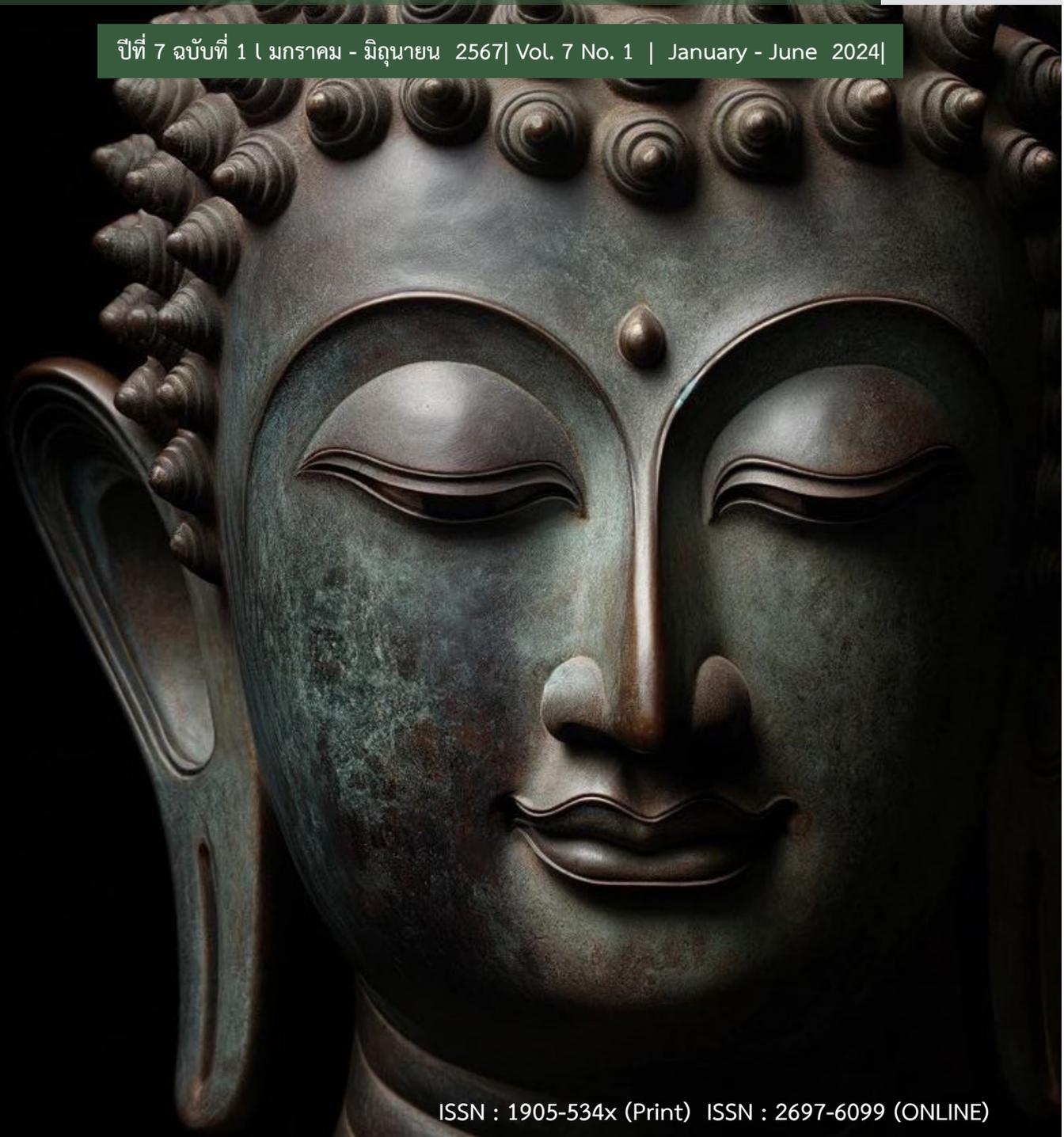


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Beyond Beauty and Sublimity: The Interrogation of the Ugly in Buddhist Aesthetics

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Abstract

Western Aesthetics traditionally prioritizes beauty and the sublime, neglecting the potential of the “Ugly” for aesthetic experience. This article explores how Buddhist Aesthetics, informed by the core concepts of impermanence (Anicca) and non-self (Anatta), challenges this dominant paradigm. By deconstructing the notion of fixed beauty and promoting an appreciation for the impermanent and the imperfect, Buddhist philosophy opens a space for the “Ugly” to be understood not as an antithesis of beauty, but as part of a nuanced aesthetic experience. Through an examination of Buddhist Arts and practices, this article argues that impermanence allows us to discover beauty within decay and imperfection, fostering a unique aesthetic appreciation.

