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# Beauty and Ugliness in Italian Renaissance Art: Antithesis, Paradox, Oxymoron and Coincidence of Opposites[1]

The art of the Italian Renaissance has long been equated with the search for beauty and harmony. However, many works have challenged this 'golden legend', and suggested that it is possible to read the production from this period *sub specie deformitatis*. Thus, the notions of "counter-Renaissance", which we find in Hiram Haydn [11], 1950 and 1962, and in Eugenio Battisti [5], who speaks of a form of "*antirinascimento*", and "anticlassicism" (John Shearman [17], 1967, and Antonio Pinelli [16], 1993) have underlined the polyphonic and partly contradictory character of the art of the Cinquecento,the solar depictions of which Heinrich Wölfflin and Jacob Burckhardt had failed to capture, thus showing it could not be boiled down to its quest for harmony.

Following a historical process that took place throughout the Cinquecento and ended in the Baroque period, the Italian artistic theory and production, each in its own way, gradually managed to think of ugliness in art as something other than a simple voluntary (transgression) or involuntary (failure) deviation from the standards of beauty. More precisely, they sought to combine ugliness and beauty which, since the appearance of antique philosophy and aesthetics, were most of the time opposed to each other on the ontological (being vs. non-being), logical (true vs. false), moral (good vs. evil), formal (harmony vs. disharmony), aesthetic (pleasant vs. unpleasant), and anthropological (identity vs. otherness) levels [10].

It seems therefore that this topical antithesis between the beautiful and the ugly made way for 'beautiful ugliness' first theorised in the second half of the 16th century as a paradox — the ugly being endowed with qualities traditionally attributed to beauty — and later, with the advent of the Baroque period, as an oxymoron since the ugliness, and even the horror of the content of the mimesis, underlined the transfiguring power of art and the talent of the artist. Such a shift could reveal a contiguity, or even, in the context of the theorisation of the 'perfect ugliness' of caricatures in the 17th century, a *coincidentia oppositorum* between the beautiful and the ugly: after all, do not *kalós* and *kakós* differ only by a single letter?

**Antithesis**

The *doxa* inherited from antiquity and the Middle Ages, which dominated Italian artistic literature from the Renaissance until the middle of the 16th century at least — that is, until the

[1] This paper takes up the main arguments presented in [7].

treatises of the Counter-Reformation — opposed rather than articulated ugliness and beauty. Indeed, the two concepts were then essentially perceived as antithetical, contradictory, and irreconcilable: ugliness could only be conceived as the simple opposite of beauty, and it was thought to be deduced *ex-oppositione* from a theory of beauty that one only had to reverse.

Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435), for example, contains a decisive passage that was taken up several times by the sixteenth-century *trattatiste* (in particular by Michelangelo Biondo in 1549[2], Giovanni Della Casa in 1558[3] and Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo in 1584[4]) on the composition of surfaces, in which the founding father of Italian treatises on art defined beauty as harmony (*concinnitas*) and suggested the faces of old women were a paradigmatic example of ugliness (both natural and artistic):

"The composition of surfaces creates this elegant harmony [*concinnitas*] in the bodies and this grace we call beauty. A face with large surfaces, other small ones, here prominent, elsewhere too deeply set, as if sunken, as we see in the faces of old women, will look very ugly. But the face in which the surfaces meet so that the soft lights change into delicate shadows, without pronounced angles, we will say it is beautiful and graceful"[5].

We understand that ugliness could be defined as disharmony of parts with a whole and among each other.

