

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**The Aesthetic of de sinister experience
and of Otherness.**

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This year, the Congress has invited us to meditate upon the possible and impossible links between cultures from the aesthetic paradigm, an activity effortlessly and directly associated with the Other, with alterity. My words invite you to re-think the boundaries of modern identity from the very experience of the sinister. We'll cross the limits of aesthetics while we question the condition of modern subjectivity

The aesthetic paradigm I plan to explore is that of the sensitive negativity and, to be more precise, the way in which to represent the repulsive by a radical questioning of the identity of modern subjectivity. I explore the aesthetic possibility of the repulsive from the limit experience with the sinister. This experience is given to us, on one hand, by negating identity's metaphysical structure and, on the other hand, suggests following alterity's topology, which takes place in a dramatic structure where the limits of a metaphysical system of difference are washed away. I intend not only to undermine the negative sense of it and its implication, but also to consider it making a positive construction of endless novelties possible, re-creating and re-structuring it.

Our first stop will be Freud's definition of the “uncanny”, referring to a psychic content that is made actual, but what really interests us is its evocative character, a movement from past to present in which something that once was part of our real or imaginary experience stumbles upon us now, makes us shiver, frightens us¹.

It is this ambivalence that makes the inversion of the image possible, which Freud considers a condition for the uncanny to take place. He mentions that many things that would be considered uncanny in real life are not considered so in poetry and also that fiction owns tools to create the uncanny where real life may not have them.

In his *Poetics*², Aristotle anticipated the winding and deadly frontier that holds artistic representation together (fiction / reality), mentioning that an image can change sensitive effects one way or another, by making what in representation is positive become negative or, inversely, that which in reality has negative effects may in an image attract us and cause pleasure. It is exactly then when we perceive the world of shadows as if it were

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¹ Freud, Sigmund. *Lo siniestro. El hombre de la arena* ; traducciones de L. López Ballesteros y de Torres y Carmen Bravo-Villasante. Barcelona: Pequeña Biblioteca Calamvs Scriptorivs, 1979.

² Aristoteles. *Poética*. Madrid: Istmo, 2002.

real. Kant confirms it in his *Critique of Judgement*³ mentioning that the efficacy of a fiction work can be acknowledged by beholding nature as a work of art, the sinister effect par excellence.

Once we have covered the basic ground for the experience of the sinister in aesthetic representation, we shall proceed to measure its possibility. We already know that the already adult and soon adulterous discipline we name "aesthetics" not only extends further than plastic and literary representation, but it also erodes from its autonomy the reasons of a Reason that is the constituent of reality.

Modern subjectivity is foreseen in the mythic enlightening maxim that reads *Sapere aude*, autonomy of knowledge, reasons and rationalities follows and precedes it. Aesthetics was displayed as another rationality, but always in conflict with its own rationality: the experience of the sensitive. It worked towards making human beings better and souls more beautiful, making thus real a metaphysical progress. In other words, art placed on its shoulders the titanic task of conquering one space of experience able to take the inhospitable into account. It soothed and conquered the ontological space that corresponds to unease or fracture, just so something new revealed itself.

The first scope of aesthetics in modern philosophy (not so loyal to the movement of the Beautiful Reason that grounds all value) reveals thus its internal delimitation: metaphysical duality. The progress from ancient mystic forms to homeric heaven as a spirit free of religious beliefs awakens the dreams of reason, the monsters of sleeplessness. It forced that irrationality to yield and names it "sinister". Schelling stands on shaky ground in his *Philosophy of Mythology*⁴, making the repulsive and menacing character that the boundary of the sinister provokes clear. He states that we call "sinister" that which should stay hidden. The transit from the dark and darkening power as a component of irrationality towards other forms from which rationality springs signifies darkness flowing through light's very source. A light that doesn't really glow, it is indecisive and makes sight more difficult, because it stays just before realization.

The experience of the sinister manifests that which should stay hidden but reveals itself, even though it remains a mystery. A datum offered to perception foreshadowing something that is not said threatens intellect, a datum that doesn't show itself and doesn't access knowledge manifests the suffering of a yearning reason

What makes sinister mysterious is the determination of the subject by another sphere's irruption. Bergson in *L'évolution créatrice*.⁵, confirms this relation between the unveiling of mystery and the unfolding of nature/art, reality/fiction. It proceeds through the romantic idea of the free imagination, that imposes a way of functioning tighter than expected; then it happens that following Hölderlin the sense of the signs at play is 0 The sense is ripped apart and the originary springs, between the sinister and the frightening⁶.

Every duplication presupposes an original and a copy, and we may ask ourselves which is the double. We then discover that the "other event" isn't really the double of the real event. It is precisely the other way round: it's the real event which appears as the double of the "other event". Thus, in the end, the real event is "the other": the other is this

³ Kant, Immanuel. *Crítica del Juicio*. Madrid : Espasa-Calpe, 1989

⁴ Schelling, F. *Las edades del mundo*. Madrid : Akal, 2002, pp. 57-83.

⁵ Bergson, H. *L'évolution créatrice*. Paris : PUF, 1991.

⁶ Hölderlin, F. *Ensayos*. Madrid: Hiperión 1990, 48.

that happens, the double of another reality that may be the real itself, but is always out of touch.

