

# Is Beauty Necessarily Accompanied by Pleasure?

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## Abstract

This essay looks at the Fourth Moment in the Analytic of the Beautiful of Kant's Third Critique and tries to analyse his claim that the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful is always necessarily accompanied by a feeling of pleasure. By comparing two paintings, namely Dante Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* and Salvador Rosa's *The Witch*, the present essay aims to suggest that while judgments of the aesthetically unpleasing may be influenced by ideological dictates, the response of the subject when undergoing aesthetic judgments of the beautiful is necessarily a-temporal and, consequently, accompanied by a feeling of pleasure.

**Keywords:** Kant, aesthetic judgment, feeling of pleasure.

## Essay

In the Fourth Moment of the Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant sets out to establish the necessity of aesthetic judgment, that is to say, that all aesthetic judgments are necessarily associated with a feeling of pleasure.

In this essay, I intend to show that the necessity of beauty Kant puts forth not only is ascribed solely to positive judgments of beauty, but also that beauty itself is independent of culture, by comparing two works of art that have the same subject – the depiction of a witch – but illustrate it in two very different manners. One of the paintings, namely Salvador Rosa's *The Witch*, is representative of Umberto Eco's treaty *On Ugliness*, while the other, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, is representative of Eco's treaty *On Beauty*. Even though the artists are separated by a period of more than two hundred years, the subject of the paintings is roughly the same: the depiction of the dangerous woman. By contrasting acknowledged beauty with acknowledged ugliness, I am hoping

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to show that Kant's notion of common sense, namely the free play of the faculties of understanding and imagination, can only be applied to judgments of beauty, and that the free play is disrupted in the case of judgments of ugliness, thus implying the feeling of pleasure is a result of judgments of beauty alone, as opposed to aesthetic judgments in general.

In the case of the beautiful, the pleasure the Subject derives is a necessity, different from any other kind of necessity in the sense that it is exemplary, that is, impossible to acquire through experience or empirical judgments. Unlike knowledge, which is strictly dependent on concepts, aesthetic pleasure can only arise independently of concepts. Kant differentiates between the necessity that arises from judgments of cognition, which can be, but is not necessarily, a feeling of pleasure, and the necessity arising from judgments of taste, which *must* be a feeling of pleasure, because taste itself is expressed *as if it were* a feeling of pleasure. Judgments of taste, therefore, only arise when judgment is associated with liking.

When deeming an object beautiful, the Subject relies on beauty's universality in order to exact approval, and thus pleasure, from every other Subject that is met with the object in question. The pleasure in aesthetic judgment is merely contemplative and not interested in the object, as opposed to judgments of the agreeable and judgments of the good, which both take an interest in the object.<sup>1</sup> The relation between Subject and object is to a certain extent phenomenological, as it requires the 'participation' of both: as the Subject judges the object aesthetically he enters a reciprocal relation of analysis, that is, one in which the Subject scrutinizes and the object is being scrutinized. However, in the particular case of aesthetic judgments, the relation is not meant to reach completion, and is not initiated with such a purpose in mind, but is, as it were, suspended in a lingering fashion, which is precisely what arouses pleasure in the Subject. The pleasure we derive in aesthetic judgments from contemplating an object is in fact a result of the object keeping representing itself, thus employing our cognitive power without reaching an end (i.e. knowledge through conceptual means). Even though we cannot reasonably demand agreement in our aesthetic judgments, we have the right to do so, because we expect our judgments of taste to be reciprocated.

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<sup>1</sup> "...the judgement of taste is simply contemplative, i.e. it is a judgement which is indifferent as to the existence of an object, and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure... The beautiful [is] what simply PLEASES him [the Subject]... [the delight] of taste in the beautiful may be said to be the one and only disinterested and free delight; for it...extorts approval." (Kant, 1952, pp. 48-9)

In order for beauty (and implicitly aesthetic judgments) to be reciprocated, they must first be communicated universally. Consequently, a relation between the Subject's manner of subjectively assessing objects and the representation of the object is necessary, because communicating an aesthetic judgment involves communicating the mental state one is in when making judgments of taste. With regard to this, Kant brings into discussion the 'free play' of the faculties of understanding and imagination as the sole ground upon which aesthetic judgments can be imparted and deems pleasure to be a natural response to the awareness of the free play of the faculties: "That an ability to communicate one's state of mind, even though it be only in respect of our cognitive faculties, is attended with a pleasure, is a fact which might easily be demonstrated from the natural propensity of mankind to social life" (Kant, 1952, p. 49). In consequence, because the pleasure we take in the beautiful comes as the result of a communicable mental state, we can rightfully demand that pleasure also should be communicable, as a prerequisite of judgments of the beautiful. Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, in my view, illustrates the communicability of both mental state and pleasure: the overall impression of the painting creates a disruption in the rational way of existence of the Subject, thus permitting his faculties to alter their customary relation and be in free play. Beauty, consequently, does not *need* to exact approval, but has the right to, as it is alluring and disquieting enough to create the necessary state of mind in order to communicate the judgment of taste.

