

The Abject and the Ugly: Modern Art in Kristeva and Adorno

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Abstract

In this paper I explore a convergence of the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva and the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno on the role of modern art in society. I argue that Kristeva and Adorno share a similar methodological approach, which privileges modern art as an object of mediation between the individual and society. In particular, both view certain kinds of modern art as able to illuminate the relationship between the individual and society in a way that theory alone--such as a psychoanalytic account of personality formation or a Marxist account of class conflict--is unable. This methodological approach is grounded in the assumption that the appearance of reality in modern society is ultimately false. For both Kristeva and Adorno, society proliferates false images of a happy, fulfilled life even though the experience of reality engendered by individuals in "crisis" is vacuous and empty. Within a totalizing society, modern art is one realm that lifts the veil on this false reality and allows for a different reflection and identification of the subject. This capacity of art is based on its ability to reveal the repressed origins or foundations of such a society, which for Kristeva occurs in abject art and for Adorno occurs through the ugly in art.

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Introduction

In this paper I explore a convergence of the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva and the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno on the role of modern art in society. I argue that Kristeva and Adorno share a similar methodological approach, which privileges modern art as an object of mediation between the individual and society. In particular, both view certain kinds of modern art as able to illuminate the relationship between the individual and society in a way that theory alone--such as a psychoanalytic account of personality formation or a Marxist account of class conflict--is unable. This methodological approach is grounded in the assumption that the appearance of reality in modern society is ultimately false. For both Kristeva and Adorno, society proliferates false images of a happy, fulfilled life even though the experience of reality engendered by individuals in "crisis" is vacuous and empty.¹ Within a totalizing society, modern art is one realm that lifts the veil on this false reality and allows for a different reflection and identification of the subject.² This capacity of art is based on its ability to reveal the repressed origins or foundations of such a society, which for Kristeva occurs in abject art and for Adorno occurs through the ugly in art.³

1. The Individual and Society

Kristeva's theorization of the relationship between the individual and society in her recent work is rooted in an analysis of features particular to the late twentieth century. In

¹See, for example, Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 2, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 67, and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 119.

²See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 88 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 18, 243.

³See, for example, Kristeva, 18, and Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 49.

Intimate Revolt, for example, she often describes this society as “the society of the spectacle” in Guy Debord’s sense of the phrase.⁴ She views this spectacle as totalizing. That is, society is a “mediatic universe of the image”, which contains all information in a visible form: everything is visible and transparent and thus everything can be represented.⁵ In this all-encompassing spectacle, nothing negative remains. Within this social context that perpetuates the illusion of total consciousness, Kristeva notices through her clinical work individuals who have unstable boundaries, an incomplete or incoherent experience of the self, feelings of emptiness and an inability to love.⁶ These individuals, who according to Kristeva appear more frequently in this changed climate, undergo an experience of negativity that has no correspondence in the external world of the spectacle. Thus, individuals are unable to conceptualize their relationship to society and their place within it because the specular images erode our capacity for imagination and fantasy. Kristeva writes:

It has often been said how the society of the spectacle and certain aspects of the contemporary family (the lack of relationships, lack of authority, and so on) lead to phantasmatic poverty if not vacuity. . . . But, even more, the impoverishment of fantasies, their reduction, their abolition threaten to abolish inner depth itself, this camera obscura that has constituted the psychological life of the speaking being for millennia.⁷

Images perpetuated by television, advertising, and Hollywood movies, for example, cause the erosion of fantasy described in the above quotation. This of concern for Kristeva because she views our capacity for fantasy as integral to the expression of drives and instincts that otherwise have no expression and thus produce a sense of emptiness, anxiety and other various “maladies of the soul.”

⁴ Kristeva, 79, 139-40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶ See, for example, Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁷ Kristeva, *Intimate*, 68.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer also conceive of the individual in relationship to a totalizing society produced by the Enlightenment. This society is rooted in a false conception of reason, which equates reason solely with calculation and utility.

Correlatively, the most rational behavior in such a society is behavior that is standardized.

