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On the Threshold of “aesthetic Inferno”

Tania Vladova

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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Galard, Jean. *La Beauté à outrance : réflexions sur l'abus esthétique*, Arles : Actes sud, 2004

Rosenkranz, Karl. *Esthétique du laid*, Paris : Circé, 2004

- 1 Images which overexpose violence are currently in the eye of a stormy quarrel. What is the right distance for looking at, dwelling on, and observing horror? And what happens to aesthetics and beauty when the unimaginable is put on display? What is presented by the clash between authentic testimony and artistic intervention?
- 2 In 1853, Hegel's student, Karl Rosenkranz, wrote an *Aesthetics of Ugliness*. In the preface to the French edition, the idea of theorizing over what the author calls in his introduction "aesthetic inferno" is turn by turn described as a "semblance of the phenomenology of ugliness" (p.11) and a "metaphysics of beauty" (p.14). What is in fact involved is an aesthetic inferno to which the philosopher unfailingly succumbs. And this for two reasons: because he does not manage—and for good cause—to dominate the initial challenge, which is to distinguish evil from ugliness. And because he uses the concept of ugliness rather to make a hypostasis of beauty, an ideal which an aesthetics of reception strove to rid itself of in the 19th century. As the first project trying to establish an autonomous theory of ugliness, the late-in-the-day publication of the French translation is only to be lamented. A descriptive zeal and overly heterogeneous examples are often held against the author. Rosenkranz's book, coming after Lessing and Herder in particular, nevertheless broaches an issue which, for some decades now, has been gathering sway. Involved here are the boundaries of the (re)presentable, and of ugliness authorized (by whom?) in art. The 18th century pointed to the degree beyond which

ugliness became intolerable: disgust, and distaste. In his preface, Gérard Raulet accuses Rosenkranz of sidestepping *pathos*—a factor which makes it possible to proceed from a rhetorical system to an aesthetic one—in order to turn it into *pathology*. So, today, what has become of the link to the image of “flawed beauty”?

- 3 Between testimony and document, and aesthetic attention and intention, J. Galard's *La Beauté à outrance* [*Outrageous Beauty*] sets forth and questions the shots we make of our present-day brutality—and the way we look at it. Is this aversion, or caricature of violence? Rosenkranz allotted two limits to ugliness: beauty and comedy. Today, it is a matter of being able to demonstrate the ethical and aesthetic distance between viewer and image and image and viewer. There is also cause to wonder whether images themselves determine this “gap”. The status of photography and live reportage poses problems which *La Beauté à outrance* subtly develops. So the following acknowledgement rears its head: instead of introducing proof of the veracity of their testimony, images taken on the spot, in the flesh, leave “impressions”. They are not individualized, they do not even teach us things we do not know about, they are quite simply “interesting”. This, says Galard, is one of the reasons why they come back to us “like a loop”. The semblance of authenticity is appropriate. So is the mass effect. Neither pathos nor pathology, but an effect of saturation, a documentary presentation claiming to display both the object aimed at and its own shooting mechanisms. Aesthetic excess clouds reality, it creates a “retraction” or “spiriting away” (*Wegkünsteln*), to borrow Rosenkranz's term. What is the degree of this excess and what is the norm in force for the aesthetic link? Doing away with pleasant connotations and wondering if the aesthetic link offers active access to an understanding of reality or if it removes the sense of reality from everything to the point of anaesthesia is what Galard proposes (p.34). Is it minimum artistic intervention which, alone, guarantees the authenticity of testimony, as put forward by Susan Sontag in *Devant la douleur des autres* [*Regarding the Pain of Others*]? Or alternatively, is it only an artistic work pushed to the limit, “aimed at lucidity and aptness” (Galard, p.152), as envisaged by K. Fielder, that is capable of achieving clarity? Fielder's word reverberates in Galard's book, even if there is no reference to it therein.
- 4 Fiedler (1841-1895) attributes the active access to an understanding of reality to a labour of construction, and production. This task is accomplished by artistic activity. The *Aphorisms* strive, in a neo-Kantian vein, whose ins and outs are laid out with both skill and subtlety by Danièle Cohn's preface, to challenge once more a certain number of accepted ideas, fashioned by an aesthetic tradition torn between two stools: «Either imitation of nature or painting of ideas, this is the rub; aptness is elsewhere and will be obtained by those who find a third way [...]» (§150). Aptness does not consist in denying aesthetic pleasure, but in not subordinating art to beauty; it does not deny the existence of aesthetic sentiments, but avoids muddling them with what is crucial to a comprehension of art. Instead of starting out from a theory of reception, from a conception of painting as imitation giving rise to “ghosts of passions” (Abbé Du Bos), Fiedler sees art as a human need, the setting in motion and development of an activity, and an acquisition by the artist of an intuitive knowledge, a shift “from visual perception to visible expression”¹. Starting from the artist's work and an attention paid to the very genesis of artworks, Fiedler attempts to formulate a line of thinking which, without creating any system, tends to relieve visual art of the weight of beauty and fiercely erects an understanding of works, which is possible «when the figurative writing of art communicates a limpid reflection and knowledge to us [...]» (§27). The aesthetic dimension is there, but it appears

as secondary in relation to the cognitive work which only the artist is capable of bringing full circle. The art critic can merely try to follow the artist in his approach. No longer thinking of the world as something given, but seeing in it a reality manufactured by an active approach involving the production of the "visible", this factor of Fiedlerian thinking also applies to the present-day over-use of live, in the flesh reportage.

NOTES

1. Fiedler, Konrad. *Sur l'origine de l'activité artistique*, Paris : Ed. Rue d'Ulm/Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 2003, (Aesthetica), p.86