a building before it passes into what is not itself. *It is what represents the building to a subject.* It follows, then, that the conventional architectural categories of interior and exterior are not only of little help; they are an obstacle, in so far as they always return the problem of the inside and the outside to the phantasy of, say, a solid cube. Such an object, with its apparently vivid manifestation of what is an inside, of what is an outside, and of what is a surface, is an obstacle to the reframing of the question from the point of view of the issue of ugliness. The exterior is the representation of the object for the subject, and therefore includes much which is ‘inside’ the object. The interior is the existence of the object and therefore can include anything on the ‘outside’ of the object which has not been submitted to a regime of representation. It is in this sense that

ugliness arises as and when the interior of the existence of an object exceeds, for a subject, its representational exterior. It might be tempting to regard this event as a simple issue of something leaking or bursting out of a representational shell. And indeed images of seeping and leaking and of bursting and exploding will inevitably dominate literary and graphic attempts to capture this moment. In fact the situation is more complex, as can be seen if this moment is considered from the viewpoint of the subject rather than the object.

When the order of representation still contains the existence of an object, the subject remains within a certain proportional relation to the object. This relation permits the subject a sufficient portion of narcissism for the subject to ‘appreciate’ the object. As long as the object signifies for me, I am sustained by the object, which is in a sense a mirror for me. We can imagine that when this elementary safeguard becomes intensified and elaborated in formal schemes of proportion and symmetry in architectural design and theory we have to pose the question of the relation between symmetry and reflection. The topics of beauty and narcissism draw close together in this respect.<sup>3</sup> But the moment of ugliness follows a quite different path. From the point of view of the subject this moment occurs when the inside of the object bursts traumatically through the subject’s own phantasy of what makes up the inside.

We are concerned here, not with the object as such, not with the inside of the object as such, but with how these are refracted in the phantasies of the subject for whom ugliness is preparing itself. The assertion that an object exists twice, as representation and as existence, is not a question of trying to divide the object into two aspects. It involves the causal proposition that, as long as the representational order of the object overcoats its existence, it also determines the phantasy of what the inside is. If this seems relentlessly abstract, the question can be illuminated by considering the human face. When I experience another’s face in the order of representation and expression, I do not experience the face as the exterior of a head any more than I experience it as a surface of representation. The face as representation dominates my experience to the point that the perception of the head as a physical volume, which therefore implies an inside, is repressed. Everything I see is organized around the face as a vehicle of expression. The eyes, the nose, the mouth, the structure of the face are all filled with and determined by the phantasy/fact of expression. Moreover, this interpretation of the face is not limited to the reading of a surface, as distinct from what lies behind a surface. The experience of the

meaning of the face determines the phantasy of what is behind the face. Facial expression seizes possession of a *depth* which is implied. In reading the surface, I fill out what is behind the surface with the depth of the surface. I do not perceive an object divided between its representational surface and its interior existence. In so far as I am grasped by the object as representation, it creates a depth in which I perceive the representational order permeating the object all the way through. When I look at you, I do not only imagine that the surface of your face epitomizes an expression; the experience of your face overwhelms any thought of what might lie behind it. The depth of your face exhausts any question of 'behind'. This phantasy is shockingly curtailed by the sight of a facial wound. Suddenly the phantasy of depth is shattered by the perceptual registration that there *is* a behind to the face and that, far from supporting the experience of depth, it projects the stuff of another order, or disorder. The sight of subcutaneous reality, the sudden, crazy sight of flesh and bone is altogether too much. It seizes my attention because it does not signify, because of its evident character of being too much, too close, too soon. It does not so much undermine as 'overmine' the face and its expressive economy. The face does not collapse; the face is thrown off. The depth of expression is relegated to the surface of a mask. The moment of ugliness, then, is the shattering of the subject's *phantasy* of what makes up the object, in which the object is permeated by its surface just as a face is, and not that there is a non-signifying interior whose pressure to appear is concealed only by the temporary and mendacious skin of a mask. The trauma, for the subject, is occasioned by the sudden appearance of 'stuff', the stuff which threatens to overwhelm and engulf the subject, and to contaminate the subject with its own lack of meaning.