According to the *Critique of Judgment*, the delight is free of interest for any person. It is, therefore, only natural for the Subject to suppose that the object he deems beautiful must have some universal characteristic that enables it to trigger the same subjective response in more than one Subject and thus appear beautiful to many. Beauty is not intrinsic to the object, but lies in the representation of the object in the mind of the Subject. The quality of the representation, that of being considered beautiful or not, that is, of being subjected to an aesthetic judgment, must rely on a ground common to the representations of many Subjects. However, because the triggering of some sort of pleasure is what defines the universality of beauty, the possibility of an aesthetic judgment becomes void in its absence, that is, without the pleasure that the Subject derives from beholding the object, beauty cannot be universal. Rossetti's *Lilith* plays the role of the determinant of delight that possesses the

intrinsic ability to trigger pleasure in all Subjects: this is beauty's universality, because taste itself is characteristic to all judging Subjects.<sup>2</sup>

In order for a judgment to be valid, it needs to be founded on the grounds of a principle; were aesthetic judgments purely objective, their foundation, that is, their underlying principle, would be the grounds on which one could demand agreement from others. However, because aesthetic judgments are subjective, their underlying principle must also be subjective, but, as Kant points out, "with universal validity" (Kant, 1952, p. 82). This subjective principle, which, as aesthetic judgments, is independent of concepts but relies solely on feeling, is called by Kant 'common sense' (or 'sensus communis') and is described as being a free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding, and also the only grounds on which one can determine what is liked by means of feeling and demand agreement regarding one's aesthetic judgments from all Subjects. Common sense as the subjective principle of aesthetic judgments, or at least the idea of one such principle, is therefore necessary for the existence of any judgment of taste.<sup>3</sup>

Both cognitive and aesthetic judgments must rely on the existence of common sense in order to be universally communicable. The certainty of the existence of common sense therefore results from the fact that knowledge is communicable. However, because common sense is essential in both cognition and aesthetics, "the (implausible) conclusion would be, that knowledge is based on an essentially aesthetic frame of mind", as Hughes (2010, p. 69) suggests, or, equally implausible, that aesthetic judgments are based on cognition. The solution to this semantic conundrum is suggested by Hughes' reading of Kant, namely that the difference between the common sense used in cognition and the one used in aesthetic judgments lies in the proportion in which the faculties of

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<sup>2</sup> Even though judgements of taste are subjective judgements, they come, in part, as a consequence of beauty's intrinsic quality of being universally acknowledged, and are, therefore, invariably conducted on the grounds that every judging Subject should be able to perceive the beauty of a certain object. The necessity of pleasure in the beautiful, therefore, arises from the fact that, because every judging Subject has the possibility of deriving pleasure from the beauty of a certain object, he ought to do so, as a way of concurring to another's aesthetic judgement. Rossetti's painting, therefore, should have *the possibility* of pleasing every judging Subject, even though it does not necessarily have to.

<sup>3</sup> Pleasure, therefore, is directly dependent on the free play of imagination and understanding. The question that therefore arises is whether Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* indeed sets the necessary frame of mind for the harmonious play of the faculties to arise, or whether it disrupts the balance, making aesthetic judgements impossible. This question should find an answer in the contrast between Rossetti's and Rosa's paintings.

imagination and understanding are employed, as well as the nature of the attunement between them, which, in the case of judgments of taste, is a 'free play' – a disinterested harmony of the faculties that could arise in cognition, but does not, and instead only communicates through feeling. The definition of common sense therefore, according to the Readers' Guide, is that it is "the ability to coordinate our mental faculties as is required for any cognition whatsoever" (Hughes, 2010, p. 71). This is not to say that cognition is instrumental in judgments of taste, but that it is the quality of the judgments of taste of being, in a sense, like cognition that makes them communicable, and their particularity of relying solely on subjective judgments that makes them aesthetic.

Common sense, as the subjective principle on which judgments of taste are made, has the possibility of becoming an objective principle when the judging Subject takes common sense as the ground on which agreement regarding aesthetic judgments could exist. That is to say, common sense is represented as objective when its subjective universal validity is exerted, because, as Kant explains, it "could...demand universal assent like an objective principle" (Kant, 1952, p. 85). Pleasure, therefore, is for aesthetic judgments what the intake of knowledge is for cognitive judgment: the necessary result of the principle on which the respective judgment is based, or, to phrase otherwise, the response of the Subject to judgments of taste, just in the way the response to judgments of cognition is the arising of knowledge.

