

# Reconceptualizing “Ugliness”: A Genealogical Deconstruction of the Eurocentric Normative Concept of “Ugly”

**Ahmed Abdullah Bin Farooqi Rayhan**

*Lecturer, Department of English, United International University, Bangladesh*  
abdullah@english.uuu.ac.bd | ORCID: 0009-0007-6811-429X

## Abstract

The socio-cultural construction of beauty simultaneously generates a normative understanding of unattractiveness as well, since these properties exist in binary within popular perceptions. However, since beauty itself is a construct, its binary counterpart (unattractiveness) must similarly be understood as a construct as well. While existing studies have traced the origin and continual re/construction of beauty, the current research seeks to conduct a genealogical study of the concept of “ugliness.” By tracing the historical and socio-cultural evolution of these concepts and perceptions through paintings and visual oeuvre, the research endeavors to suggest that perceptions of unattractiveness, though ingrained, are not natural and are instead rooted in socio-cultural dynamics with a solid political foundation. The research traces the origin of the Eurocentric normative concept of beauty and examines the construction of “ugliness” pertaining to the development of the notion of beauty to reveal the dimensions embedded in this process from its inception to the present situation. In this context, theoretical insights from scholarship on gaze, beauty, and disability provide a conceptual framework to interpret the political underpinnings of the construction of the notion of “ugliness.” In capital-driven societies, those who defy beauty standards face dehumanization, harassment, and systemic barriers, harming self-worth, and limiting opportunities and relationships. By establishing “ugliness” as a socio-cultural construct rather than a biological reality through a genealogical deconstruction of the concept, this research aims to normalize being “unattractive,” dismantling the aura that contributes to its undesirable and stigmatized status, which often results in psychological harm to individuals not aligning with the normative beauty standards.

**Keywords:** beauty, ugliness, cultural construct, normativity, visual arts

Not meeting the beauty norms set by society has a significant impact on an individual’s overall wellbeing. Being normatively “ugly” can make an individual

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a victim of dehumanization, abuse, harassment, and systemic challenges that can eventually lead to insecurity, anxiety, and even clinical depression (Spiegel 56). Thus, it is important to address and deconstruct this normative concept of “ugliness” as it causes such distress. However, though extensive research and literature on the construction of “beauty” exist, discourses on “ugliness” are noticeably limited. The current study attempts to review relevant existing works on normative beauty and, by exploring the concept of ugliness as a counterpart of the discussions on beauty (Rosenkranz 32), attempts to establish “ugliness” as a constructed norm similar to the constructed norm of “beauty” that is established without any rational foundation. The genealogy of ugliness has its own trajectory in the Western episteme. Classical sources such as Plato and Aristotle occasionally framed ugliness as deviation from proportion and harmony. The category, with time, evolved into a complex cultural signifier. The medieval theology linked ugliness to sin and moral decay. Early modern physiognomy used the notion of ugliness in order to justify social hierarchies. The romantic aesthetics embraced forms of the grotesque and the sublime-ugly. These shifts in meanings of “ugliness” as an individual concept has been traced in detail in literatures like Umberto Eco’s *On Ugliness*. Eco, in his work, shows the way ugliness, as a distinct notion, functions as a dynamic tool for artistic expression, moral instruction, and social exclusion. While philosophical works on ugliness such as Eco’s have treated ugliness as an autonomous aesthetic category with its own history, symbolism, and typology, the current study takes a different approach. Eco’s work traces ugliness across myth, religion, literature, and visual culture. It shows that ugliness can be culturally codified independent of the notion of beauty. However, the current research does not seek to produce a stand-alone genealogy of ugliness. Rather, it examines how ugliness has been constructed and circulated largely as a secondary effect or a byproduct of beauty’s elevation to normative status in its modern Eurocentric form. This framing of ugliness foregrounds the interdependence of the two concepts that emphasizes that ugliness, rather than being a separate and a self-sustaining category, often functions in practice as the inverse condition that beauty’s cultural and political production requires in order to define, defend, and perpetuate itself. It argues that the notion of ugliness is contingent upon the concept of beauty rather than being individually constructed.

To elucidate these arguments, this study traces the origin of the Eurocentric normative concept of beauty and then, through this lens, analyzes certain paintings to demonstrate how the normative concept of beauty was established and circulated to eventually argue how our current understanding of “ugliness” originated. Then, by drawing on relevant scholarly works on normative beauty, the study will try to show how the construction of “beauty” constructs and

circulates “ugliness” in parallel as well. Eventually, the argument will stand that the construction and circulation of “ugliness” is a completely arbitrary process that is contingent upon the construction of beauty and is pregnant with “othering” and capitalist agenda. Considering the arbitrary nature of the concept of ugliness, the study will conclude with a proposal of how the significance of this concept can be diminished to nullify the detrimental effect it has on individuals. In the context of this study, it is imperative to clarify the definition of “Eurocentrism.”