Keywords: Beyond Beauty, Sublimity Buddhist Aesthetics, Impermanence, Non-Self, Ugly, Wabi-Sabi, Aesthetic Experience

Introduction

Since antiquity, the question of “what is beauty?” has occupied a central position within Western philosophical discourse. From Plato’s Theory of Forms, which posits an ideal realm of pure beauty (Plato, Symposium, 210e-211b), to the writings of Immanuel Kant, who explored the subjective nature of aesthetic judgments (Kant, Critique of Judgment, 1790), Western thinkers have continually grappled with defining and analyzing beauty.

This focus on the beautiful was later accompanied by a fascination with the sublime. Philosophers such as Edmund Burke explored how experiences of awe and terror, often evoked by overwhelming natural phenomena, could also be considered within the realm of Aesthetics (Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 1757). Together, beauty and the sublime form pillars of traditional Western Aesthetics, shaping how we perceive and respond to the world around us. However, while beauty and the sublime have been extensively analyzed, the concept of the “Ugly” has been largely marginalized within Western aesthetic discourse. This raises the question of whether ugliness possesses its own aesthetic validity and what insights might be gained by interrogating its place within our understanding of the world. To address these questions, this article turns to the rich philosophical tradition of Buddhist Aesthetics, which offers a profound alternative to Western paradigms.

The Birth of Aesthetics: Beauty and Sublimity Take Center Stage Aesthetics: A New Discipline Emerges

The formal study of Aesthetics, though its roots can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers like Plato (Kahn, 1992, p. 12), truly blossomed in the 18th century. It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, a German philosopher, who is credited with coining the term “aesthetica” in his 1735 work, *Aesthetics*. In this groundbreaking treatise (Baumgarten, 1735/1954, p. §1), Baumgarten argued for the existence of a distinct realm of sensory knowledge and experience

separate from logic and reason. This new field, Aesthetics, would focus on the appreciation of beauty and the nature of aesthetic judgment.

The Duality of Beauty and Sublimity

As Aesthetics took root, two core categories emerged to define the realm of the aesthetically pleasing: beauty and sublimity. Beauty, often associated with harmony, proportion, and pleasure, has captivated philosophers and artists for millennia. Think of the elegant symmetry of a Greek temple or the breathtaking perfection of a Renaissance portrait. Edmund Burke, a prominent 18th-century thinker, explored beauty in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Burke, 1757, p. Part I, Section XIII). Here, he emphasized the qualities of order, smoothness, and delicacy as key features of beauty.

Sublimity, on the other hand, evoked a different aesthetic experience. It dealt with awe-inspiring vastness, power, and even terror, pushing the boundaries of the human experience. Imagine the immensity of the Grand Canyon or the overwhelming force of a raging storm. Burke, again in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (Burke, 1757, p. Part II, Section II), described the sublime as a pleasurable form of fear, a feeling that awakens wonder and a sense of our own insignificance in the face of overwhelming natural forces.

The Foundation is Laid

The emergence of Aesthetics as a discipline and the establishment of beauty and sublimity as its foundational categories marked a significant shift in Western philosophical thought. From that point forward, these concepts would continue to be debated, redefined, and challenged, paving the way for a richer understanding of arts, natures, and the human experiences.

Thesis Statement:

This article explores how Buddhist Aesthetics, grounded in the core principles of impermanence (Anicca) and non-self (Anatta), challenges the

dominance of beauty and sublimity in Western Aesthetics. By interrogating the concept of the Ugly and its potential for aesthetic experience, Buddhist thought offers a unique perspective on the nature of beauty itself (Walpole Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2007: 18).

The Tyranny of Beauty in the West

Western Aesthetics, from the time of Plato, has largely been preoccupied with the concept of beauty. Classical philosophers sought to define and categorize beauty, often contrasting it with the sublime (**Kahn, *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, 2001, p. 12**). However, the “Ugly” has remained largely marginalized in this discourse.

