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Ultimate ugly: Jake and Dinos Chapman's disasters of war and the theology of ugliness

Abstract

Ugliness is an elusive concept and has been little discussed in theological aesthetics. This article argues that contemporary culture often regards ugliness and being more authentic than beauty, and prizes ugliness in contemporary art. Through a discussion of works by the contemporary British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman that rework Goya's *Disasters of War*, this article suggests that ugliness is connected to nihilism, and that it should be seen as not the opposite of, but the negation of beauty. The works by the Chapman brothers embody the aesthetic and affective qualities of ugliness and thus a consideration of these works can help to formulate a theology of ugliness.

Keywords

Beauty Ugliness Jake and Dinos Chapman Disasters of War
nihilism

List of figures

Fig 1. Francisco Goya y Lucientes, *¡Grande hazaña! ¡con muertos!* (*What a feat! With dead men!*), plate 39 of *Los Desastres de la guerra*, etching, 15.6 x 20.8 cm, c. 1810-12, published 1863, London: British Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum

Fig 2. Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great deeds against the dead*, 1994, fibreglass, resin, paint and wigs, 277 x 244 x 152 cm, private collection © Vibrant Pictures/Alamy Stock Photo © Jake and Dinos Chapman. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2016.

Biographical Note

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Ultimate ugly: Jake and Dinos Chapman's disasters of war and the theology of ugliness

The artists Jake and Dinos Chapman specialise in ugliness. In their successful and prolific career, they have made numerous works aiming to shock, repel and disgust the viewer, and they have been rewarded with plenteous publicity, admiring critical responses and healthy sales. This paper will focus on a small selection of the Chapman brothers' large output, works in which the artists reworked ideas in various media from Goya's series of etchings *Los desastres de la guerra* (*The disasters of war*). These works, I will argue, cultivate ugliness: they choose the ugly, dwell on it, and make the viewer confront it. Ugliness is a positive choice for the Chapman brothers, the ideal that their work reaches for. What is the meaning of all this ugliness, and what does this encounter with ugliness do to us as viewers? William Dyrness has suggested that the meaning of visual art 'lies in what it does rather than what it represents' and 'what it does *with* what it represents' [emphasis in the original] (Dyrness, 2001, p. 100) What is it that ugliness does, and what does art that chooses ugliness do with what it represents?

Ugliness is an elusive concept. Writers on theological aesthetics have been more concerned with beauty and its meanings, and scarcely mention ugliness except as an antonym for beauty, whilst writers on philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism and art history have little more to say. As Robert M. Adams

comments in his brief essay ‘Ideas of Ugly’, ugliness has normally been defined negatively as the absence of and opposite to the beautiful: “if there were no beauty, there would be no ugly at all, for the latter exists only as a negation of the former.” (Rosenkranz, 1853, cited in Adams, 1977, pp.91) Yet beauty and ugliness are not simply paired opposites, for what is unbeautiful is not necessarily ugly, nor is what is not ugly necessarily beautiful. Some instances of ugliness, for example the grotesque, might be seen as misunderstood beauty that requires a shift in perspective to be rightly valued; others, such as the ‘ugliness’ of poverty and disability, as the aesthetic corollary of oppressive and unjust power relations. In this case liberation theology might help us to uncover the ugliness in the power relations themselves and to forge new ideas about beauty.

These instances are examples of the urge to redeem ugliness by recasting it as misunderstood or fallen beauty. But what of ugliness that resists this redemptive urge: ugliness that is, as it were, content with its own ugliness? In this essay I want to concentrate on forms of ugliness that are not redeemable. I am concerned not with unchosen ugliness, but with works of art whose makers have made a positive choice in favour of ‘ultimate ugly’: the ugly as a conscious aesthetic. In this essay I argue that ugliness is more than the absence or opposite of beauty; rather, it is the negation of beauty, the lack of belief both in beauty and in beauty’s metaphysical qualities.

I’m interested in ugliness because it seems to me that contemporary culture values chosen ugliness in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few

decades ago. Umberto Eco's anthology *On ugliness* is a historical survey that unintentionally demonstrates how ugliness can be found in the pre-modern world only by identifying it with the fearful, the grotesque, the deformed and the damned. In other words, it is a compendium of concepts that cluster around ugliness rather than a discussion of ugliness itself. On the other hand, Stephen Bayley's recent book on the subject is titled *Ugliness: the aesthetics of everything*: the world around us, in all its multitudinousness, is ugly rather than beautiful, and we are surrounded by and live within the ugly. Our contemporary culture has opened up the possibility of ugliness as a positive value rather than the aesthetic corollary of something wrong or disordered in the moral or spiritual realm, the physical sign of sinfulness, or the calamity of bodily deformity. In a culture where beauty has become a matter of surfaces and appearance, ugliness has come to be thought of as more real, more authentic, than beauty.