Consumer society, based in this conception of reason, reduces individuals to functions and erases their qualitative differences. In this way, mass culture produces a numbing sameness. Thus, the regulation of individuals according to an instrumental reason concerned only with abstraction and calculation produces an impoverishment of experience:

Through the mediation of total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.⁸

In this context, individuals are unable to conceptualize their relationship to society because the capacity for self-reflection is eroded. Furthermore, our experience of society is structured according to the same patterns of rationality that it perpetuates, thus there is no conflict between the public mind and individual experience:

The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made *a priori* of the stuff from which he himself constructs it. Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are pre-censored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers.⁹

In the above situation, the capacity for critique or for occupying a negative stance seems to be extinguished since the conditions for the possibility of our experiences are predetermined by consumer society.

In this context, both Kristeva and Adorno share an ambivalent view towards art. On the one hand, art is produced within a totalizing society and is subject to its logic. On the other

⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

hand, art retains a certain autonomy from society and is able to critique its logic. Kristeva displays this ambivalence, for example, when she asks whether cinema wishes “to be an exhibition of the sadomasochistic repressed in the spectacle, an authorized perversion, a banalization of evil? Or, on the contrary, its demystification?”¹⁰ At the same time, she views art and literature as “allies of psychoanalysis; they open the verbal path to the construction of fantasies and prepare the terrain for psychoanalytical interpretation.”¹¹ Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer write concerning art, “Even its freedom, as negation of the social utility which is establishing itself through the market, is essentially conditioned by the commodity economy.”¹² Regardless of their ambivalence, both Kristeva and Adorno view the autonomy of art as successfully revealing that which is repressed or excluded by contemporary society: the origins that form the repressed foundations of the totalizing socio-symbolic system. The next section will explore the way in which modern art is able to reveal these origins.

2. Art and Origin

Although a totalizing society prevents one from directly addressing the decline or impoverishment of experience, modern art is decisive for both Kristeva and Adorno in facilitating this capacity. In this section, I will examine the way in which Kristeva views abject art as fulfilling this role, and then turn to the counterpart of this analysis in Adorno’s examination of the ugly in art.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes abjection as a state that elicits both horror and fascination in the individual. Intimately connected to experiences of disgust, Kristeva gives food loathing and the encounter with the corpse as examples of abjection. In both cases, she describes visceral, nauseating reactions to experiences that disturb the boundaries comprising an

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Intimate*, 80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹² Adorno and Horkheimer, 127.

individual's sense of identity. The revulsion experienced when one encounters a corpse, for example, is the result of seeing directly what we must "permanently thrust aside in order to live."¹³ Kristeva continues, "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being."¹⁴ If ridding oneself of waste is how we live, and we identify ourselves as alive over and against this waste, then the corpse is "the most sickening of wastes."¹⁵ It is a body that has fallen beyond the limit between life and death and become waste itself. The encounter with the corpse brings the subject face to face with a state that has encroached upon the boundary necessary for life: "It is death infecting life."¹⁶

From the example of the corpse, then, we can see that for Kristeva, abjection is something that disturbs the individual's identity. Furthermore, abjection is not only the experience of some object that threatens the subject externally by disturbing its boundaries, but is also an experience internal to the subject. The individual who undergoes this internal abjection experiences a fundamental loss or emptiness at his or her core. Kristeva calls individuals beset by abjection borderline patients and they experience their emptiness as a threat, as something that will pull them in, overwhelm them, and destroy them. This sense of emptiness has a cause but as Kristeva notes, contemporary society does not allow for its identification.

Within her psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva explains that the onset of abjection in adult life is attributable to the primary separation that the child undergoes from the mother, a separation that is marked by repulsion and fascination.¹⁷ For Kristeva "phobia, on the one hand, and 'borderline' disorders, on the other, bear witness to these archaic states of subjectivity where

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ See, for example, Kristeva, *Intimate*, 260.

the subject does not yet exist but is separating from the other, from the object, in abjection.”¹⁸

At a certain stage the infant must ‘reject’ the mother in order to form an individuated sense of self.¹⁹ Thus, the first instance of subject formation is not mimesis or becoming like another, but rather is the experience of separation: “It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.”²⁰ The return of abjection in adulthood is thus an indicator of an unsuccessful transformation in this phase of subject formation.