Both Amin and Quijano explain Eurocentrism as a worldview that positions the history, culture, and aesthetic values of Europe as the universal norm while marginalizing or erasing non-European systems of knowledge and representation. In the realm of aesthetics, Eurocentrism manifests in the valorization of the Greco-Roman ideals of symmetry, proportion, and “perfection” as inherently superior, while dismissing alternative aesthetic traditions as lesser, primitive, or irrelevant (such as the Indian aesthetic appreciation of body hair on the female body). This dynamic is not only cultural, but extends to the political paradigm. This emerges from and is sustained by histories of colonial expansion and global media flows that prioritizes Western visual codes over others. This definition frames the subsequent genealogical tracing of beauty and ugliness as an inquiry into how such Eurocentric ideals became naturalized as universal standards. For example, as discussed later in this essay, Plato’s association of symmetry with beauty, while influential, originated and is influenced by distinctly Hellenic philosophical tradition that later became central to Eurocentric aesthetic hierarchies. These classical ideals were disseminated globally through colonial expansion and European art academies. This practice framed European proportion systems as universal while devaluing other aesthetic logic. The current study attempts to critique this Eurocentric approach to beauty.

To do that, the study adopts a genealogical approach as genealogy “investigates how certain ... truths are historical constructs that have their roots in specific social and political agendas” (Saukko 115). In addition, as Saukko explains, this approach exposes how certain constructs establish themselves as the truth. Genealogy “is a method that helps to dismantle authoritative forms of knowledge” (116). It is also effective in evaluating the “political and personal repercussions of ... discourse[s]” (125). Thus, in understanding the underlying cultural and political implications of beauty and “ugliness,” genealogy, as a method, can function as a potent tool. This genealogical study involves analyzing dominant discourses, epistemes, and visual arts related to beauty. By examining the historically initial conception of beauty as understood and represented in dominant discourses, established epistemes, and popular visual arts, this study identifies the root of this

concept in “social and political agenda” (115) and evaluates the “repercussions of [the] discourse” (125) of “beauty.” The current study deploys genealogy not merely as a metaphorical tracing of ideas but rather as a methodological practice that uncovers the contingent, non-linear, and politically invested formation of concepts. In Foucauldian vernacular, genealogy resists origins and essences, and instead maps the discursive struggles, ruptures, and power relations through which, in this current context, “truths” of beauty and ugliness have become naturalized. In this sense, genealogy here entails destabilizing the assumption that beauty or ugliness are timeless categories, demonstrating the way visual and philosophical traditions sediment these categories into norms, and exposing the manner in which these norms serve capitalist and disciplinary agenda. Thus, in the context of the current study, genealogy is the central analytic that the paper utilizes to interrogate the arbitrariness of aesthetic hierarchies.

In order to analyze the art works, the study employs the Loomis framework as a methodological tool to show that the visages that are normatively considered beautiful in Western tradition are geometrically symmetrical. The Loomis method establishes a vertical center line (midline) on a spherical base, representing the head’s bilateral symmetry (Loomis 22). Thus, a face fitting within the Loomis framework must be symmetrical. By employing the Loomis framework, this study analyzes the symmetrical value of faces considered beautiful within the Western aesthetic tradition, thereby demonstrating a connection between symmetry and the Western construction of beauty. This Loomis framework itself is not neutral. American illustrator Andrew Loomis developed this framework in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The framework draws on Euro-American academic art traditions that prioritizes Greco-Roman proportional ideals. The Loomis framework establishes itself as a “scientific” drawing method and this epistemic establishment is what the genealogical study of the current research aims to critique. In the Loomis framework, the culturally specific visual codes become naturalized as universal standards through pedagogical and artistic institutions. Learners approach the Loomis framework as standards of drawing. Genealogy, in the current study, does not validate this standard, but rather reveals how such tools operationalize and perpetuate Eurocentric aesthetic norms.

The current study, drawing on theoretical contributions of Mulvey, Bordo, Nixon, and Davis, attempts to establish that beauty and ugliness are interdependent cultural constructions. Mulvey theorizes beauty as a gendered modality of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” situating it within the visual economy of the gaze, while Bordo elucidates the mechanism by which media manufactures and sustains this desirability through stylized aesthetic codes like youth and symmetry. Nixon extends this critique and situates these codes within institutionalized gendered

and capitalist systems that compel identity formation through normative conformity. Davis further demonstrates how this process pathologizes difference, thereby constituting ugliness as a counterpart of beauty. Overall, these insights indicate that media’s fetishization of perfection confers legitimacy upon identities through systems of visibility, while simultaneously excluding bodies that fall outside the normative boundaries, rendering beauty and ugliness contingent products of socio-political agendas.