The metaphysical structure of duality falls apart. Modern subjective Reason -of identity- enters a condition of maximum conscience.

In the gnoseological order conscience faces the confusion of real and imaginary. It makes man walk towards exhaustion point, where he/she is lost and states its condition as unfinished. The divided individual faces total annihilation of the self. In this process of unfolding man is able to behold itself unfolded, the possibility of losing its own identity is near. The falling apart of the image that keeps self together is suffered with the experience of the squizoid subject, the one that has suffered a double rupture with the world and with himself/herself.

The Eros of annihilation and destruction enters the space delimited by subjectivity and presents a real/symbolic subject; a subject that thinking he sees is really an object. The absence of conscience leads to the metaphysical experience of death; imperfect death that embodies the only life that is located in the fantasy of the one who engenders symbolically his alterity.

We may talk now about a plane that isn't really an unfolding of a sentence in two senses but liminal contact and contagion, an ambiguous sphere made by the adverse. With this, the fiction of the ghost tumbles, is broken and the limit of the sinister emerges

The experience of the sinister, as a radical questioning of modern subjectivity, betrays the illimited and primitive narcissism of itself. It mentions the suspicion that something objective may lie in subjectivity. Objectively it would be a particular case, indefiniton in something known that is given to perception, towards a recognition that never really happens, and subjectivity would determine a condition of distress. A subject that is saturated as object. We could here mention Bataille⁷ on the ab-yect. In a different way from the classic relationship of subject-object, which implies an opposition thanks to which the subject the subject finds its place in the scene of a constantly building sense, with the ab-yect the former relationship is broken: the object is so colossal that it endangers and spoils the sense of its use.

We have already trailed the implications of the experience of the sinister. Now, we shall see how it manifests itself in the symbolic plane of the repulsive.

From the sinister to the disgusting

Freud said that the burst of fiction in conscience is something alien to our usual universe. It causes unease and it awakens the deepest desires as it generates an attraction towards that which is strange, due to a projection of a sublimated desire. What interests us of the freudian legacy is the pulsional character of this phenomenon. Erotic and thanatic pulsion play together in the mirror-room of duplications breaking identity limits.

⁷ Bataille, George. *L'expérience intérieure*. Paris: Gallimard, 1978.

What makes me write this text is the investigation regarding the aesthetic and ontological frame of the thanatic experience of the sinister.

Rosenkranz, in his work *Estética de lo feo*⁸, carries out an investigation regarding the phenomenon of sensitive negativity and identifies the disgusting as ideally tasteless and ideally-really malign. Its main characteristic is the negation of the beautiful form of the phenomenon through a deformity that is born from corruption. Rosenkranz considers that ugliness must be contained as to-be-a-must-not-be. This operation saves the "logic content" in the production of the ugly. It implies that its being can only be in a way that doesn't endanger idea's internal unity. Rosenkranz defends that in order for the unity to be, it must first perform the experience of its must-not-be of the negative. He writes the sensitive negativity as "counter-logical", and not as alogical. The first consequence is that evil becomes a negative substitute and remembrance of good. Evil achieves precisely the contrary of what it seeks, and serves as stimuli for good. It will happen as a necessary movement of the aesthetic idea, that enjoys its freedom allowing negativity to exist inside.

I suppose (grounded on a vast bibliography) that Rosenkranz abandons his investigation here, afraid of this apparition of the alogical.

I think it's art's difficult task to introduce ugliness freely, so that in this production it is reconciled with beauty, as Bataille and Braudillard have stated.

The ideological maxim of art throughout history has been to avoid matter through thought, as form without matter is Form and has its equivalent in the Reason of the soul.

Maybe we must re-think art's form and leave the materialistic antidote that looks the other way and remember that art's form is not pure, but purified. With this we must assume that ugliness must be exposed as phenomenology and, thus, the phases of a negative aesthetics consist in negating the positive content of every element corresponding to the unfolding of the idea of beauty.

Form's absence, abstract negation of the idea of beauty, breaks the frame of the purely aesthetic to confront absolute Idea as something irreducible. Its figurative impossibility gives full reality in that which can't be articulated. The work washes away, central figures disappear in the discomposition of genres and themes, in the horizontal multiplicity of the vision.

That which explains Reason's insurmountable limit-condition is the fact that it is constituted in a black hole.

It leads to the Other that is being, not that which is not being but pure black Alterity. The negative is the positive itself as destruction of the essence. The sensitive shows itself in its radical alterity referring to eidetic. Metaphysical order is violated in an incessant movement of a frame crossed out by sensitive plurality. A present not inscribed in any resolute process is affirmed and dead matter transformed in waste or formless remains reveals the interior form of an order: its limit.

⁸ Rosenkranz. *Estética de lo feo*. Madrid: Julio Ollero, 1992.

The indetermined abyss after the transgression of the limits of stablished frontiers reveals the persuasive force of drama's own schemes. The aesthetics of the repulsive analyzes the menacing and seductive nothing, only what Narciso's annihilation never was, *the perfect crime*⁹.

⁹ Baudrillard, J. *Le crime parfait*. Paris : Galilée, 1995.