In the aesthetic theory of the 15th and 16th centuries, more often than not, the question of beauty and ugliness falls within the dialectic of the one and the multiple: the different parts that make up an ugly body or an ugly object do not form a harmonious and unitary whole. The spectator's gaze, which can only move from one part to the other without ever grasping the whole, is then dislocated; in other words, the *reductio ad unum* of the multiplicity of parts fails to materialise. More specifically, in artistic treatises, the classical definition of ugliness as

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2 *Della nobilissima pittura*, VIII: "Havete a sapere, pittori miei cari, che dalla superficie, quella gratia e la concinità appare, qual tutti i pittori dimandano bellezza, imperò un volto si trova di grande superficie et l'altro di poca overo di piccina, et la superficie grande, gli è quando esce troppo fuori, ma la piccina gli è quando va troppo dentro come cosa richiusa, il che noi vedemo nel volto di persona attempata, e vecchia, certamente costui serà brutto di aspetto, ma quella faccia in cui serano giunte le superficie, veri lumi et dilettevoli in le soave ombre discendeno, et non appare alcuna asperità de gli angoli, meritamente questa faccia diremo essere venusta et bella <…>" [6, pp. 14–15].

3 *Galateo*, XXVI: "<…>Vuole essere la bellezza uno quanto si può il più e la bruttezza per lo contrario è molti, sì come tu vedi che sono i visi delle belle e delle leggiadre giovani, percioché le fattezze di ciascuna di loro paion create pure per uno stesso viso; il che nelle brutte non adiviene, percioché, avendo elle gli occhi per aventura molto grossi e rilevati, e 'l naso picciolo e le guance paffute, e la bocca piatta e 'l mento in fuori, e la pelle bruna, pare che quel viso non sia di una sola donna, ma sia composto di visi di molte e fatto di pezzi" [8, p. 74].

4 *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura*, VI, 3: "La superficie massime nel corpo humano, è grandissima parte della bellezza, talmente che quella faccia dove le superficie saranno in tal guisa aggiunte insieme, et con tal arte, che i lumi dolcemente scorrano, generando ombre soavi senza alcuna asprezza di angoli, meritamente si dirà che habbia una principalissima parte della bellezza. Per il contrario quel volto ch'haverà alcune superficie grandi, et altre piccole, in una parte spinte in fuori, in un'altra troppo nascoste et ritirate in dentro, come si vede ne' vecchi, veramente sarà bruttissimo a vedere" [13, p. 254].

5 "Ex superficierum compositione illa elegans in corporibus concinnitas et gratia extat, quam pulchritudinem dicunt. Nam is vultus qui superificies alias grandes, alias minimas, illuc prominentes, istuc intus nimium retrusas et reconditas habuerit, quales in vetularum vultibus videmus, erit quidem is aspectu turpis. In qua vero facie ita junctae aderunt superficies ut amena luminas in umbras suaves defluant, nullaeque angulorum asperitates extent, hanc merito formosam et venustam faciem dicemus" [1, p. 158].

disharmony enriched by concepts borrowed from rhetoric and poetics, as well as from musical treatises[6], allows us to account for multiple forms of ugliness: the lack of harmony can thus affect the different "parts" of a painting (i.e. for Alberti, the delineation, colours and composition) and the different levels of its composition (surfaces in limbs, limbs in bodies, bodies in *storia*), but also the style of an artist or a school (when Italian aesthetics are opposed to Gothic and Flemish aesthetics). One understands the distrust generally expressed by the *trattatisti* with regard to the part and the detail, which have the power to undo the harmony of a representation and, therefore, to ruin the process of idealisation which is its corollary: the ugly detail, that is to say, the one that does not fit into the overall harmony of the whole, 'de-universalises' the painting, even though that same painting, to take up Aristotelian categories, should strive for the universality of poetry rather than at the particularity of history.

From then on, the presence of ugliness in the treatises following in the wake of Alberti's *De Pictura* remained marginal: it only appeared in an incidental way through the various counterexamples put forward by the theorists. Ugliness would thus only be the deviation from the rules on which artistic beauty is based, whether this deviation is voluntary (in the case of transgression) or, more frequently, involuntary (in the case of failure, which may concern both the choice of the content of the representation and the modalities of its very execution). Within this conceptual framework, there could be no explicit thought of the artistic ugliness, insofar as the represented is not yet clearly distinguished from the representation itself, at least in the writings of the theorists, as the Albertian assimilation of the ugliness of a work with the cacophonous and disharmonious face of old women amply demonstrates.