Tracing the origin of the concept of beauty finds its genesis in the inception of human civilization. Humans developed a cognitive preference for symmetry because early humans tended to perceive symmetrical items, such as healthy crops, plants, leaves, and trees, as beneficial, while the infected items were often structurally asymmetrical (Freeman et al. 115). Later, with the emergence of intellectual communities, the concept of beauty was systematically conceptualized. As Aristotle expounded, the popularly acknowledged universal system, mathematics, was the standard system in conceptualizing the systemic notion of beauty along with many other similar abstract notions. Mathematically, as Rotman posits, “symmetry” is ideally “perfect” as mathematics strives to establish an equivalent relation between two objects that are equal but appear to be distinct (46). Livio further adds, the material expression of math, that is geometry, also finds perfection in symmetry (4). Symmetrical geometric shapes are deemed perfect (Jayadevan et al. 16). This perception of associating perfection with symmetry solidified the conceptualization of symmetry as an inherent part of beauty as beauty too is closely attributed to the notion of perfection (Hagman 661). Aristotle notes this idea in *Metaphysics* as, “[t]he chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree” (1705).

Philosophers of the classical era intellectualized and epistemologized this idea of normative beauty, conceptualizing and establishing the norms of beauty as inherently about symmetry. Plato was one of the first to conceptualize symmetry as beauty. In his book *Timaeus*, Plato recorded, “[t]he good is the beautiful, and the beautiful is the symmetrical. ... A leg or an arm too long or too short is at once ugly and unserviceable” (36). Here, by directly implying symmetry as beautiful or asymmetry as “ugly,” Plato creates a concrete definition of what is beautiful and what is not. Aquinas also makes a similar remark while describing the requirements for beauty. He delineates three requirements for beauty, the first requirement is “perfectness” and the second of which is “due proportion or consonance” (39). This “consonance” is basically symmetry as the human body is deemed harmoniously proportionate when its sides are visually equal or have harmonious order. Aristotle talks about this order in *Poetics* where he

says, “to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (2322). Thus, the contrary of it, or visible objects that are asymmetrical or disproportionate, are not deemed beautiful. Similarly, Vitruvius posited that one can “attain beauty by pursuing symmetry” (5). Thus, it implies that asymmetry is the opposite of beauty. Plotinus summarizes this entire paradigm of beauty and non-beauty in *Enneads* as, “in regard to the objects of sight and all other things, their beauty consists in their symmetry. [If something] does not have proportion ... [it] will be excluded from being beautiful” (93).

The gradual promotion and popular circulation of this perception established the normative notion of beauty that is based on symmetry. This notion of associating beauty with symmetry made the attributes featuring asymmetry like dark spots, freckles, and other forms of skin markers, an indication of “ugliness” as any spot on the skin is never symmetrically identical. Even if the spots are identical, creating symmetry of both sides of the face, such faces with spots are still not considered “beautiful” because it lacks “due proportion” (Aquinas 39), “definiteness” (Aristotle 1705), and “perfection” (Aquinas 39). “Perfection,” by definition, means “the state of being complete” (“Perfection”). For a face to be “complete,” it must be devoid of features that either augment or detract from its fundamental components, which essentially consists of skin along with eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, and chin (Jefferson 12). Thus, facial completion, for example, means it should only have these aforementioned essential items and anything additional to it, such as freckles, dark spots, or any form of marks, or lack of an item, such as loss of eyelashes due to alopecia areata, results in imperfection, making the face incomplete. Similarly, as “proportion” is an essential part of beauty (Aquinas 39) and disproportionate body parts are deemed “ugly” (Plato 36), the incompleteness of the body is also not beautiful. In short, according to the classical doctrine of beauty, incompleteness due to disability and imperfection due to any lack or excess has an equally significant role in making a face “ugly.”

These classical notions of beauty are significant as they conceptualized symmetry and completeness as beauty and these perceptions were established as standards to be later reflected and implemented in media representations that eventually constructed and circulated a constricted idea of beauty to ultimately normalize it. Among the classical media that constructed and circulated the norms of beauty, such as literature, theatre, etc., visual art played a pivotal role. The current study deals with such visual arts, specifically painting, to trace the construction and circulation of these beauty norms to infer the concept of “ugliness” these conceptions of beauty imply.