Impermanence and the Deconstruction of Beauty

Buddhist Aesthetics, rooted in the fundamental teachings of the Pali Canon (**Tripitaka**), offers a radical departure from this focus on the beautiful. The concept of impermanence (Anicca) as expounded in the Anicca Sutta (Sn 22.59) undermines the very notion of fixed and enduring beauty. All phenomena, the Buddha teaches, are subject to change and decay. Clinging to the impermanent as beautiful leads only to suffering.

The Non-Self and the Allure of Imperfection

Furthermore, the doctrine of non-self (Anatta) as articulated in the Anatta-lakkhana Sutta (Sn 22.59) deconstructs our attachment to superficial beauty. We are not a fixed, unchanging self, but rather a process of ever-changing mental and physical phenomena. This realization allows us to appreciate the beauty that exists within imperfection and impermanence.

Reframing the Ugly: Impermanent and Imperfect

From a Buddhist perspective, the “Ugly” is not an antithesis of beauty, but rather a reflection of impermanence. Nothing is inherently Ugly, for even the most beautiful flower eventually withers and decays. This impermanence, however, does not negate the possibility of aesthetic experience. The wabi-sabi aesthetic

tradition in Japan, deeply influenced by Buddhist thought, celebrates the beauty of impermanence and imperfection (Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, 2001: 11).

The Imperfect as the Aesthetic

Buddhist practices cultivate an appreciation for the impermanent and the imperfect. Mindfulness meditation, as described in the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10) allows us to observe the ever-changing nature of experience without clinging to any one sensation, be it beautiful or Ugly. Through this practice, we develop a more nuanced and expansive sense of beauty, one that embraces impermanence and imperfection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Buddhist Aesthetics, by interrogating the concept of the Ugly and highlighting the impermanent nature of beauty, offers a profound challenge to the Western preoccupation with the sublime and the beautiful. Through the practices of mindfulness and a deep understanding of impermanence, we can cultivate a more profound and inclusive experience of the aesthetic realm, appreciating the beauty that exists within all of existence, even the impermanent and the imperfect.

The “Ugly” in Western Aesthetics

In Western Aesthetics, the marginalization of the Ugly has been a prevailing theme throughout the history of aesthetic discourse, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards beauty and its perceived opposites. This marginalization manifests in various ways, from the emphasis on idealized forms in art and literature to the exclusion of certain aesthetic experiences deemed unpleasant or undesirable.

One notable manifestation of the marginalization of the Ugly is evident in the canonization of beauty as the primary criterion for artistic merit. Throughout art history, representations of beauty have been valorized and celebrated, while depictions of ugliness or deformity have often been relegated to the periphery or dismissed altogether. This privileging of beauty can be observed in the works of prominent aesthetic theorists such as Immanuel Kant, who posited beauty as a universal and transcendent quality that elicits disinterested pleasure (Kant, 1987, pg. 30).

Furthermore, the marginalization of the Ugly in Western Aesthetics is perpetuated by societal norms and cultural biases that equate beauty with virtue and ugliness with moral or intellectual deficiency. This binary opposition between beauty and ugliness not only shapes aesthetic judgments but also influences social hierarchies and power dynamics. As Susan Bordo contends in her seminal work **Unbearable Weight**, Western culture's preoccupation with idealized beauty standards contributes to the stigmatization of non-conforming bodies and identities, further marginalizing those deemed unattractive or abnormal (Bordo, 2003, pg. 76).

In conclusion, the marginalization of the Ugly in Western Aesthetics reflects broader patterns of exclusion and discrimination based on aesthetic preferences and societal norms. By critically examining the historical and cultural underpinnings of this marginalization, scholars can challenge dominant paradigms and advocate for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of aesthetic experience. Embracing the Ugly not as a deviation from the norm but as a legitimate and meaningful aspect of human expression is essential for fostering a more equitable and compassionate aesthetic discourse.

Exploring the Potential Historical and Philosophical Grounds for Exclusion

Platonic Influence: Plato's veneration of ideal forms and the supremacy attributed to Beauty, Truth, and Goodness implicitly linked ugliness with imperfection and undesirability. This hierarchical perspective endured over time, persisting even as aesthetic theories evolved (Plotinus, 205-270 C.E.).

Association with Morality: Throughout Western intellectual history, beauty has often been intertwined with moral virtue. Conversely, ugliness became synonymous with the undesirable, the morally corrupt, or the vicious (Eco, 2007: 12).