Kristeva envisions the possibility of approaching the borderline case through psychoanalysis.²¹ Interestingly, Kristeva views art as performing the same function as psychoanalysis for society as a whole:

Ab-jection is also set in motion in the imaginary experience when repression fissures in order to make the drive and anxiety available, and representation takes the regressive path in order to symbolize the subject’s states of instability: states of horror and fascination. From Dostoyevsky’s idiots to Céline’s journeys to the end of the night, from Biblical abominations to the sufferings of Marguerite Duras . . .²²

Abject art provides a discourse or representation for the experience of the individual, which cannot find any other counterpart in the society of the spectacle. In this way, art opens up the possibility of self-reflection and transformation in the individual.

The presence of the ugly in modern art plays an analogous function for Adorno as abjection does for Kristeva concerning the repressed foundations of subjectivity. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno discusses the ugly in modern art in contrast with the way the ugly was perceived in archaic and traditional art. The portrayal of subjects considered ugly in archaic and traditional

¹⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹ Kristeva believes this stage is pre-Oedipal. See Kristeva, *Powers*, especially chapter two for her critique of the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex.

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 209.

²² Kristeva, *Intimate*, 157-158.

art, for example, were dissonant elements within the artwork. According to traditional aesthetics, ugly elements opposed “the work’s ruling law of form” yet at the same time they were integrated into the artwork.²³ For example, a subject matter considered ugly could still be part of a beautiful artwork in the way that it was pictorially represented. Adorno’s key point in his discussion of traditional artworks is that the presence of the ugly did not fundamentally challenge the ideal of beauty but rather was integrated into this ideal.

For Adorno, the ugly in modern art is more than a formal element that is ultimately harmonized within the artwork: “The anatomical horror in Rimbaud and Benn, the physically revolting and repellent in Beckett, the scatological traits of many contemporary dramas, have nothing in common with the rustic uncouthness of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings.”²⁴ The ugly in modern art is qualitatively different from previous artworks because it is the appearance of what is historically older, what art rejected in order to establish itself as art: “The concept of the ugly may well have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase: it marks the permanent return of the archaic intertwined with the dialectic of enlightenment in which art participates.”²⁵ In this respect, the ugly in modern art is a negativity that is not reconciled within the artwork. Instead of integrating ugly elements, the modern artwork “decries domination” in and through the ugly or what Adorno calls the nauseating and physically revolting.²⁶

If the ugly is the return of archaic elements, then it suggests that the beautiful in art developed “in the renunciation of what was once feared,”²⁷ and which only became ugly because of this renunciation. Archaic art imitated fear, such as the “cannibalistically threatening cult

²³Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 46.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

masks and grimaces,”²⁸ but with the emergence of subjectivity and the concurrent diminishment of mythical fear, representation of this fear became taboo. In this sense enlightenment subjectivity, anchored in the promise of reason, participated in the domination of nature in order to extirpate the fear historically associated with it. Yet, the expectation that reason would free the subject from fear and violence is unfulfilled in the contemporary administered world. Individuals are dominated by an instrumental reason that reduces individuals to mere examples of the species thus instituting the return of myth. The “ancient terror” that art renounced reappears as the ugly in modern art.²⁹

The ugly in modern art is not harmonized with the formal principles of the artwork. It carries “marks of the frightening” and thus produces shock in the viewer through the deformation of objects, such as in Picasso’s works.³⁰ There is a difference for Adorno between the representation of the domination of nature or the principle of violence as the thematic content of art, such as in social realism, and the formal manifestation of the ugly, such as in cubism.³¹ Adorno views the former as still recuperating the depiction of violence or what is dissonant into the artwork. Adorno’s problem with the “graphics of starving working-class children and other extreme images” is that they maintain an affirmation of the status quo. They are “documents of that beneficent heart that beats in the face of the worst, thereby promising that it is not the worst.”³² In contrast, the ugly that manifests itself within the formal elements of the artwork refuses this integration.

²⁸ Ibid., 47.

²⁹ See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Aesthetic Violence: The Concept of the Ugly in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*,” *Cultural Critique* 60 (2005) for a discussion of this issue in Adorno.

³⁰ Hohendahl, 183.

³¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 49.

³² Ibid.