It could be argued that, because aesthetic judgments *must* be followed by an emotional response, it is not compulsory for that response to be pleasure. That is to say, the mere existence of a judgment of taste does not compel the Subject to feel delight, but allows him to feel either delight or repulsion when being presented with an object. The question, therefore, arises from the opposition between positive and negative judgments of beauty, from the clash between the beautiful and the ugly.

To illustrate beauty, Rossetti chose a figure that was deeply rooted in mythology. In the Biblical tradition, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, before Eve, and she is described, both in biblical texts as well as in Rossetti's painting, as a *femme fatale*, a dangerous, seductive beauty who would lure and destroy men. The image of Lilith is highly sexualised: her skin is pale and her body, unconstrained by corsets, is barely covered by a nightgown, features which only highlight her lips and hair of bright hues of red, both symbols of overpowering sensuality. The ambiguity of the setting (the impossibility to establish whether the scene is set in or out of doors) adds to the

dream/myth-like quality of the painting, and Lilith's cold gaze, which is self-contemplative and completely indifferent to outer elements, is discrepant with her inviting pose.

By contrast, Rosa's painting describes a witch clasping a flaming torch, possibly a necromant, in a moment of fury and at the peak of her bodily repulsiveness. She is naked, not as a symbol of sexuality, but as one of repulsiveness that comes with old age and wickedness, and surrounded by elements of witchcraft: her familiar, a skull, bones, a parchment signed in blood, and a dead baby.<sup>4</sup> As was the fashion in the Middle Ages, witches were wildly infamous and the depiction of witches was to fit the age's understanding of them. Witches, who were mostly learned or simply superstitious women, became the bane of the Middle Ages, arousing an impressive amount of interest and numerous misogynistic treatises on how to identify and punish them.<sup>5</sup> Even though, allegedly, it was witchcraft that altered the bodily features, aestheticism played an important part, because, as Eco points out, "in most cases, the many victims of the stake were accused of witchcraft because they were ugly" (Eco, 2007, p. 212). Ugliness was, therefore, the prerequisite of evilness.

The most striking feature the two paintings have in common is the fact that they both are depictions of witches. However, because the ages in which they were painted differ, one becomes a portrayal of repulsive form and wickedness, while the other of eroticised beauty. The difference in age, therefore, sets the standard of beauty, and as the ages progress beauty becomes increasingly more independent of morals, culminating with a reversal in fashion with the rise of Decadence as a movement.

Even though Kant mostly focuses on positive judgments of beauty and on the feeling of pleasure the Subject derives from beholding the object, the negative judgments of beauty are equally important. About the aesthetics of ugliness, Kant says that naturally ugly and frightening objects can only appear to be beautiful when depicted by the fine arts, because of the intensity of the

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<sup>4</sup> These elements were 'identifiers' of a witch: the parchments signed in blood was proof of a pact with the devil and the familiar (commonly an imp, like in the painting, but also a pet, like a cat or a crow) was the witch's way of channelling evil forces according to will. The skull and the dead baby were 'ingredients' for spells, but also what was meant to convince the people of witches' evilness and dangerous natures, as they symbolized two crimes punishable by death on their own: infanticide and desecration of graves.

<sup>5</sup> The most famous of these treatises was *Malleus Maleficarum*, published by two inquisitors and witch-hunters, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer (1486). The overtly misogynistic nature of the text is obvious even in the title, as the Latin particle '-arum' is only used in the feminine, the form for masculine and neutral being '-orum'.

description – that is to say, the work of art is judged aesthetically in itself, as composition, and not through the prism of what it represents. However, as far as negative judgments of artistic representations are concerned Kant's view is that only objects which arouse disgust can be depicted in conformity with nature while preserving aesthetic pleasure: "...the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself" (Kant, 1952, p. 174), thus forcing the Subject to consider the object natural, and not merely as a representation. The result, Kant argues, is that the free play of the faculties is disrupted, because the sensation one takes in beholding a repulsive work of art, that is, the disgust, "depends purely on the imagination" (Kant, 1952, p. 174).