**B**ut this way of stating the argument, here and in the previous article, places too much stress on the excessive materiality of the ugly. In many films which turn upon the threat to human beings by aliens, this excess frequently takes a literal form. The dynamic of the subject's relation to the alien is that the way in which the alien contaminates space expresses itself as a ceaseless move towards – a pursuit of – the subject. The ugliness of the alien always begins to betray itself through an indistinctness of form; the alien is equivalent, not to its form, but to the stuff that leaks through its form. The movement of the alien towards the human being is also expressed by the increasingly liquid character of the former. The first contact the alien makes with the human subject is through the transmission of a kind of ontological drool. The defences of the subject are redoubled in the attempt to brush off this stuff, the ugly, and to re-establish the radical physical difference between the subject and the ugly object. At the last moment before which the subject is engulfed by the stuff of the alien, the subject produces a response which already announces its defeat – that of vomiting. Vomiting as a defence contains the following paradox – that to vomit is a last-ditch attempt to expel aspects of the impending ugly object, but at the same time it is already identified with the ugly object in precisely that action of spreading itself about. The final collapse of the subject and its defences comes about in precisely the action of the ugly

object revealing to the subject that they are the same. But this type of account, with its stress on the excess of stuff as that which characterizes the ugly object, while it may document the case of what is there and should not be, is likely to be misleading. For there is a special case of that which is there and should not be; *it is that which is not there and should be*.

In Gustave Leroux's novel *The Phantom of the Opera* the opera ghost circulates through Garnier's Opera House as a rumour. He sidles into the narrative as the collection of stories which are told about him, and as the unseen spectator in Box 5. These stories are not only descriptions of a ghost, but ghosts themselves – apparitions of what is not fully there. For the signs of a ghost whisper of a special type of reality, one that redistributes the usual relations between the seen and the unseen. It is not that the ghost is either seen or not seen, visible or invisible; usually a ghost is partly seen and partly not seen. It is, rather, that the sight of the ghost is 'unnatural'. The girls of the *corps de ballet* take their conviction about the ghost from the words of Jacques Busquet, the chief scene-shifter: 'He is extraordinarily thin and his dress coat hangs on a skeletal frame. His eyes are so deep that you can hardly see the fixed pupils. All you see is two big black holes, as in a dead man's skull. His skin, which is stretched across his bones like a drumhead, is not white but a dirty yellow. His nose is so little worth talking about that you can't see it side-face; *and the absence of that nose is a horrible thing to look at*.' The novelist ignores the conventions of logical analysis and the analysis of visual perception, and does so quite correctly. But surely one sees what one sees? It might be possible to 'see' something that isn't there, just as it is possible to see something that is there. All manner of distortion might be allowed to fall between the act of seeing and the facts of what is there, distortions that would fall somewhere between hallucination and inattention. But to stare at something which is not there seems to make no sense (nor to have any reference). How could we tolerate such an underdetermined world as one in which I can stare at what is not there? If something is not there, it should not be there to stare at. 'If absent, then not present' might be the schoolmaster's report on the alternatives offered by existence, where presence and absence must be taken to be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories. But it is just such a world that the ghost comes to trouble, and just such a logic that he comes to haunt. The ghost teaches a lesson in complexity – that in an in-between world the status of what is present and what is absent is not so swiftly resolved. True, viewed from the point of view of presence, the nose is absent. In the inventory of perception there are many things, but nose there isn't. There is no nose here. But negation is the enemy of this kind of clarity. It refuses to be simply the opposite of affirmation. At the very moment when negation denies the existence of an object (There is no nose here . . .), behind the back of the proposition it creates a 'negative object', the shadow of an object which isn't there. Now, viewed from the point of view of absence, a 'no-nose' begins to make itself manifest; indeed, it is that which is a 'horrible thing to look at', the absence of that nose. The consequence of this is the idea that the relations between what is present and what is absent are relations which are not mutually exclusive. An absent object may be present