In art, ugliness was still often relegated to the status of a detail or a fail to beauty, when an ugly figure, for example, contrasts with the beauty of another figure nearby. On that topic Leonardo emphasised: "*Le bellezze con le bruttezze paiono più potenti l'una per l'altra*". However, such a statement already bears the seeds of the paradoxical developments that emerged around the second half of the Cinquecento.

**Paradoxes**

From the treatises related to the context of the Counter-Reformation — in which the theme of ugliness occupied a much more important, explicit and less negative place than in previous writings on art — and up to the beginning of the Baroque period, i.e. throughout the second half of the 16th century, ugliness and beauty were no longer thought of as totally antagonistic categories, but were articulated as a form of paradox. More precisely, the forms of 'beautiful ugliness' that emerged at that time were the expressions of ugliness to which art theorists attributed the same qualities as those that the *doxa*, which was still dominant, traditionally attributed to beauty. Ugliness was beautiful *in spite of* its ugliness.

First of all, the Tridentine treatises on art — those of Giovanni Andea Gilio and Gabriele Paleotti *in primis* — legitimised and even valorised ugliness by placing it within two partly contradictory paradigms. On the one hand, that of the painter-historian who must renounce idealisation and his pride as an artist in order to favour realism and become the faithful interpreter of biblical truths, where ugliness is not only unavoidable (especially when it comes to

[6] About Renaissance art theory, see [15 and 12].

representing the suffering of Christ and the holy martyrs or penitents), but above all plays a major theological role (since Christ accepted to be disfigured on the Cross in order to redeem all the ugliness of humanity deriving from the original sin). On the other hand, the paradigm of the painter-orator or painter-preacher, who is allowed to emphasise ugliness (in the representation of evil) in order to inspire the faithful as efficiently as possible — the *movere* becoming, in a context of persecution of Catholics, the main dimension of religious painting. This tension between the painter-historian and the painter-orator manifested itself in a particularly acute way when it came to the representation of the horrors of the Cross: while nothing must be hidden from the macabre nature of such scenes, their efficiency nevertheless rests on the pleasure they evoke in the viewer; Paleotti, in particular, then had no choice but to resort to the Aristotelian paradox of representation and tragic catharsis to achieve the theoretical link between the two paradigms. The theorist argues the following:

> "And the pleasure of an imitation of this kind is so great that things which, by nature, are generally perceived by our eyes with disgust and horror, like a monster, a corpse or a mole, have the opposite effect when they are well imitated, and are infinitely pleasing, as, besides Aristotle, Plutarch asserts as well <…>"[7].

From then on, the "cruel and horrible scenes" (*pitture fiere e orrende*) are beautiful in that they are *true* and, what is more, *pleasant*. However, the Counter-Reformation theorist could not go too far in theorising the paradox set out in Aristotelian *Poetics*, because he risked granting an autonomy to art that would have completely contradicted his insistence on *decorum* and his condemnation of the vanity of artists (who place their art above the Holy Scriptures) and of mannerism.

The Renaissance developments around the Aristotelian paradox of representation, which were already heralded by the thinkers of the Counter-Reformation, thus linked ugliness to *pleasure* by operating a clear dissociation between the content and the modalities of representation and, therefore, between the displeasure linked to the represented and the double pleasure, both cognitive and properly aesthetic, that the mediation of mimesis allows. Artistic ugliness could be reduced to a formal failure relating to the technical execution of an imitation and no longer concerned the choice of its subject. Concerning the monstrosity, both mannerist and scientific, represented in Bronzino's *Doppio ritratto del nano Morgante*, Giorgio Vasari could thus affirm:

> "For the Duke Como, he painted the full-length portrait of the dwarf Morgante, from two points of view, from the front on one side of the painting and from the back on the other side, with his monstrous limbs; *it is a painting of astonishing beauty in its genre*"[8].