An important difference emerges between the perspectives on art in Kristeva and Adorno. Whereas for Kristeva, the abject in art is a representation of the negativity experienced by the individual, for Adorno, the ugly in modern art as a problem of form plunges the viewer into a negativity that produces a refusal of understanding. The experience of this negativity in the viewer challenges the false images of society, but the result is not necessarily a healing transformation of the individual as it is for Kristeva. This difference between Kristeva and Adorno will be addressed in further detail in the next section.

3. Art and Reparation

Kristeva and Adorno reveal that it is in the apparently degraded aspects of art that we can perhaps catch a glimpse of the truth that has been shunned, repressed, and excluded from the dominant meaning making, socio-symbolic system in which we live. Both the abject and the ugly are links to origins that have been suppressed, in the former case by identity formation and in the latter case by the advent of art. For Kristeva, abject art enacts the function of psychoanalysis and can heal the debilitated western subject. Abject art does this by aesthetically enacting a return to the origins of personality formation--the attachment to and the repulsion of the maternal body through which abjection occurs. In this way, individuals who live in a culture or society that is cut off from its past can re-find the lost capacity to love. Adorno is more reluctant than Kristeva to proclaim that art is a conduit for the betterment of the individual or society. Instead, art is tormented by the return of what it must expel in order to constitute itself as art. In this respect art on the one hand experiences its own decay, that is, its inability to live up to its concept—the ideal of beauty that has historically been the aim of art. On the other hand, this failure or decay also carries a redemptive quality in the recuperation of what was shunned—the ugly or archaic origin necessary for art to exist in the first place.

The main difference between Kristeva and Adorno, then, is in their respective focus on content. Kristeva is interested in art that portrays the abject. For Adorno, the ugly is symptomatic of a deeper crisis within art itself, which brings to light the true nature of all artworks: they can only exist on the initial rejection of the archaic. Furthermore, for Kristeva the representation of the abject affects the viewer by bringing him or herself in touch with their own abjection, in a way analogous to transference in the clinical setting. For Adorno, it is the resistance to meaning, the sheer refusal of the mind's capacity to understand and harmonize dissonant artworks that brings our capacity to reason closer to self-reflection. The reparative function that Kristeva finds in abject art is clearly something that Adorno's thinking about reconciliation in art gestures toward, but the crucial difference is that for the latter, it is uncertain whether this possibility can exist within the current social system. In this way, Kristeva and Adorno differ in their understanding of whether the individual's depreciated experience in society can be restored through art.

This leads to a final comment about the distinction between Kristeva and Adorno with respect to the concept of truth that each attributes to their analysis of art. Kristeva's notion of curing the individual beset by abjection through art depends upon the acceptance of the idea that abjection is at the root of personality formation. In other words, one must accept as universally true that abjection is an origin from which subjectivity emerges.³³ In contrast Adorno's focus is historical, for the truth that modern art reveals is one about the nature of consumer society itself and the kind of experiences it engenders for those living within it.

³³ See Rosalind Krauss, "Informe without conclusion," *October*, 78 (1996), 93-98 for a critique of the use of Kristeva's notion of abjection to analyze art, specifically, Laura Mulvey's analysis of the work of Cindy Sherman.

Conclusion

For both Kristeva and Adorno, the individual struggles to make meaning from its debilitated standpoint within a consumer society that is a *false* reality: the society of the spectacle, the semblance of reality, a phantasmagoria mediated by a slew of commodified images, a world where illusion holds sway and truth or reality is obscured. In this context, knowledge of the relationship between individual and society becomes problematic within an epistemological model that relies on our rational capacities. For both Kristeva and Adorno, the debilitated subject experiences challenges in its ability to reason. Within Kristeva's perspective, the subject experiences threats to his or her sovereignty. Abjection infuses the conscious state of the individual with the unconscious, blurs the boundaries between subject and object, and reveals a center of emptiness that cannot be conceptualized. Within Adorno's perspective, the reified categories of our concepts reproduce the stifling conditions of a repressive society. They enact the dissolution of the subject by mimicking the structures of irrationality that reason intended to conquer. Within this social context, both thinkers instead of looking forward turn toward the past in order to find clues about the future, Kristeva by investigating the origins of the crisis character of the 'borderline' patient and Adorno by investigating the origins of the crisis of enlightenment subjectivity. It is in this context that both Kristeva and Adorno, although widely differing as theorists, share the common project of redeeming the western subject.

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