IS THERE A NEGATIVE JUDGMENT OF TASTE?
DISGUST AS THE REAL UGLINESS
IN KANT’S AESTHETICS

Can we find in Kant’s transcendental philosophy an aesthetic judgment on ugliness? What is its relationship with the principle of purposiveness? And what is the role of disgust? These questions animated an intensive debate among Kantian scholars in the last fifteen years. This article aims to contribute to such a debate from the standpoint of a theoretical position that considers the ugly in relation to aesthetic purposiveness and disgust. The just mentioned critical debate started with two articles, both published in the «British Journal of Aesthetics»: in 1998 David Shier claimed that there are no pure negative aesthetic judgments in Kant’s aesthetics; in 1999 Christian Wenzel answered to Shier by stating that aesthetic disharmony exists and this proves the existence of negative judgment of taste in Kantian aesthetics. The whole debate is therefore based upon two opposite positions about the possibility of a judgment on ugliness in Kant’s philosophy. The claim I support derives from Shier’s position: I will try to integrate it with the notion of purposiveness and with a comparison with disgust.

The arguments of the two parties are both very interesting and, almost in every case, involve the role of free play between the imagination and the understanding. Authors who state that there aren’t negative judgments also claim that the aesthetic judgment is communicable and universally valid while the judgment on the ugly cannot be communicable. What is communicable is the subject’s state of mind constituted by the free play between the imagination and the understanding, always in connection with ple-

sure. Thus, if the negative aesthetic judgment existed, it would be communicable; however, the free play, which grants the communicability, is never connected with the displeasure that characterizes the ugly. Therefore negative aesthetic judgments don’t exist in Kant’s transcendental philosophy3.

Authors who claim that negative judgments of taste are possible point instead to the necessity of an aesthetic disharmony and recognize a link between such a disharmony and the knowledge in general, as it happens for the free harmony between the imagination and the understanding. Wenzel, as well as the authors supporting his position4, starts from Kant’s essay: *Attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy*. Following this essay, these authors claim that displeasure is not the mere absence of pleasure, as ugliness is not the mere absence of beauty5. Through the principle of purposiveness is thus possible to give a positive ground to ugliness, as well as to apply the structure of the *Analytic of the beauty* to an *Analytic of the ugly*. These authors support their claims also by grounding them on empirical evidence. It is obvious, they say, that Kant had to consider judgments on ugliness, considering the fact that we undoubtedly have experience of it6.

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6 Other interesting essays, not totally reducible to any of these positions are: C. La Rocca, *Das Schöne und der Schatten. Dunkle Vorstellungen und ästhetische Erfahrung zwischen Baumgarten und Kant*, in H.F. Klemme - M. Pauen - M.-L. Raters (hrsg. v.), Im Schatten des Schönen. Die Ästhetik des Hässlichen in historischen Ansätzen und aktuellen Debatten, Bielefeld, Aisthesis Verlag, 2006, pp. 19-64; C. La Rocca, L’intelletto oscuro. Inconscio e autocoscienza in Kant, in C. La Rocca (a cura di), *Leggere Kant. Dimensioni della filosofia criti-
1. Why negative judgments do not exist in Kant’s aesthetics

In my opinion, the more convincing argument on the role of ugliness in Kant’s aesthetic is that of Paul Guyer, which in turn recalls that of Reinhard Brandt. Guyer agrees with Brandt in claiming that certainly ugly things exist, but this does not mean that pure aesthetic judgment on the ugly exists as well. Guyer argues, in fact, that the experience of the ugly is impure and that Kant is therefore more interested in showing the element of displeasure that characterizes the sublime than that which defines the ugly. Guyer discusses also the reference to negative magnitudes and recognizes that displeasure is not a mere absence of pleasure. He also points out that in the Reflexionen, on the basis of the notion of pleasure, Kant defines three categories of aesthetics: the beauty, the ordinary and the ugly. This triad might lead to the conclusion that Kantian aesthetics is grounded on the articulation of pleasure, absence of pleasure and displeasure. Guyer however reminds us that Kant’s aesthetics is grounded on the articulation of the faculties and that we can only have two kinds of relationship between the imagination and the understanding: either the free play or the reference of the representation to an intellectual concept. If we have a judgment, Guyer continues, there must be harmony between the imagination and the understanding: we can recognize an object precisely because there is a unity, either logical or aesthetic, between the imagination and the understanding. It follows that there can be judgments on the ugly, but they are not pure aesthetic judgments. Guyer concludes his argument with an interesting reference to disgust and displeasure connected with sub-

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7 P. Guyer, op. cit.
lime. I will get back to this reference in the second part of my contribution.