Emergence of Rationalism: The Enlightenment era's celebration of reason, order, and harmony further reinforced the preference for beauty, which was seen as aligning with these principles. Ugliness, conversely, came to represent disorderliness and was consequently marginalized within the realm of Aesthetics.

Romantic Emphasis: Despite Romanticism's embrace of the sublime, characterized by elements of awe and fear, ugliness failed to evoke such profound responses and remained on the fringes of aesthetic discourse.

Illustration: The Grotesque: The treatment of the grotesque in Western art and literature vividly illustrates how ugliness has often been relegated to a separate aesthetic sphere rather than integrated into broader discussions of beauty.

Distorted and Exaggerated Forms: The grotesque emphasizes deformity, exaggeration, and hybridity, frequently eliciting feelings of disgust or unease (Thomson, 1972: 18).

Categorization as the Other: In contrast to the sublime, which may evoke awe alongside fear, the grotesque was deemed inherently repulsive and diametrically opposed to beauty.

Utilization for Contrast: Often, the grotesque appeared in cultural productions as a foil, serving to accentuate the beauty of other elements through stark contrast.

It is essential to recognize that these attitudes were not uniform, and dissenting viewpoints did exist. However, the prevailing dominance of beauty and its association with positive attributes relegated the concept of “ugliness” to the periphery of Western aesthetic discourse.

Buddhist Aesthetics and Impermanence

In Buddhist philosophy, impermanence (Anicca) is one of the three marks of existence, along with suffering (Dukkha) and non-self (Anatta). Impermanence refers to the transient and ever-changing nature of all phenomena, emphasizing the inherent instability and flux of existence (Harvey, 2013, p. 48). Non-self, on the other hand, posits that there is no fixed, permanent, independent “self” or essence within phenomena, including the individual self (Dalai Lama XIV, 1997: 32).

Exploration of How These Concepts Challenge the Notion of Fixed Beauty

The core Buddhist concepts of impermanence and non-self challenge the conventional notion of fixed beauty by highlighting the ephemeral nature of all phenomena. Impermanence underscores the fleeting quality of beauty, emphasizing that it is subject to decay and change. Nothing in the phenomenal world, including physical appearance, remains static or unchanged over time (Nagarjuna, 2009, p. 75). This impermanence stands in stark contrast to the prevailing cultural ideal of eternal beauty, challenging individuals to reevaluate their perceptions and attachments to superficial notions of attractiveness.

Discussion on How the Focus on Non-Self Deconstructs Attachment to Superficial Beauty

The focus on non-self in Buddhist thought deconstructs attachment to superficial beauty by emphasizing the interdependent nature of all phenomena. According to Buddhist teachings, clinging to a fixed self or identity leads to suffering, as it perpetuates the illusion of separateness and fosters attachment to transient experiences (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999, p. 62). Similarly, attachment to superficial beauty arises from the mistaken belief in a fixed and inherently existing self, which seeks validation and identity through external appearances. By recognizing the fluid and interconnected nature of existence, individuals can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the inherent beauty found in impermanence and the interdependence of all phenomena.

The Ugly as Imperfect and Impermanent

In Buddhist Aesthetics, the concept of the Ugly is reframed within the context of impermanence, challenging conventional notions of beauty and ugliness. Impermanence, a fundamental principle in Buddhism, asserts that all phenomena are transient and subject to change (Harvey, 2013, p. 48). Within this framework, nothing is inherently ugly, as beauty itself is impermanent and constantly evolving. The perception of ugliness arises from attachment to fixed ideals and preferences, which are themselves impermanent and subject to flux.

Impermanence allows us to appreciate the beauty within decay and imperfection by shifting our perspective to recognize the inherent dynamism of existence. In Buddhist philosophy, imperfection is not something to be rejected or shunned but rather embraced as an integral part of the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and renewal (Dalai Lama XIV, 1997, p. 42). Through the lens of impermanence, what may initially be perceived as Ugly—such as aging, decay, or physical deformity—can be viewed as manifestations of the ever-changing

nature of reality, each possessing its own unique beauty and significance.

