

"If beauty's dead, where does that leave ugliness?"

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NOTES & THEORIES

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A car-designer friend uses a computer presentation which manipulates Claudia Schiffer's face millimetre by millimetre until the precise moment occurs when her features become disagreeable. The suggestion is that beauty can be calibrated.

A character in one of Henning Mankell's Swedish cop thrillers of magnificent, hallucinatory drabness moans that all teenage girls think about today is beauty. A cursory inspection of any newsagent supports that observation, although you'd have to concede they seem to think about sex and telly as well. Certainly, a global cosmetics business that spends nearly US\$4bn annually on research and development in pursuit of magic formulations for teenies to lard and smear their nymph-like limbs and features would agree with Mankell's character, but it is a simple statement that begs several complex questions.

Yes, a lot of people are chasing a version of beauty. If you look at the index of The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations there are about 180 entries for "beauty" and related words. But very few people are confident what it means. Artists today have abandoned beauty as a useful term, still less as a professional objective. Yet an East Anglian self basting-turkey entrepreneur, well-known through broadcast advertisements, used the term frequently.

So far from being a joy for ever, there are people who see beauty as a sinister conspiracy. One of those was the now-disgraced deconstructivist Paul de Man who declared himself to be its enemy. For the less evolved feminists, beauty is an artificial testosterone-fuelled construct designed to subjugate congenitally hairy and teratologous womankind to cruel modifications so as to satisfy the will and lust of thrusting alpha males with commercial interests in the cosmetics and fashion businesses. The mere introduction of the word "beauty" is a reliable way to turn a conversation into an argument.

But if beauty does not exist, then it follows that there can be no such thing as ugliness. The landscape painter John Constable said "I never saw anything ugly in my life ... light and shade and perspective will always make it beautiful." He had a point, but it is clearly an absurd one. Constable was thinking of Suffolk elms, not Widnes. According to Serge Gainsbourg, grizzled French chanteur, ugliness is superior to beauty because it lasts longer. This is a conceit that balances cynicism with romance, a true liaison dangereuse, in the style French literary lovers have managed artfully since Choderlos de Laclos.

Since the beginning of the last century cults of ugliness have periodically influenced art and design. Wider horizons brought exotic influences to Europe, disrupting a canon of perfection that had been consistent in Western art since Polykleitos was

the first artist to issue a manifesto. For instance, Jacob Epstein's mural for the British Medical Association was described by The National Vigilance Society as "Degraded Chaldean or African ... Asiatic-American or Hun Jew ... emaciated Hindu or badly-grown Egyptian". That was in 1907. Thirty years later the Nazis were condemning Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art).

Even today in industrial design, the most venally commercial of all the arts, there is a curious taste for the discordant. While Raymond Loewy, a pioneer of design consultancy, insisted that beauty was an upwardly rising sales graph, he also insisted that "ugliness sells badly". Here the evidence is mixed. Recently BMW has been on an extraordinary aesthetic misadventure. After making its reputation with cars that looked like the well-balanced portfolio of mature stocks you needed to afford one, BMW, under American design chief Chris Bangle, now makes cars whose aesthetic signature is agitated and disturbed. For the first time in history a manufacturer has set out to confront his customers.

At Renault, Patrick Le Quement, one of the most intellectually astute designers, made the Vel Satis deliberately imposing. He told me "a certain imbalance is favourable to perceptions". And added that "beauty is not to be confused with mere elegance". On the other hand, Apple Computer's sales success can to a degree be attributed to the gorgeous clean forms created by designer Jonathan Ive, shapes of a purity and pleasantness that Edmund Burke would have decribed as beautiful.

We get our word "ugly" from the Old Norse ugga, which means fearsome. This sense of alarm is preserved in the expression an "ugly customer". A different sort of ugly customer is creating extraordinary demands for what are politely known as "enhancement technologies". These are people who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder, a condition where you suffer from imagined ugliness. A remedy has been discovered by US manufacturers of the better class of ready-to-wear. This is known as "vanity sizing", where cutomers are flattered by deceit into believing they are climbing into a garment that says it is smaller than it is. The demand for body modification in pursuit of generally agreed goals seems so universal that it is tempting to regard it as instinctive. Or, to put it another way, it seems to hint that Polykleitos was right and Gainsbourg wrong.

Enhancement now goes beyond surgery. A new generation of products called cosmeceuticals crosses the line between cosmetics and drugs. These include a lipstick that adds bulk as well as colour. Any visitor to a Paris pharmacy knows that the French have long believed that the female form can be improved by rubbing-in strange compounds. Indeed, a joint venture by food group Nestle and cosmeticians L'Oreal uses a mixture of bio-engineered tomato, soya and vitamin C to make a nymphet's flesh 40 times denser, so as to match her brain.

Ultimately, beauty may have a sexual nature. And so too, therefore, may ugliness. The urge to reproduce may be its defining characteristic. Shakespeare wrote that "from fairest ideas we desire increase, that therefore beauty's rose may never die".

Wittgenstein said that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.

But it is to the Polish common man that we owe thanks for the dismissal of ugliness. He has a saying: "No such thing as an ugly woman, just a lack of vodka". So much for transcendence. Or maybe ugliness is only sin deep.