Guyer’s argumentation is criticized by Martin Steenhagen, who recalls the interpretation of Henri Allison. Allison argues that we should distinguish between harmony and free play. Steenhagen hence claims that the judgment on the ugly is grounded on the disharmony of the faculties and that it has the same subjective sources of the judgment on the beauty. On this ground he claims the possibility of a pure reflective aesthetic judgment on the ugly and the necessary overcoming of the epistemological argument of Guyer. Guyer, he writes, seems to give for granted that concepts are always at the core of experience, but a pure reflective judgment requires abstraction from such a conceptualism. Therefore Steenhagen suggests that the relationship between the imagination and the understanding should be considered as a necessary cooperation allowing us to conceive a judgment grounded on a disharmony. While it is impossible to define a pure judgment in relation to disharmony, it is however possible to refer to a reflective judgment on the ugly, if we consider it as impure and not universally communicable.

Steenhagen’s argument leads us to an important conclusion: there are impure aesthetic judgments on the ugly. Nevertheless, his argument does not answer Guyer’s article, which tries to answer the question whether or not there are pure aesthetic judgments on the ugly. The issue here is not whether or not we make experience of the ugly, which is undeniable, but whether there is room in transcendental philosophy for a judgment on the ugly. I believe that a convincing answer could be found by taking into account the principle of purposiveness.

In the First introduction to the critique of the power of judgment, Kant defines purposiveness with relation to the need of the subject to find some empirical rules in nature. For this reason Kant can claim that purposiveness has a subjective character: the aesthetical judgment is grounded on the principle that nature is ordered as if it was accordant to the subject’s faculties. The prin-

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10 On the ugly and the sublime see: H. Parret, The ugly as the beyond of the sublime cit.
11 M. Steenhagen, op. cit.
12 H. Allison, op. cit.
ciple of purposiveness therefore ensures the relationship between the imagination and the understanding and grants a free harmony between them. If we considered the ugly as a pure aesthetical judgment, then we would have to refer it to the principle of purposiveness, the fundamental principle of the power of judgment. But how can ugly things be purposive for the subject?

I think there are two solutions, mainly: either the fundamental disharmony of the ugly is connected to an element of contra-purposiveness, or the displeasure created by the ugly is reduced to a form of pleasure. Kant certainly follows the second option when he writes «beautiful art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting»14. Although Kant recognizes a form of contra-purposiveness in the experience of the sublime and in his description of the organisms15, he always brings it back to the subjective purposiveness. There is no room in Kantian aesthetics for a real contra-purposiveness and this clearly appears as the power of judgment acts only by following the principle of purposiveness. Since we cannot account for any real contra-purposiveness, we are not allowed to claim any disharmony between faculties based upon the principle of purposiveness. Finally, what can be judged as ugly is brought back to beauty through the action of art. As in the case of the sublime, the initial displeasure is led to a form of pleasure.

The argument of the contra-purposiveness is taken into consideration also by Hud Hudson and by Sean McConnell. In this regard, Hudson, who makes perhaps the first attempt to explain ugliness in Kant’s aesthetics, writes that «it is this subjective contra-purposiveness in the presentation of the mere form of an object [...] that is connected with a universal disliking, and that prompts a judgment of taste (of reflection), when it is a judgment of ugliness [...] ugly is an object’s form of contra-purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose»16. McConnell stretches Hudson’s argument even further as

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14 I. Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, in Kants Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 5, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1913, p. 312; Critique of the power of judgment cit., p. 190. From now quoted as KU.

15 See KU, pp. 260 and 379; pp. 143 and 250.

16 H. Hudson, op. cit., p. 93.
he concludes: «in the case of a contra-final object, the empirical imagination will never detect a rule and thus the object will not engage the cognitive faculties and so free play (or play for that matter) will never arise. [...] An appeal to contra-purposiveness [...] destroys the very possibility of the judgment of taste»17.

Both Hudson and McConnell try a different strategy to justify the ugly in Kant’s aesthetics yet they do not come to any drastic conclusion as I do: to my mind, there isn’t any pure aesthetical judgment on the ugly. Either the ugly is reduced through art to a specific form of beauty or it is excluded from the realm of the power of judgment.

2. The real ugly: the case of disgust

Properly speaking, the ugly is never excluded from Kant’s aesthetics, but it is rather reduced to the beauty. The «only one kind of ugliness – Kant writes– cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely, that which arouses loathing (Ekel)»18. It seems therefore that the loathing can be considered as the real ugliness and as the real opposite of beauty.