The distance between contemporary aesthetics of ugliness and pre-modern conceptions of the ugly can be seen in the ways in which ugliness occurs in the Bible. There are plenty of instances of ugliness: the terrible plagues visited on Job, the devastation of Israel in Isaiah and Jeremiah, the complaints of the Psalmist, the horrors of Daniel and Revelation. Yet none of these are chosen: ugliness, deformity and horror are visited on the sinful and the unfortunate. They are the outward sign of inward sinfulness; they are a calamity that one pleads to God to deliver one from; they are a catastrophe that heralds the coming of God's kingdom. Even where the people of Israel choose what is abominable, the ugliness that results – the turning of the valley of Topheth to

the valley of slaughter, the laying waste of Jerusalem – is the just punishment for the people’s sin (Jer 7. 30-34). The devastation of the land results from the people’s perversity: one form of untruth (worshipping idols) is answered with another (reducing the land to devastated ugliness). To make something ugly is to pervert it from its natural state, and from the underlying beauty and goodness that comes from being part of God’s creation. To say something is as ugly as sin is to affirm that beauty is fundamental to the goodness of God’s creation – a beauty that is distorted and destroyed by sin. Even in its fallen state, creation bears witness to God’s glory, because beauty is “based on the actual and continuing presence of God as the fundamental shape of being.” (Dyrness, 2001, p. 90)

I’ve chosen to explore the theological meanings of ugliness through a discussion of a selection of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s work because, although they are not the only contemporary artists interested in ugliness, their oeuvre to date has been intensely concerned with the exploration and elaboration of an aesthetic of the ugly. Since 1993 they have made at least eight works or series of works across a variety of media responding to Goya’s series of prints depicting the Napoleonic invasion of Spain and the ensuing *guerrilla* resistance, *The disasters of war* (1810-12). Starting with *Disasters of war*, a single work comprising 82 small tableaux each representing one of the plates from the series (1993), and *Great deeds against the dead* (1994), a life-sized three-dimensional model of plate 39, they have produced numerous versions of the plates, over-drawn and hand-coloured, or transformed into comic-book style pictures. In 2003 they made *Sex I*, a painted bronze

sculpture, which again repeated the theme of plate 39, and in 2015 a black-painted version of this sculpture entitled *Sturm und drang*. The Chapmans have described their interest in *The disasters of war* as a compulsion (Turner, 2006). Although they have worked on the entire series, the image that they have returned to most often is plate 39, *¡Grande hazaña! con muertos!* (*Great feat! with dead men!*) [fig.1], and it is on their workings of this plate that I am going to concentrate.

Great feat! with dead men! has come to stand as a symbol of the destruction of beauty and the ruin of humanity by the cruelty and mercilessness of war. The dismembered and mutilated bodies hanging on the tree allude both to the torsos and limbs of classical sculpture and the genre of 'fragments of the antique', and to the imagery of the crucifixion. In particular, the central figure of the man tied to the tree with his contorted body and collapsed legs draws on the iconographic conventions of the crucifixion and deposition from the cross. Because of these visual allusions, Goya's image not only conveys the hideousness of war with its carnage and cruelty, but also, implicitly, links them to the 'alien beauty' of the cross, with its hope of redemption (De Gruchy, 2001, p.122). The Chapmans' works, however, strip away these references to Christ's redeeming sacrifice and, as we shall see, re-work the image as an icon of meaningless ugliness.

Great deeds against the dead [fig 2] is a scaled-up version of the miniature tableau of plate 39 from *Disasters of war*, for which the Chapmans used

plastic figures, bases, trees, guns and masonry intended for model railway and toy soldier enthusiasts. In the larger version, they used shop dummies for the figures, painted and given ludicrous wigs, but with the joints between the pieces left obvious. The tree and the patch of grass it stands on are scaled-up version of the Hornby trees that they had used for the miniature version. These two works, then, make no secret of their pre-fabricated nature and their obviously plasticky quality. Although their 'ready-mades' have been adapted – the mutilations of the bodies painstakingly painted on in garish red – the Chapmans do not attempt to emulate Goya's virtuosic exploitation of the possibilities of his medium. The cheap brown acrylic wigs, the sheeny plastic of the bodies, and the modelling of the tree and base are designedly the sculptural equivalent of a stick-man in drawing. This is not to castigate the Chapmans for their lack of skill: that would be to miss the point of an artistic practice that is uninterested in authenticity and originality, craft, and the exploration of a medium.