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[7] *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane*…, I, 22: "E tanta è la dilettazione che porta così fatta imitazione, che le cose che di sua natura sogliono recare agli occhi fastidio et orrore, come il vedere un mostro o un cadavere o una talpa, fanno contrario effetto quando sono bene imitate, e dilettano mirabilmente, come oltre Aristotele disse Plutarco con queste parole: *Delectat picta lacerta, aut simia, aut Thersitae facies, non pulchritudinis, sed similitudinis causa; nam quod turpe est suapte natura, nec potest fieri pulchrum, imitatio tamen exprimens similitudinem sive pulchrae, sive turpis rei laudatur*" [2, p. 219].

[8] "Ritrasse poi Bronzino, al duca Cosimo, Morgante nano, ignudo, tutto intero, et in due modi, cioè da un lato del quadro il dinanzi e dall'altro il didietro, con quella stravaganza di membra mostruose che ha quel nano: la qual pittura in quel genere è bella e meravigliosa" [4, p. 235].

Accepting such expressions of 'beautiful ugliness' naturally resulted in widening the field of representation. This development went in two directions: on the one hand, towards disgust, or even horror and the macabre; on the other hand (by means of a Renaissance theorisation of comic catharsis and of an *ut comoedia pictura*), towards the 'low' and the comic, i.e. '*pittura ridicola*', which heralded the development of genre painting in the following century.

Finally, in addition to the acceptance of true and/or pleasant forms of beautiful ugliness, the development of the Renaissance into what we can call an "era of suspicion" made it easier to associate the ugly with the good. Indeed, if the men of the Renaissance continued to admit that the qualities of the body most of the time directly reflect those of the soul — according to the doctrine of *kalokagathia* a beautiful appearance is the sign of a good soul and, conversely, physical ugliness is that of moral ugliness — the thinkers of the Cinquecento were nonetheless fascinated by the paradoxical figure of Socrates (who in Plato's *Banquet* is compared to the sileni and the satyr Marsyas) and by the disjunction that the 'silenic forms of ugliness' and their reverse, the 'perfidious beauties', bring into play between appearance and essence. Under a repulsive physique a beautiful soul can sometimes be hidden and *vice versa*. The extraordinary popularity of this *topos* in Italian literature in the end of the 15th–16th centuries had a considerable impact on the theorisation of artistic 'beautiful ugliness', both in terms of the subject of the work (the challenge of portraying the Silesian figures and their inner grace) and of the representation itself (thus, artistic 'whims' which, despite their deformity, are perceived as beautiful in that they showcase the ingenuity of their creator). In a madrigal (included in *Il Figino, overo del fine della pittura*, 1581), Gregorio Comanini makes Vertunno, Arcimboldo's '*capriccio*' say the following:

> "If you don't marvel at the sight of
> The ugliness, by which I am beautiful,
> You don't know how much ugliness [bruttezza]
> Surpasses all beauty [bellezza]."[9]
> Here, 'bruttezza' and 'bellezza' literally rhyme.

**Oxymoron**

If the expression 'beautiful ugliness' remained a paradox until the end of the 16th century, it is because it overturned a *doxa* that nevertheless remained dominant: the thematisation of comic painting, for example, actually chiefly laid the foundations of the theory of beauty and the hierarchy of genres that was gradually being established; moreover, "*spaventevoli*" paintings certainly appealed to Vasari as they did to the theorists of the Counter-Reformation, but only on the condition that they remained exceptions.