In the debate on the ugly, also Guyer takes into account the disgusting and writes that disgust is an example of a not pure aesthetic judgment on the ugly. Kant defines disgust as a sensation that arises when «the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting»19. Thus, Guyer claims that Kantian disgust is a moral answer to the attempt to make beauty what it is not and to overcome the freedom of the imagination20. Similarly, Mojca Kuplen claims that disgust actually interferes with Kantian aesthetics, while the ugly doesn’t21. We can therefore argue that, although a purely negative aesthetic judgment does not exist, the authentic negative judgment of taste and the real opposite of beauty seems to be the disgusting, and not the ugly. The ugly can in fact be reduced to the

19 KU, p. 312; p. 190.
beauty so that it can find its own place in Kant’s aesthetics. Disgust expresses on the contrary the real threat to beauty.

One of the very few significant studies on Kantian disgust is certainly that of Winfried Menninghaus. In his famous book on the disgust, Menninghaus claims that Kant’s aesthetics follows a different trend from that of the 1750’s-1760’s debate animated by Herder and Lessing. While Johan Adolf Schlegel and Moses Mendelssohn paid attention to the disgust only in some marginal points of their texts, Herder and Lessing gave great importance to the disgust in their aesthetic theories. Kant, on the contrary, goes back to writing about the disgust only in his less prominent writings: we find the most important passages on the disgust in the *Anthropology*, in the *Observations* and in some unpublished texts.

In his *Beobachtungen* Kant gives an interesting definition of the disgust. He writes that «nothing is so opposed to the beautiful as the disgusting». This statement seems to confirm my claim that the real opposite of beauty is not the ugly, but the disgust. In this regard what Kant writes in his *Remarks in the observations* is also very interesting: «beautiful and sublime are not the same. The latter swells the heart and makes the attention fixed and tense. Therefore, it exhausts. The former lets the soul melt in a gentle sensation, and, in that it relaxes the nerves, it puts the feeling into a gentler emotion, which, however, where it goes too far, transforms into weariness, surfeit and disgust». Reading this passage, Kant adjuncts: «to distance oneself as far as possible from this sort of disgustingness takes purity, which is indeed becoming for every person, and which in the case of the fair sex is of the first rank among the virtues and can hardly be taken too far by it» (I. Kant, *Observations of the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* cit., p. 234; p. 41).

25 I. Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1912, p. 233; *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime and other writings*, trans. by P. Frierson - P. Guyer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 40. In the following page Kant adjuncts: «to distance oneself as far as possible from this sort of disgustingness takes purity, which is indeed becoming for every person, and which in the case of the fair sex is of the first rank among the virtues and can hardly be taken too far by it» (I. Kant, *Observations of the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* cit., p. 234; p. 41).
26 Id., *Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 20, hrsg. von der Preußischen Akademie der Wissen-
it seems therefore that Kant takes into account three aesthetic categories, that are not the beauty, the sublime and the ugly as in the Reflexionen, but rather the beauty, the sublime and the disgust. Starting from this tripartition, Menninghaus states that disgust, thus defined, could be considered as an element of the transcendental philosophy, constituting, just as beauty, an important strategic element of Kant’s system. Menninghaus is in fact persuaded that Kant places the origin of his aesthetics in the differentiation between the ideal sphere of the aesthetics and the realistic consideration of the disgust. On that basis, Menninghaus can claim that Kant constructs a precise form of politics and morals of the disgust.

The major merit of Menninghaus’ analysis is namely the recognition of the moral nature of Kantian disgust. In the Pädagogik, Kant defines the disgust as the highest form of education and in the Anthropology he writes:

Even the presentation of the evil or ugly (for example, the figure of personified death in Milton) can and must be beautiful whenever an object is to be represented aesthetically, and this is true even if the object is a Thersites. Otherwise the presentation produces either distaste or disgust, both of which include the endeavor to push away a representation that is offered for enjoyment; whereas beauty on the other hand carries with it the concept of an invitation to the most intimate union with the object, that is, to immediate enjoyment.
Also in 1798 Kant maintains the definition of the disgust he had given in the third *Critique*: the disgust is a feeling against an imposing enjoyment. In the *Anthropology* the disgust is however connected also to a «strong vital sensation», that Menninghaus can write that the disgust is part of the moral feeling and it makes morality and freedom in feelings more real. In the *Anthropology*, Kant namely writes: «nausea, an impulse to free oneself of food through the shortest way out of the esophagus (to vomit), has been allotted to the human being as such a strong vital sensation, for this intimate taking in can be dangerous to the animal. However, there is also a *mental pleasure* […] and thus the natural instinct to be free of it is also called nausea by analogy, although it belongs to inner sense»33.