Examples from Buddhist art and literature further illustrate this concept. In traditional Buddhist art, depictions of wrathful deities or grotesque figures often convey profound spiritual truths despite their unconventional appearance (Nagarjuna, 2009, p. 75). Likewise, in Buddhist literature, stories of enlightened beings encountering and embracing the seemingly ugly or repulsive underscore the transformative power of impermanence and the potential for beauty to manifest in unexpected forms. These examples serve as reminders that true beauty transcends superficial appearances and is ultimately rooted in the dynamic interplay of impermanence and imperfection.

The Aesthetic Experience of Imperfection

1. Mindfulness as Foundation: Mindfulness practices such as Vipassana meditation cultivate non-judgmental awareness. Practitioners are encouraged to observe sensations, thoughts, and external phenomena with simple curiosity, without labeling them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This breaks down habitual patterns of aesthetic judgment based on preconceived ideals (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 4).

2. Embracing Change: Observing the constant flux of experience, a cornerstone of mindfulness practice, underscores impermanence. Witnessing the fading of a flower, or even decay, the practitioner internalizes the understanding that all things, beautiful or otherwise, are subject to change. This fosters acceptance rather than aversion towards the imperfect (Harvey, 2013, p. 51).

3. Contemplating Imperfection: Specific meditations focus on the impermanence of the body itself. The “32 parts of the body” contemplation can initially create a sense of aversion, but with practice, leads to understanding the body as merely component parts, none of which are inherently beautiful or Ugly.

Mindfulness and Aesthetics

This mindful awareness translates into everyday aesthetic experiences:

1) Beyond Dualistic Judgment: Mindfulness lessens the tendency to categorize experiences as ‘beautiful’ or ‘Ugly’. We start appreciating the complex interplay of light, texture, and form as they exist without labels. A cracked vase, for example, may now reveal a unique beauty in its asymmetry.

2) Finding Beauty in the Transient: The ephemeral nature of phenomena becomes a source of poignant beauty. Fallen leaves, the patterns left on the sand by receding tides – their fleeting existence heightens their peculiar aesthetic appeal.

3) Appreciation of Process: Mindfulness shifts our focus from a static ‘end product’ to the beauty within the process of creation and decay. The weathered textures of an ancient stone, telling a silent story of erosion, can become aesthetically compelling.

Connections to Wabi-Sabi

There’s a strong resonance between this Buddhist perspective and the concept of wabi-sabi found in Japanese Aesthetics. Both emphasize finding beauty within the imperfect, asymmetrical, and impermanent. However, Buddhist philosophy uniquely underscores the practice of mindfulness as the catalyst for this aesthetic shift. Therefore, Buddhist practices cultivate a profound shift in aesthetic perception. Imperfection, once a source of aversion, becomes a doorway to appreciation and understanding. Through mindfulness, we discover a unique kind of beauty woven within the very fabric of impermanence.

Conclusion

Throughout this exploration, we've demonstrated how Buddhist Aesthetics offers a profound challenge to the traditional Western focus on beauty and the sublime as the sole categories of aesthetic experience. Central to this challenge is the concept of impermanence (*Anicca*). By recognizing the fleeting and ever-changing nature of all phenomena, Buddhism dissolves rigid notions of fixed "beauty" or enduring "ugliness" (SN 22.59). This insight fosters a unique appreciation for the transient nature of aesthetic experiences.

The Buddhist concept of non-self (*Anatta*) further expands this critique. With no fixed, unchanging essence (SN 22.59), our tendency to cling to external forms of beauty loosens, allowing for an appreciation of the imperfect and the unconventional. What might be labeled as "Ugly" within a Western framework can hold a different kind of aesthetic power within Buddhist thought, where the ever-unfolding nature of existence is embraced.

This shift in perspective leads to a distinct aesthetic experience. Rather than seeking perfection, Buddhist Aesthetics cultivates an appreciation for the impermanent, the flawed, and the unexpected. Mindfulness practices enable us to perceive beauty even within experiences of decay and change. This broadened aesthetic sensibility has parallels in artistic expressions in traditions influenced by Buddhism, such as those found within the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*.

Further avenues of exploration lie in delving deeper into this connection with *wabi-sabi*, as well as investigating specific artistic expressions in Buddhist cultures and their aesthetic sensibilities. Additionally, examining the implications of Buddhist Aesthetics for contemporary art and design could offer fresh perspectives on our relationship with the material world. By embracing impermanence, we expand our understanding of beauty and foster a more meaningful appreciation of the world around us.

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