even as an object of perception in a world of all that is missing. The existence of objects, and the modalities of their existence, must be viewed not exclusively from the point of view of presence but from the point of view of its 'ghost' – the negative world of inverse objects. Far from there being two terms which may apply to the existence of an object, there are at least four. From the side of presence we may state, 'There is a nose' or 'There is no nose'. But already the negation begins to point to another world, which we can formalize in the following way: 'There is a no-nose', and its further negation, 'There is no "no-nose"'. It can be immediately grasped that one vital consequence of negation is that, far from being a singular and decisive operation that mirrors affirmation, it is something quite different. Affirmation and negation are not symmetrical. Negation keeps open a relation to the ghosts of objects, to a world of shadows without objects. In unconscious life negation must be regarded as a productive force rather than a limitation, or privation, of objects there might be for experience. Freud insists that the unconscious does not understand negation in its conventional sense, any more than it understands the conventional categories of space, time and causality.<sup>4</sup> The unconscious is not governed by those transcendental categories by which philosophers have sought to police the operations of what used to be called the 'mind'. It is possessed by an unstoppable positivity. The unconscious experience of a 'negative object' is positive, real and direct. 'There is a "no-nose"', is the propositional form of the scene-shifter Jean Busquet's experience. The consequences for the investigation of unconscious relations to objects and spaces are radical and blunt; the subject relates (in the question of ugliness) not only to those objects and spaces which are there and should not be, but also to those objects and spaces which are not there and should be.

But why is the ghost's missing nose so ugly? Or, in the context of this argument, why is a missing object equivalent to an excess? In the case of the excess, what is at stake is the threat to the subject, the threat that the subject would be overwhelmed. It must follow that the missing object must have the same effect. Psychoanalysis has at least two distinct accounts of what is missing. It conceives of the sources of missing objects according to two separate logics; in one case it is of punishment, in the other case it is of loss. Now, although the sources of punishment and of loss may seem utterly distinct, in practice they become importantly linked and intertwined. I may suffer punishment as a forfeit, as a loss, as a configuration of what is vital. Or I may experience loss as a punishment, that my loss is a sign of reality's persecution of me. Within the discourse of psychoanalysis this is usually presented as a differential speculation on the role of the penis and the breast. A phenomenological drama is drawn out of each organ – the drama of castration, on the one hand, and of separation on the other.<sup>5</sup> Each infant in the 'long march' to becoming an ex-child must negotiate the passage of separation and the fear of punishment which is given its emblem in the anxieties around castration. Such a passage is not constituted by an event, a trauma and its aftermath, but rather in the continuous, ceaseless relation, with its irruptions, its repetitions, its histories between the subject and absent objects. To many they will seem quixotic and arbitrary. It is enough here to keep in mind that the

experience of loss and the fear of punishment can easily find a path to each other. Loss can easily be experienced as a punishment; punishment can easily take the form of loss. In either case the subject is threatened with the loss, not of a thing, but of something which was included in the definition of the thing. Without it I am not.

Or we could say that the ghost haunts or 'underwhelms' the subject. The ghost places me in a world where I lack that which I need in order to be. If the original definition of the ugly was that it overwhelmed me in its excess, that it closed in on me and blotted out the minimal extent of narcissistic self-possession which I need in order to be separate in the world, here I face the opposite case, but a case in which the outcome is the same. I am underwhelmed by the object, which takes away what I need to be. Excess and lack tend in the same direction, though they take different routes. The lack takes two differing forms, and two differing logics – that of the ghost, and that of the mask. The ghost is a trace of representation which lacks the means to come into existence. It haunts us. That is, it robs us of our conviction that we exist. If it touches us, its coldness robs us of the heat of our substance. Even to see it is to begin to lose our sight of the world, for it transforms the relation between what is normally seen and what is not seen. In seeing negative objects we lose our footing in existence. We glimpse our lack of life, the death of what we need to live. Traditionally this is the *vanitas*, the reminder of mortality. In terms of building it appears as those spaces which can be thought of as a vacuum, negative constructions in which we experience a kind of horror. A missing stair is not simply dangerous; it needs us to lose our footing, indeed it needs our footing. We are always less by being here. The 'ghostly' space is at the opposite pole from the undead. The undead are not simply not dead: they are far too much alive, they manifest an altogether excessive life.<sup>6</sup> But this invasive contaminating life is stripped of all signification. It has a murderous vivacity which gorges upon meaning, wolfing down signs and transforming them into mere existence. The ugliness of this contagion is the degrading, the liquidation of all forms of representation. Not only does it consume meaning, it ruins whatever representation may be left. The face ceases to express, the exterior ceases to signify. What is left is a mere mask. And a mask cannot cloak or contain existence. It no longer produces the effect of depth. If anything, it heralds its powerlessness to signify by becoming a masquerade. It is the cosmetic which always gives on to the horror spread by surgery, to the subcutaneous existence it no longer encases but rather underlines. Buildings which are given a face-lift of distracting detail may not be installing a mediation of representation, but proving that masks cannot signify.<sup>7</sup>