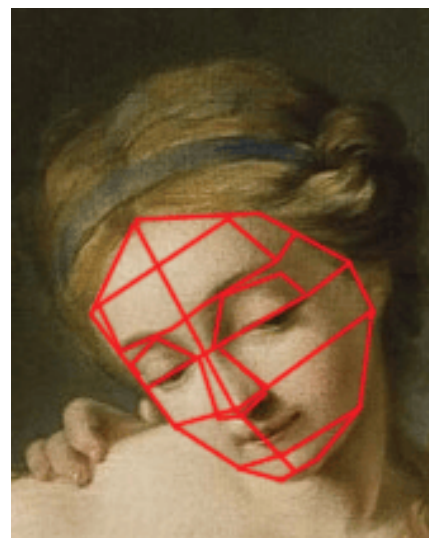
Initially, to establish the argument that symmetry and completeness of body were considered to be the normative standard of beauty throughout centuries, this study will analyze Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, Jean-Simon Berthélemy’s *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, and Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys’ painting *Helen of Troy*. These particular paintings are relevant for examining normative standards of beauty as the figures in these paintings, Venus (Barolsky 105), Callisto (Wall 111), and Helen of Troy (Maguire 31), are conventionally acknowledged as “beautiful” figures. Moreover, the fact that these works span several centuries provides valuable insight into the perceptions of beauty across time. Here, by highlighting the visible symmetry in these paintings through anthropometric measurements and the Loomis framework, the study argues that the established norm of symmetry and completeness as beauty was constructed by widely implying such facial features as exemplars of beauty in arts and similar visual media.

The frame of the Loomis method and the anthropometric measurement of the faces in these paintings that are considered beautiful or the epitome of beauty shows the clear underlying criterion for normative beauty.

For example, the following portrayal of Callisto from *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto* (Berthélemy) aligns with the perfect Loomis framework:

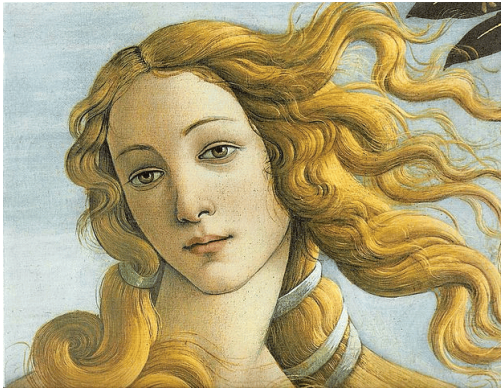


**Figure 1:** Berthélemy, *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, Paris: Louvre, 1763.

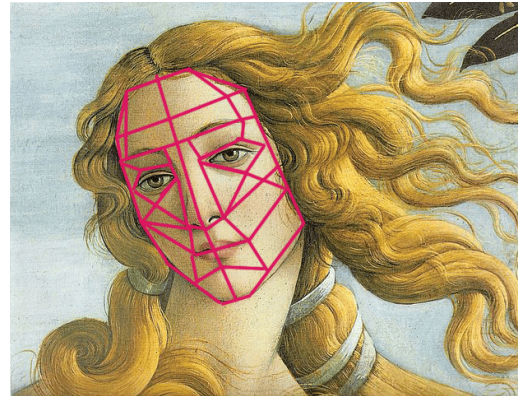


**Figure 2:** Berthélemy, *Jupiter in the Guise of Diana and Callisto*, Paris: Louvre, 1763 (within the Loomis framework).

Similarly, the portrayal of Aphrodite in *The Birth of Venus* (Botticelli) accords with this Loomis framework with precision. The following depiction clarifies the symmetry:

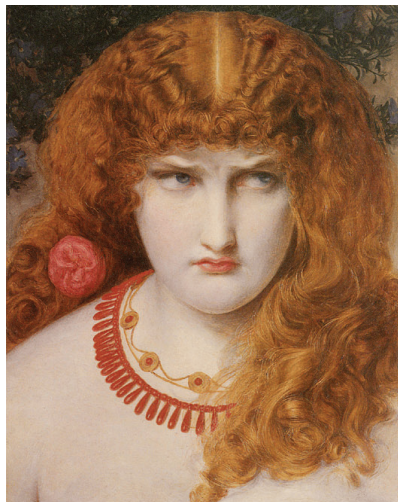


**Figure 3:** Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, Florence: Uffizi Gallery, 1486.

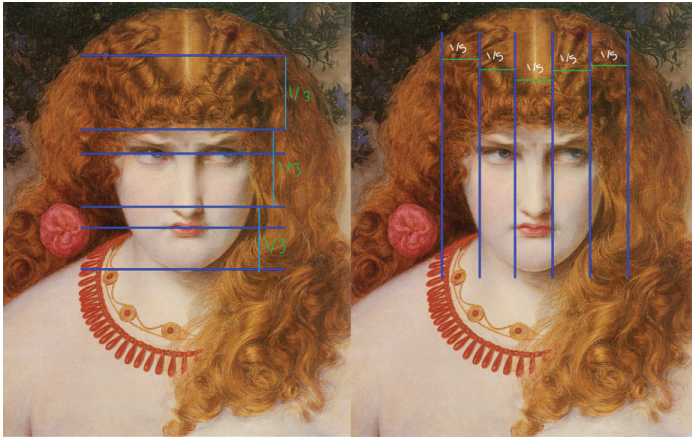


**Figure 4:** Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, Florence: Uffizi Gallery, 1486 (within the Loomis framework).