On the contrary, the superficiality of the Chapman's work in formal terms, the way it keeps all of its goods in the shop window, is central to the meanings of their art. In this they borrow their approach from the American artist Jeff Koons, whose intentionally superficial work the Chapmans cite as an influence (Turner, 2006). In *Gigantic fun* (2000), reproductions of Goya's etchings are overdrawn with images taken from children's colouring books, while in *Insult to injury* (2004), the Chapmans bought a historically significant set of *The disasters of war* for £25000 and systematically defaced them, adding clown faces, Mickey Mouse heads, swastikas, gas masks and insect

eyes to Goya's figures. Their sculptural version of plate 39, *Sex I* (2003) brings together many of these motifs in a luridly coloured and detailed version in painted bronze (recalling Koons's replications of balloons in painted metal) in which the dismembered bodies are decayed and crawling with maggots, with the faces transfigured into garish clowns' heads.

It's not unusual for artists to return to subjects and motifs over a number of works, nor is it unusual for artists to borrow from and to reimagine works by other artists – indeed, these practices are central to traditional art training. Nevertheless, the Chapmans' reworking of Goya departs violently from the accepted notion of influence or imitation. In his discussion of the Chapmans' relation to Goya, Simon Baker notes that Jake Chapman "has used the word 'impoverished' to describe the things the brothers work with" (Harris, 2010, p.29) This suggests that rather than making the images their own by transforming them through an imaginative engagement with their subject and its visual articulation, the Chapmans' aim is to hollow out Goya's work, erasing its significance and affective power, abrading the subtlety of line and composition, and turning its profundity into an intentional shallowness. As Baker notes, the reworkings of plate 39 are "not so much the realisation or 'improvement' of Goya's iconography so much as a brutal cleaving of form from content" in which the ersatz and banal is used to impoverish the original (Harris, 2010, p. 30).

But there is more at stake in these pieces than the simple reduction of complexity and meaning to caricature and banality. For the Chapmans, their

work refuses the idealism that burdens art and makes it into a vision of or argument for the redemption of the world:

"Art suffers the responsibility of having to have idealistic things to say about the world. People go to galleries expecting work to have something positive to say. Even if your work is shitty and nasty the response is that this shittiness and nastiness should convert somehow into something positive," says Jake. "We've always tried to hard-wire into our work something to make that impossible." (Field, 2003)

In contrast to theologians such as Dyrness who think of art as always 'part of something larger', the Chapmans see their work as a critique of profundity and meaning and as blocking any attempt to render it redemptive (Dyrness, 2001, p. 101). As the critic Jonathan Jones comments of *Insult to injury*, 'what the Chapmans have released is something nasty, psychotic and value-free', something that refuses what Jones calls 'the humanist rhetoric of moral, emotional and political meaning' (Jones, 2003).

The Chapmans' work has commonly evoked two kinds of responses: shock and horror, and laughter. When *Hell* was exhibited at the Royal Academy (*Sensation!*, 1997) warning signs alerted viewers to the work's disturbing content. Laughter is the preferred response of more sophisticated viewers, and this is the response the Chapmans themselves aim to provoke, because for them such laughter leads to a deeper significance than the shallowness of the works themselves can lend itself to:

But our cynicism translates into humour. So in some ways the work is made for a limited set of people who are prepared to go and see

something, understand its misanthropic nature and laugh. When someone laughs at something we've opened an abyss. Everything falls in. (Field, 2003)

In refusing possibility of a redemptive role for art, the Chapmans instead turn to a humorous cynicism in which art provokes laughter through its rejection of hope, purpose and transcendent meaning.

In an essay on the Chapmans' 'powers of laughter' Tanya Barson argues that their works evoke the kind of laughter described by Nietzsche and his follower Georges Bataille: laughter against God and expressive of "joy before death", that is, an existential joy in the face of the total annihilation that is a godless death, "a darker vision [of] a laughing apocalypse ... without God." (Grunenberg and Barson, 2006, p.85) The abyssal quality of such laughter lies in its negation, its absolute refusal, of transcendence, of idealism, of meaning and value. Although the Chapmans have described their versions of *Great feats! with dead men!* as representing a secular crucifixion, this is not to say that they carry a consoling humanist message. On the contrary, "the body is elaborated as flesh, as matter. No longer the religious body, no longer redeemed by God." It is in the context of "the absolute terror of material termination" that the Chapmans invite the viewer to laugh (Turner, 2006).