This is precisely no longer the case with the Baroque aesthetics announced by Tasso's 'beautiful horror'[10], where the 'beautiful ugliness' is no longer a paradox but an oxymoron. Going beyond the Aristotelian paradox of representation, Baroque artists wanted to deliberately exploit the defectiveness, even the horror of their subjects in order to unfold, by contrast, the extent of

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9 "[…] Se 'n mirar non t'ammiri / Del brutto, ond'io son bello, / Ben non sai qual bruttezza / Avanzi ogni bellezza" [3, p. 258].

10 *La Gerusalemme liberata*, XX, 30: "Bello in sì bella vista anco è l'orrore, / e di mezzo la tema esce il diletto. / Né men le trombe orribili e canore / sono a gli orecchi lieto e fero oggetto" [18, p. 494].

art's transfiguring power. In praising Guido Reni's *Strage degli innocenti*, Giambattista Marino explains in the *Galeria* (1619) that:

> "The noble creator knows well
> That even a tragic story is an expensive object [*Ch'ancor Tragico caso è caro oggetto*],
> And that often horror goes with pleasure [*e che spesso l'horror va col diletto*]."[11]

What used to be a licence or a deviation became the rule, the new *doxa*, as well as the foundation of a whole aesthetic. These new forms of 'beautiful ugliness' are then beautiful *by virtue of* their ugliness or even their horror.

**Coincidence of opposites**

Finally, the theorization of caricature and ideal ugliness, first by Giovanni Atanasio Mosini (in his 1646 introduction to Giovan Battista Agucchi's *Trattato della Pittura*)[12], then by Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Carlo Cesare Malvasia, and Filippo Baldinucci, allows us to go even further in the articulation of ugliness and beauty.

Indeed, in their ideal forms (and perhaps, consequently, in their less perfect manifestations), beauty and ugliness can be assimilated in that they both aim at idealization (they are then at an equal distance from naturalism, which consists in not considering the Idea). Mosini writes about Annibal Carrache that he

> "said that when the valuable painter correctly creates a small, loaded portrait [*ritrattino carico*], he imitates Raphael and the other good artists who, not content with the beauty present in nature, gather it from several objects or the most perfect statues, in order to produce a work that is perfect in every way; and that it was for this reason that to make a small loaded portrait [*ritrattino carico*] is nothing other than to show oneself to be an excellent connoisseur of the intention of nature by making this big nose, or this wide mouth, in order to give this object a beautiful deformity [*bella deformità*]"[13].

Perfect beauty and 'perfect deformity' therefore both complete an intention of nature that can tend towards beauty as well as ugliness (in the case of a *natura ludens*) and are therefore, for the artist, a genuine construction.

From Alberti's *De Pictura* to the first theorization of caricature in Mosini's treatise, the face of ugliness had resolutely changed: indeed, ugliness was no longer presented as the opposite of beauty, but as its reverse side; and the articulation of the beautiful and the ugly was no longer seen as an antithesis, or a paradox, or even an oxymoron, but as a self-evident fact according to which both are — quite simply — the two sides of the same coin.

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[11] "Che fai Guido? che fai? / La man, che forme angeliche dipigne, / Tratta hor'opre sanguigne? / Non vedi tu, che mentre il sanguinoso / Stuol de' fanciull ravivando vai, / Nova morte gli dai? / Oh ne la crudeltate anco pietoso / Fabro gentil, ben sa / Ch'ancor Tragico caso è caro oggetto, / e che spesso l'horror va col diletto" [14, p. 69].

[12] See [9, pp. 61–86].

[13] "[…] dicendo, che quando il valente Pittore fà bene vn ritrattino carico, imita Rafaelle, e gli altri buoni autori, che non contenti della bellezza del naturale, la vanno raccogliendo da più oggetti, ò dalle Statue più perfette, per fare vn'opera in ogni parte perfettissima: percioche il fare vn ritrattino carico, non era altro, che essere ottimo conoscitore dell'intentione della natura nel fare quel grosso naso, ò larga bocca, à fine di far vna bella deformità in quell'oggetto" [9, p. 65].