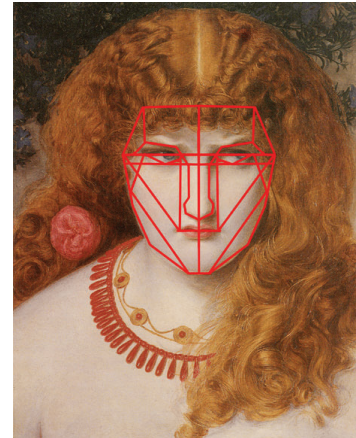
The depiction of Helen from Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys' painting *Helen of Troy* not only aligns with the Loomis framework, but within the anthropometric frame of drawing as well because of her completely front-facing posture. Below is the depiction of Helen of Troy within these frameworks:



**Figure 5:** Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867.



**Figure 6:** Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867 (within the anthropometric frame).



**Figure 7:** Sandys, *Helen of Troy*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 1867 (within the Loomis framework).

The Loomis framework is a methodical technique used in visual arts to draw symmetrical items, such as faces (Loomis 25). Similarly, standard anthropometric frames support the idea that “an aesthetically pleasing face can be separated into three equal vertical thirds and five equal horizontal fifths” (Armengou et al. 352). These divisions create a framework of symmetry, as the distances between these lines constituting the complete face are defined as “equal.” Consequently, faces that align with the anthropometric frame are considered “aesthetically pleasing” because they are measured as symmetrical.

It is noticeable that the faces that are widely deemed beautiful under Eurocentric standards, such as those of Venus (Aphrodite), Callisto, and Helen of Troy, align perfectly with these metrics of symmetrical facial structure. This suggests that Eurocentric beauty norms fundamentally prioritize visual symmetry as a defining characteristic of beauty. These paintings thus conform to the beauty norm of symmetry and completeness as propounded by classical scholars. Such conformity established and reinforced the norms of beauty suggested by the Western classical scholars while also circulating this beauty standard as the prevailing norm. This occurred due to widespread recognition, acknowledgement, and appreciation of these paintings. In the following years, the concept of beauty is further subjected to the methodical principle of scientific approach. For example, in recent times, a viral news story about actress Amber Heard having the most “scientifically” beautiful face took over the internet. The articles (*The Daily Star*; *New York Post*) reported that a research conducted by Dr. Julian De

Silva developed a face mapping technique to discover the most beautiful face. According to the report, Dr. Silva utilized the Greek golden ratio of beauty, which is also referred to as “Phi.” In the context of this research, this ratio supposedly determines the “perfect” proportion of facial features. It is safe to assume that this notion of “perfect” is based on the premise of symmetry as the golden ratio is characterized by symmetrical forms (Prokopakis et al. 18). The implication here is that the notion of beauty is still methodologized through the borrowing of scientific rationality, thereby ignoring the arbitrary nature of the assumed connection between beauty and science, beauty and symmetry, and beauty and perfection. However, such perceptions of beauty as implied by Dr. Silva further contributes to the practice of associating perfectness or symmetry with the construction of the concept of beauty. The popular media, by portraying such “scientifically perfect” facial features as “attractive,” “attainable,” and “beautiful” through representational practices, further solidifies this implication, eventually transforming it into a norm despite its irrational and arbitrary nature. This, yet again, in turn constitutes the notion of “ugliness” as well where any facial feature that is not “perfect” or “symmetrical” falls out of the category of beauty, thus out of the category of “attractive” and “attainable.”

From a Foucauldian perspective, both the Loomis framework and the modern revival of the golden ratio of beauty as utilized by Dr. Silva exemplify the way disciplinary techniques produce beauty as scientific truth while simultaneously marginalizing alternative epistemes of aesthetics. Foucault terms these suppressed and devalued perspectives as “subjugated knowledges” (7). The notion of “subjugated knowledges” entail forms of understanding that are dismissed as they do not conform to the dominant regimes of truth. The Loomis method naturalizes the Greco-Roman proportional ideals through technical grids. It codifies symmetry as the universal criterion of beauty. In the same manner, the golden ratio establishes itself as an objective mathematical formula of assessing beauty. It lends the authority of science to what is in fact a culturally specific ideal of proportion. In both instances, alternative aesthetic traditions, such as that of South Asian valorization of ornamentation and body hair, or the medieval grotesque aesthetics, or the indigenous practices of scarification or bodily modifications, are relegated to the margins as primitive, absurd, and “unaesthetic.” These perceptions of beauty are overshadowed by the dominant Western episteme of beauty and are thus made, what Foucault calls, “subjugated knowledges.” In this context, the comprehension that appears to be neutral and universal are in fact normative apparatuses that discipline both artistic practice and spectatorship. The dominant epistemes of the Loomis framework and golden ratio of beauty that emerged from the Greco-Roman traditions do not merely describe beauty, but rather they actively generate a hierarchical system

of aesthetic values that establishes a rigid binary where asymmetry, and thus the constructed category of “ugliness,” is codified as repulsive.