Rosa's painting – a classical image of the witch in the Middle Ages – is, above all, striking. The posture of the witch, her facial features, her angst, her rage, are all expressively portrayed, and the painting itself is undoubtedly of aesthetic value. However, the reaction the Subject has at the sight of the painting is mostly physical, as opposed to the reaction one might have at Rossetti's painting, which would not limit itself to being purely physical. Rosa's painting is a portrayal of ugliness, of a subject that arouses fear and repulsion. The quality of the representation keeps the viewer from being stricken by the composition itself, but presents the subject of the painting as if it were natural, and not merely a representation. Thus, the response of the Subject is as if presented with a natural object, and therefore, the painting is initially met with disgust. This reaction, in Kant's view, is not a pure aesthetic judgment, as it is not conducted on the grounds of a free play of the faculties, but only influenced by imagination. Rosa's painting invites to be known, not contemplated, that is, assessed through cognition, not aesthetic judgment. While cognition does not, in any way, undermine the overall aesthetic value of the painting, it does imply a relation between judgments of taste and cognition, which impedes on the judgments' possibility of being aesthetic.

Rossetti's painting, on the other hand, portrays the mythological beauty, which, unlike the beauty dictated by fashion, transcends both age and artistic movements. Rossetti's painting invites the viewer to contemplate it: it appears beautiful not because it reveals something about a certain age, movement, historical period or person, but because it portrays a type of beauty that is independent of time. Lilith, as a mythological character, is set outside time<sup>6</sup>, thus the painting depicts an ideal of

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<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade named the mythological time *'illo tempore'* – *'that time'*: an idealised time which cannot be pinned down to a certain historical age, but exists outside the constraints of historical

beauty that is enduring because it keeps representing itself, it shows a finality of form that is in itself pleasurable, without being in need of interpretation or clarification. Ugliness, as a product of society, is always in need of clarification, while the Kantian beauty should never be. Lilith, as the form of beauty, is never depicted as a product of society; her beauty precedes society, fashion and artistic movements, and is universal in the sense that it has the ability of facilitating the free play of the faculties regardless of time. The viewer is made to contemplate the painting in itself, and not its subject (or focus). By contrast, Rosa's witch engages *with* the viewer, making him to seek to understand the subject of the painting (the witch herself) and the historical content, as opposed to the painting as a whole. Ugliness becomes an underlying message: Rosa's witch needs to be known in socio-historical, as well as artistic terms, while Rossetti's Lilith does not require knowledge in order to be contemplated.

While a definite formula regarding the degree in which the imagination and the understanding should be involved in the free play does not appear in Kant's Critique, the complete absence of either of them would irremediably disrupt the free play, therefore rendering void both the existence of a 'subjective principle of universal validity' (i.e. common sense) and the Subject's possibility of demanding agreement in his judgments of taste. In consequence, it is only the beautiful that results in the arousal of pleasure in the judging Subject, because, as opposed to the ugly, it is the only one that employs common sense, and thus the only one that allows both imagination and understanding to be in free play. The conclusion is that pleasure is a necessity in judgments of beauty in particular, and thus restricted to this type of judgment alone, as a consequence of common sense, the subjective universal principle which allows judgments of beauty to be communicated.

As all abstract concepts, beauty is always also to be defined by contrast to what it is not; as Alexander of Hales argues, "since from evil comes good, it is therefore well said that it contributed to good and hence it is said to be beautiful within the order. ...it would be preferable to say: 'the order itself is beautiful'." (Eco, 2007, p. 149) Thus, the pre-Derridean thought of Hales places opposites in relation, and ugliness becomes an integrated part of beauty, in the absence of which beauty itself could not be properly defined. It could therefore be argued that aesthetic pleasure derived from the arts stands in relation to social fashions that dictate the emotional response of the Subject, or rather, to the

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(real) time. '*Illo tempore*' is common to mythology, folk tales and fairy tales and mostly denotes a stage of the unconscious mind of increased receptivity.



aesthetic predisposition that is inherent to every artistic movement: art is the product of the current trend, which in turn is the result of society's momentary inclinations. Trends are invariably dependent on human desires, which shift radically once they have reached the point of saturation. In this situation, however, it is important to highlight the fact that artistic movements arise from necessity<sup>7</sup>, and therefore have finality, thus being incompatible with the idea of the beautiful. That is not to say that artistic movements have not given rise to works of art, but rather that the human desire for the aesthetically pleasing results in craft, not art, as Kant explains, and thus does not invite the play of the faculties.

Ultimately, although ugliness may be linked to social dictates and may stand in relation to a form of aesthetic pleasure, it does not necessarily follow that the aesthetic pleasure is the beautiful as such. Rather, ugliness represents the opposite of what is desirable, while beauty transcends social dictates and, by appealing aesthetically to the Subject, facilitates the free play of the faculties. The beautiful maintains its communicability and universal claim for validity, despite changes in the artistic preferences of the age. Thus, the fragility of fashion does not attack the universal character of beauty, but rather that of ugliness and of human desire.

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<sup>7</sup> The desire for change, for progress, for the adoption of different mentalities, political systems, religious views, social climates, etc.

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