It should be noted, however, that even if ugliness seems to occupy a progressively less marginal place in the theory of art as we move closer to the Baroque period, it remained quantitatively much less theorised than beauty, and we have to wait for Lessing's *Laocoon* of 1766 and, above all, Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of the Ugly* of 1853 to find writings that are largely, if not exclusively, devoted to it. Moreover, during the Renaissance the beautiful absorbed the ugly more than the other way round, at the same time as its sphere widened and diversified: what was considered ugly in a previous classical aesthetic now came to participate fully in the diversity and plurality of beauties. As a result, the boundary between the beautiful and the ugly was not only blurred: it was largely displaced, but in favour of beauty, which was gaining ground.

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**Title.** Beauty and Ugliness in Italian Renaissance Art: Antithesis, Paradox, Oxymoron and Coincidence of Opposites

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses the way Italian paintings and artistic theory from the late Renaissance conceptualised ugliness, and gradually drew it closer to beauty. The first part of this article focuses on the traditional notion of ugliness as the mere opposite of beauty, in other words, ugliness as an expression of formal disharmo-

ny. The second part deals with the evolution from this conceptual antithesis to the paradoxical entwinement of these two notions, which led some authors to endow ugliness with qualities which had hitherto been applied to beauty. We consider several forms of 'beautiful ugliness': those of the "cruel and horrible" (Gabriele Paleotti) sacred paintings whose beauty resides in their faithful rendering of the Scriptures, or, in other words, in their truthfulness; those of the Silenus-like characters whose kindness pierces through revolting physical traits; those of the artistic '*capricci*' who, under their apparent deformity, hide the ingenuity of their creator; and those who take up the Aristotelian paradox, according to which the correct imitation of ugliness arouses a feeling of pleasure among the spectator. In the Baroque aesthetic (third part), the 'beautiful ugliness' is an oxymoronic creation in which the horrifying content of the *mimesis* is consciously used in order to highlight, by contrast, the transformative power of the artist. The conceptualisation of caricature in the 17th century, which we mention in the fourth part of this work, suggests that beauty and ugliness, at least in their ideal forms, are in fact the two sides of a same coin.

**Keywords:** ugliness, artistic theory, Renaissance, 16th century, Cinquecento

**Название статьи.** Категории «красивого» и «уродливого» в искусстве Итальянского Ренессанса: антитезы, парадоксы, сочетание и совпадение противоположностей

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается, каким образом итальянская живопись и художественная теория эпохи позднего Возрождения осмысляли категорию «уродливого» и постепенно сближали её с категорией «красивого». Первая часть работы рассматривает традиционное представление об уродстве как полной противоположности красоты и выражении формальной дисгармонии. Вторая часть работы изучает эволюцию, в результате которой противоположные категории «красивого» и «уродливого» парадоксальным образом переплелись, позволив ряду авторов наделить уродство теми качествами, которые ранее применялись для определения красоты. В статье рассмотрены несколько форм «прекрасного уродства»: «жестокой и ужасной» (Габриэле Палеотти) религиозной живописи, красота которой заключается в верном воспроизведении Священного Писания или, другими словами, в правдивости; персонажей наподобие Силена, чья доброта возвышается над физическим уродством; образов каприччо, которые за кажущейся безобразностью скрывают изобретательность автора; тех, кто воспринял аристотелевский парадокс, согласно которому правильное изображение уродства вызывает у зрителя чувство удовольствия. В третьей части работы рассмотрена эстетика барокко, где понятие «прекрасного уродства» является оксюмороном, в котором ужасающий мимесис сознательно используется для того, чтобы подчеркнуть преобразующую силу художника. Появление искусства карикатуры в XVII в., которому посвящена четвертая часть статьи, говорит о том, что красота и уродство (по крайней мере, в их идеальных формах) на деле являются двумя сторонами одной медали.

**Ключевые слова:** уродство, художественная теория, Ренессанс, XVI век, Чинквеченто