As it becomes apparent by this point, the notion of beauty is not an inherent quality but is rather a construct that circulates and becomes ingrained through cultural systems, media representations, and institutional practices. Scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Susan Bordo, Sean Nixon, and Lennard J. Davis have offered insights that can be engaged to examine how beauty is manufactured, disseminated, and normalized, ultimately shaping societal ideals and reinforcing the rejection of bodies that deviate from these standards. This essay examines their arguments to demonstrate how the normative understanding of beauty is constructed, perpetuated, and institutionalized, creating a rigid binary between the desirable and the undesirable.

Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” highlights how the perception of beauty is rooted in the concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Beauty is positioned as a quality that invites the gaze, often presented in media through images coded for visual and erotic impact. Mulvey explains such bodies and appearances as, “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). This framing creates a normative standard of beauty that places individuals in the position of objects to be viewed and assessed. The act of spectatorship becomes an active process in constructing beauty, wherein the media positions certain bodies as ideal through visual codes, simultaneously marginalizing individuals who do not conform to these constructed parameters. In this process, these others who fall outside these ideals are constituted as the very negation of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” rendered instead as forms of “not-to-be-looked-at-ness.” By creating a fetishized preference for those “to-be-looked-at” bodies, a contrast is perpetuated that vivifies the visibility of features that make a body opposite of “to-be-looked-at,” that is “not-to-be-looked-at.”

Building on this, Susan Bordo’s “Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body” argues that media not only reflects but actively constructs these desirability that Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Through the posing and styling of bodies, media representation signals what is desirable and sensual, reinforcing specific aesthetics as beautiful. Bordo notes, in media representations, bodies are “posed and styled to signify desirability and sensuality” (196), showing how beauty is manufactured by associating particular physical traits and appearances with sensuality. Bordo’s framework is particularly relevant to this essay in understanding the mechanism that manufactures and circulates beauty standards. According to Bordo’s speculations, the media, in this process, becomes a powerful agent in circulating and establishing a rigid idea of beauty, training

viewers to internalize these representations as norms. Over time, this consistent framing solidifies the perception of beauty within culture, creating aspirational ideals that shape individual and collective desirability. However, this formation of desirability resulting from media representation simultaneously implies the formation of undesirability or repulsion for features that are not circulated as beautiful, eventually causing those features to be deemed “ugly.”

Sean Nixon extends this argument in “Exhibiting Masculinity,” emphasizing that beauty is a product of cultural systems and practices that circulate through media and institutionalized forms of representation. He explains, “cultural languages or systems of representation ... actively construct the cultural meanings we give to masculinities” (301). These cultural languages define what beauty is and establish its meaning as something that is desirable and acceptable, linking it to wider gender scripts and sexual identities. Thus, as the standard beauty becomes desirable, the opposite of it, that is “ugliness,” becomes undesirable in this process. Nixon further elaborates, “the visual pleasures coded in the representations are connected to wider gender scripts and sexual identities – in other words, who looks at whom and in what way” (314). This coding positions beauty as an aspirational quality tied to identity formation, where spectators are invited to view themselves in relation to the models they consume in media. This system perpetuates binaries, casting beauty as an ideal while creating a corresponding rejection of bodies that do not conform. Through media, beauty becomes institutionalized, and individuals are subtly encouraged to conform to these ideals as a means of belonging and identity validation. Nixon underscores the structural nature of this process that “forces us to be alert to the particular forms of knowledge and expertise which are associated with the representations at each of these sites” (304). This system compels us to acknowledge the constructed value that is arbitrarily associated with “beauty.” In this process, Nixon explains, “[t]he images invite an imagined male viewer to invest himself in the ‘look’ being presented by the model” (314). Thus, this process of spectatorship positions beauty as an aspirational quality tied to consumption and identity formation, which, automatically in the binary process, creates a repulsion, that is, the opposite of aspiration, for “ugliness.” As, according to Nixon, the institutionalization of beauty contributes to identity validation, not conforming to such beauty norm may not validate one’s identity to the broader society, which can be thought of as one of the reasons why individuals not conforming to the beauty standards may have negative and even derogatory experiences of associating with the self. This also highlights the notion of how, because of capitalist strategies, individuals positioned outside of the beauty standards often endure distress while negotiating with their sense of self, as they are deviated from the category of the normative beauty expectations of the culture they are a part of.