The ghost and the mask are two ways in which ugliness works to destroy the stability of the subject's footing in space. Both work on different levels of lack. The ghost wishes to signify but needs our existence in order to do so. The mask is the moment when the labour of representation has already succumbed to the thriving emptiness of existence. In each case the subject is threatened with the fate of becoming the ugly object. If the ghost haunts me, I will become a ghost. I will lack the existence I need in order to signify, and I will become the trace of meaning without a life. If I live among masks I will abandon myself to the sensation of the existence that I

can no longer express. These two ways of lacking involve becoming something which is not there and should be.

Ugliness in its radical and violent operations exposes the precariousness of the subject, especially the subject's relations to objects in space. Whether objects are experienced as those which are there and should not be, or as objects which are not there and should be, the subject experiences the profound threat of facing an internal incoherence. Viewed in this light, we can imagine that while ugliness is not, as was insisted in antiquity, the negation of beauty, it is possible that we might read the canons of beauty as at least in part a defence against the precariousness of the subject if exposed to the ugly object. In terms of that precariousness, what else is the fundamental alliance between beauty and symmetry but the work of inducing the illusion of coherence and ideality into a subject who is in fact always close to the edge? Put bluntly, such doctrines and practices of 'beauty' and of idealization are a defence against precariousness, a narcissistic turning away from ugliness. Perhaps classical conceptions of 'mere' beauty mark the moment when this fact was partly recognized, that 'prettiness' has become a mask which actually draws attention to what has been repressed and so has not been repressed.

The question arises of what other relation the subject might take to ugliness, a relation which does not repeat our conventional responses. It has been argued that the subject usually reacts to the ugly object with all the symptomatic actions of defence. The subject tries to clean it away and, when the object refuses to go, the subject retreats to a repertoire of acts of turning away, of hiding and of vanishing. In effect we block our eyes and we turn away. But what characterizes the defences is not so much that they are a certain kind of experience but that they suspend the experience of objects. Experience is neutralized in favour of indifference. The subject hibernates from objects. Instead, we now have technologies of indifference, and possibly architectures of indifference, objects and spaces that assist in the defence which emerges as being nowhere with nothing. It is there – nowhere – that we hang about, killing time. The defences are the means whereby the subject avoids life and death, both at the same time. The mechanism of the defences has yet to be described but a start can be made through an investigation of boredom. The defences provide no means of establishing a productive relation to ugliness. And yet there must be other relations to ugliness which do not start from beauty and end in boredom. For the element which is indispensable to ugliness is also indispensable to productivity: it is that of vivacity. The question of the animation of the subject's relation to the object is not one which has emerged within the discourse of aesthetics. Indeed, the traditional stress upon the disinterested character of aesthetic experience has blighted speculation about what is interesting. But before we can approach that question we will need to address, in another article, the renewed problem of what makes a building dead or alive.

#### Notes

1. This article is a continuation of the article published in *AA Files* no. 28 (Autumn 1994), pp. 61–6.
2. *ibid.* p. 63.
3. I use the term 'narcissism' here to indicate not a pathology, but the everyday illusion of a coherent world – indeed the illusion that there is a world which coherently presents itself for experience, which in turn is linked to the possibility of the subject maintaining a coherent body image. This register, which Lacanians nominate as the 'Imaginary', is presented in Lacan's paper 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je', reprinted in *Écrits* (Paris, 1966).
4. See: Sigmund Freud, 'Negation', standard edition, vol. XIX (1925), pp. 235–6.
5. An early example of the intertwining of ideas of castration and of separation from the breast may be found in A. Starcke, 'The Castration Complex', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. II (1921). In this article Starcke writes of the weaning of a child as a 'primary castration'. Freud, by contrast, as is clear in the text 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', clearly dissociates himself from the conflation of castration and separation, while acknowledging their capacity to combine in experience.
6. I owe this point to Slavoj Žižek.
7. These formulations arose in discussions with Parveen Adams, to whom I am indebted. Her own view of the matter is contained in *The Emptiness of the Image* (London, 1995).