The moral nature of the disgust is confirmed by Kant in a passage of the *Metaphysics of morals*, when he formulates the idea of an aesthetics of morals:

To think of several virtues (as one unavoidably does) is nothing other than to think of the various moral objects to which the will is led by the one principle of virtue, and so too with regard to the contrary vices. The expression that personifies both is an aesthetic device which still points to a moral sense. – So an aesthetics of morals, while not indeed part of the metaphysics of morals, is still a subjective presentation of it in which the feelings that accompany the constraining power of the moral law (e.g., disgust, horror, etc., which make moral aversion sensible) make its efficacy felt, in order to get the better of merely sensible incitements.34

This passage seems to confirm Menninghaus’s interpretation, which states that the disgust can be considered as a «negative sublime»: the disgust has a moral nature, it is connected to the vital sensation and it cooperates in making morality real. Thus, it constitutes a supplement to beauty35.

3. An interpretation of Kantian disgust
After having claimed that the ugly can find a proper space in Kant’s aesthetics only if it is reduced to beauty and that the real opposite of beauty, the one really excluded from Kantian aesthet-

ics, is the disgust, we can go back to the initial questions. Can we find in Kant’s transcendental philosophy an aesthetical judgment on ugliness? What is its relationship with the principle of purposiveness? And what is the role of the disgust?

I think, as I said before, that the solution may be provided by the notion of purposiveness. The principle of purposiveness, which ensures the activity of the power of judgment, does not permit any pure aesthetic judgment on the ugly. The contrapurposiveness is always reduced to the purposiveness, or else no pure reflective judgments would be possible. The contrapurposiveness that is irreducible to beauty (or to the sublime) is in fact totally excluded from Kant’s aesthetics through the feeling of the disgust. We can therefore claim that the disgust is the feeling that points at the real ugly and draws the bound that separates what has to be excluded from the transcendental philosophy. This idea is confirmed by the definition of the disgust that Kant gives in one of his Reflections: «the disgust is unpleasant for its own and unreserved. Therefore, our mind can’t be entertained through the representation of the disgust, as it is through that of the unhappiness. Sins against nature. We don’t speak gladly about them, because they create from their own the representation of the disgust».

The disgust can thus be defined as a strong vital sensation that preserve the beauty and the purposiveness from the contrapurposiveness. The internal system of Kant’s third Critique is based upon the reason’s need to recognize in nature some rules that allow the transition from the determination of nature to the moral freedom. The purposiveness that we find in nature has then a subjective nature and the objective ugliness of our experiences hasn’t got any chance to find a place in Kant’s system, that is to say it cannot play any role in the realization of the transition from nature to freedom. On the contrary, disgust can play a significant role in the transcendental philosophy. Although Kant doesn’t give it much room in his critical writings, disgust has a moral nature and defines the limits of what can be accepted in Kant’s aesthetics. Paradoxically, the disgusting arises in front of those things that forcibly impose an enjoyment to the subject. It likely refers to

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36 R 502 (I. Kant, Reflexion cit., p. 218); some reference to disgust can be found also in other anthropological Reflexionen: 275, 286, 366, 1067 (Id., Reflexion cit., p. 104, 107, 143, 473).

37 But perfectly coherent with the definition of disgust given in the 18th century.
those things that are so ugly that can’t be reduce to beauty and rest in the realm of the contra-purposiveness. The notion of purposiveness can thus explain the role of disgust as an aesthetical category that defines the bounds of aesthetics. The relationship between the disgusting and the ugly may help us explain the conceptual boundary between purposiveness and counter-purposiveness, even though we are still missing a clear criterion for distinguish between irredeemably ugly and ugly qua reduced to beauty through art, and, in fact, for separating the ugly from the disgusting in the first place.

Differently from the ugly, the disgusting has a simpler structure, as it doesn’t request an articulation of the imagination and of the understanding nor it asks to be considered as the object of a judgment. It is just an immediate and really strong feeling, that moves the subject in the direction of the judgment of taste and nullifies the threat of contra-purposiveness. Disgust, as Menningarhaus states, can thus be compared to the moral feeling for its function of delineating the boundary of a judgment, that is, in this case, the pure reflective aesthetic judgment.