The connection between beauty and cultural expectations of perfection is further analyzed by Lennard J. Davis in “Visualizing the Disabled Body.” Though Davis talks about the othering of disabled bodies, his framework of approaching the issue is relevant in understanding the manner in which “ugliness” too eventually becomes subjected to othering. However, Davis’ definition of “disability” equates “ugliness” with a form of disability as well, thereby explaining its societal othering. Both the categories of disability and ugliness function as social disruptions to normative expectations of the body. Similar to the way disability is read as a deviation from able-bodied completeness, ugliness is understood as a deviation from aesthetic completeness. Davis’ emphasis on the notion of gaze and agency is particularly instrumental in explaining this translation that argues that bodies marked as “ugly” disrupt the visual field in manners analogous to the disruption produced by disabled bodies. Considering Davis’ framework of disability, “ugliness” too triggers the same cultural mechanisms of regulation, containment, and exclusion. Thus, Davis’ work does not only inform disability studies but also offers a conceptual vocabulary to theorize ugliness as a form of socially constructed deviance that emerges as a counterpart of beauty.

Davis defines disability as “a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field as it relates to the power of the gaze” (168). As “ugliness” too disrupts societal standards of appearance and challenges the “power of the gaze,” it can be perceived as a form of disability. Davis further explains, “the disruption, the rebellion of the visual, must be regulated, rationalized, contained” (168). In the normative societal landscape, “ugliness” too is “regulated, rationalized, contained” through enforcement of beauty standards. In this process, those who do not conform to this category face exclusion and discrimination. This dynamic put “ugliness” within the category of disability. In addition, it can be argued that similar to the notion of disability as Davis puts it, the concept of “ugliness” too is pathologized, offering various “remedies” for certain perceived aesthetic deficiencies termed as “ugliness” such as hair loss, acne, pimples, rough or dry skin, body parts that are considered “too large” or “too small,” excessively bright or dark skin among others. Science contributes to this pathologization by providing “solutions” in the form of creams, lotions, and other “skincare” products as well as medical procedures for the augmentation or reduction of body parts such as breasts and buttocks. This pathologization is facilitated by promoting a narrowly defined category of “beauty,” which immediately renders the rest of the physical appearances as “undesirable,” “unattainable,” and “unworthy of appreciation,” or, yet again, “not-to-be-looked-at.” The underlying motivation for this pathologized construction appears to be capitalist in nature. The continued reinforcement of a singular, narrow category of “beautiful” serves to exploit those who fall into its counterpart category, which is “ugliness.” The

implications of the capitalist agenda explain why these constructed binaries of beauty and ugliness visibly persist within popular cultural products, and consequently in broader socio-cultural praxis with unignorable vividness. Davis' approach underscores how the consumption of these cultural products create normative understanding of symmetry and completeness as defining markers of "normal," which, according to the initial arguments of this research in reference to classical philosophy, are also features that define "beauty." Davis writes,

[C]ulture tends to split bodies into good and bad parts. Some cultural norms are considered good and others bad. Everyone is familiar with the "bad" body: too short or tall, too fat or thin, not masculine or feminine enough, not enough or too much hair .... (169)

The attributes "too much" and "not enough" both refer to asymmetry as these attributes suggest imbalance in reference to "expected norm." Asymmetry, by definition, is lack of equality or proportion in a system or object (Amrein and Peña 5). Thus, when something is excessive (or "too much") or is insufficient (or "not enough"), it is asymmetrical. Media representations teach viewers, much like the classical standards as discussed before, to associate beauty with wholeness, "perfection," and symmetry. This doctrine of beauty marginalizes bodies that deviate from these standards. Davis contrasts the compensatory imagination applied in the process of interacting with art with the perception of real-life bodies. For example, viewers can idealize the incomplete figure of the *Venus de Milo* as beautiful, but in real life, physical impairments or imperfections provoke horror, pity, and even repulsion for features that lack erotic allure unlike the armless sculpture of *Venus de Milo*. He asks,

The living woman might be considered by many "normal" people to be physically repulsive, and certainly without erotic allure. The question I wish to ask is why does the impairment of the *Venus de Milo* in no way prevent "normal" people from considering her beauty, while Pam Herbert's disability becomes the focal point for horror and pity? (168)

This discrepancy reveals how our perception of beauty, conditioned by media and art, is tied to our ability to conceptualize completeness. In case of certain artworks, viewers compensate for absent or imperfect elements, thereby perceiving all figures and subjects as beautiful despite their defects because the viewers are culturally conditioned to interpret such artworks as "beautiful" (Kant 111). While perceiving art, the viewer "does not see the absence and so fills the absence with a presence" (171). In this "reception of disability ..., the 'normal' observer compensates or defends against the presence of difference" (171). While viewing the art, Davis wrote, the viewer's "aim is to restore the damage, bring

back the limbs, through an act of imagination” (171). However, real bodies do not allow for this imaginative compensation, leading to a heightened perception of “ugliness” in imperfect bodies.