But outrage and laughter are not the only possible reactions to the Chapmans' work. Discussing *Great deeds against the dead*, Philip Shaw describes its superficiality as 'deadness':

Where Goya suffuses his image with violent juxtapositions, jolting the

viewer back and forth between competing attitudes and experiences, here there is no emotive contrast, no chiaroscuro from which to derive significant affect. Stripped of darkness, drained of life (witness the absence of any foliage on the supporting tree), the life-size fibreglass sculpture, unlike the plate, is perversely two-dimensional; its deadness is total. (Shaw, 2003, p.490)

Shaw goes on to say that the effect of the mutilated bodies is not appalling but dull and boring; they leave the viewer dissatisfied and disengaged from the work in front of them. And this is certainly my experience of looking at the Chapmans' works. Expecting to be upset or shocked, I found instead that I was disengaged and bored; steeling myself to look closely in order to see unexpected visual and tactile qualities, I found my attention wandering and the objects and images too shallow to hold the eye. Yet there was something sickening about the boredom induced by the Chapmans' art: however little I looked, it was always too much, and the sensation was not one of melancholy ennui, but of surfeiting and nauseous vacancy.

If the laughter the Chapmans invite draws one towards the abyss, perhaps the boredom their work evokes is similarly nihilistic in its affect. From Evagrius onward, boredom has been seen as 'estrangement from God and consequently from the self', linked with despair and desolation, with lack of meaning, and the hopeless sense that nothing matters (Nash, 1980, p.16) According to Michael Rapsosa, the nothingness of boredom, the sense of deadly meaninglessness, the yawning vacancy that draws all thought and feeling into its abyssal jaws, connects boredom with a terrible nihilism: "the

nothingness that lurks behind and threatens each person, every project, each moment." (Raposa, 1999, p.34) In that sense, boredom is truly what Kierkegaard called a 'sickness unto death'.

The boringness of the Chapmans' work is partly due to its repetitiveness and its superficiality. Turning to the same images over and over again without deepening the terms of their engagement with them, the Chapmans' 'impoverishment' of Goya seems like an endless return to the same theme, with variations so minor as to make their artistic practice look like the essentially monotonous process of mass production. The refusal of meaning, the plasticky, second-hand and mass-produced qualities of the works, the depthlessness that is central to the Chapmans' entire creative project is not altered by their continued engagement with Goya's prints. On the contrary, the Chapman's versions of *The Disasters of War* say the same thing over and over again: there is no "depth, anger, moral fervour, spiritual truth" in their works because the Chapmans simply do not value or even believe in such things (Jones, 2003).

Robert Adams suggests that works that are so ugly that they bore and repel us, forcing us to "[shut] the eyes of the mind" to them, have something that is fundamentally wrong about them (Adams, 1977, p.95), defining the ugly as monotonously self-regarding and a fundamental falsification of reality:

Ultimate ugly is a mass of negations – gray, shapeless, torpid, flaccid, self-absorbed, squirming and yawning and scratching and waiting for time to pass. Not a gleam of intelligence redeems it, not a glimpse of

self-awareness, not a glimmer of intention or direction (Adams, 1977, p.103).

Ugliness is undifferentiated and without structure; it is monotonous and endless; it is self-absorbed and blind to external reality. Ugliness is not the opposite of beauty, but its negation. For while, as Hans Urs van Balthasar says, the Christian conception of beauty 'embraces the most abysmal ugliness of sin and hell by virtue of the condescension of divine love', ultimate ugly is the refusal of redemption and divine love (Balthasar, 1984, cited in de Gruchy, 2001, p. 194). Ugliness is the collapse of meaning and purpose, the negation of meaningful relationships, the end of hope, an abyss drawing beauty into its despairing nothingness: It is apocalyptic. In ugliness, the subject sees the end of distinctions; the end of difference; the end of space; the end of time; the end of everything (Cotton and Hutchinson, 2002, pp. 11-12).

In their many works on the theme of the disasters of war, Jake and Dinos Chapman explore the terrain of ultimate ugly, and in the process bear witness both to the fundamental wrongness of ugliness, and to the attractions of ugliness and nihilism for the contemporary culture in which we live. These works, then, show us what the world looks like when meaning and beauty are seen as lying sentimentalities, and ugliness as an unflinching and authentic encounter with material reality.

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All Bible references are to NRSV.



Figure 1: Goya *Great feats! With dead men!*



Figure 2: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds Against the Dead*

Figure 4: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Gigantic Fun*



Figure 8: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Insult to Injury*