This process reveals a more profound underlying issue with normative perception toward beauty and “ugliness.” The habitual consumption of media normalizes and perpetuates the idea of beauty as tied to perfection. The association between beauty and perfection is so intrinsically embedded within cultural perceptions that viewers often imagine compensation for defects to sustain the ideal of beauty as “perfection” (e.g., imaginatively reconstructing the absent limbs of *Venus de Milo*) (Davis 171). Over time, this habituation magnifies the rejection of real bodies that deviate from these constructed ideals. Davis argues that this tendency stems from the cultural training provided by media, which teaches viewers to perceive beauty in a specific, rigid way. In this habitual process, the viewer’s perception of disability or defect while encountering non-normative bodies in media gets repressed. Davis argues,

[i]n imagining the broken statues, the critic must mentally replace the arms and the head .... The point here is that the attempt of the critic to keep the body in some systematic whole is really based on a repression of the fragmentary nature of the body. (173)

When confronted with real bodies that deviate from the normative expectations, the perception of defect that was suppressed by our tendency of perceiving media representation as perfect, even if it is through imaginative compensation, resurfaces. This intensifies the rejection of real bodies that do not conform to normative ideals of perfection or beauty. Thus, the process of defining beauty not only creates aspirational ideals but also reinforces stigmatized evaluation of imperfection.

Overall, the arguments of Mulvey, Bordo, Nixon, and Davis demonstrate how beauty is constructed and circulated through cultural products and cultural practices. Mulvey illustrates how representation shapes perception of beauty, while Bordo highlights how media further solidifies beauty as a desirable construct. Nixon shows that this constructed beauty is institutionalized through cultural systems, linking it to consumption and identity formation. Davis examines the consequences of this process, emphasizing the exclusion and marginalization of imperfect bodies or the “ugly” bodies. These scholars collectively reveal that the perceptions of “ugliness,” much like beauty, are not innate but a socially and culturally influenced construct, reproduced through media representations. By creating aspirational ideals and rejecting deviations, the circulation of “normative beauty” becomes a powerful force that shapes broader societal norms

and individual desires. In this system, “ugliness” is structurally produced at every stage of the cultural process. Mulvey shows that certain bodies are constructed as desirable objects of the gaze and Bordo demonstrates how those aesthetics are manufactured and are circulated. These arguments implicitly indicate how ugliness too is being created and circulated along with the dynamic of beauty or desirable bodies. Nixon illustrates how the beauty standards become institutionalized within systems of representation and identity. This argument, despite being about beauty, offers a hint at how, along with beauty, ugliness too becomes institutionalized but in a manner that is not apparent or explicit due to the fact that ugliness is not as celebrated or highlighted as beauty is. Finally, Davis clarifies the way the bodies that deviate from the standard norms are pathologized as defective and undesirable, thereby establishing “ugliness” as something to “cure” or “fix.” Overall, their works converge to support the claim that ugliness, like beauty, is not a natural quality, but is rather an arbitrarily constructed cultural and political product that develops along with the notion of beauty, but in a less visible and less explicitly articulated form.

By putting the concept of “ugliness” against the idea of “beauty,” the current study attempted to trace the cultural and social influence in constructing these concepts. The research focused on “ugliness” as a construct that is, in its functionality, contingent upon the notion of “beauty.” By demonstrating that the standards and norms of beauty are arbitrarily created, that is by conceptualizing symmetry as beauty whereas no such connection between beauty and symmetry is apparent, the current study argued that this must mean “ugliness” too is conceptualized in a similar manner in the process of creating beauty norms. In addition, the study showed that the concept of beauty has been made an aspiring and appreciative quality by the normative able-bodied, capital-driven culture to promote certain standards to undergird industries both in terms of production and consumption. This process, while exalting beauty, simultaneously encodes “ugliness” as a repulsive quality. While the concept of beauty is established to inspire individuals to engage in certain modes of Foucauldian biopower (Paudel 87), such as to participate in beauty trends and impose insecurity to keep individuals within certain regulations, the concept of “ugliness” is made to be repulsive to inspire those normatively perceived as “not-beautiful,” such as those individuals lacking normative completeness, to attempt to reach the status of “beautiful” as it is an “aspiring quality.” In other words, beauty norms act as biopolitical tools to regulate bodies and sustain consumer markets. This simply means that the concept of “ugliness” is also a construct, created and circulated for particular agenda. Overall, just like beauty, “ugliness” too is an arbitrary concept without any natural and/or essential meaning to it. If that is the case, the current study argues that “ugliness” should be normalized

just as “beauty” should be normalized. This analysis elucidates that if “beauty” is de-fetishized and/or is stripped of its exalted aura, then “ugliness” would likewise lose the repulsive charge attributed to it, as neither of these concepts is essentially natural, and both are inter-constructive and arbitrary in nature. Consequently, the stigmatization of “ugliness” would no longer function as a catalyst for adverse societal repercussions, thereby neutralizing the detrimental effects historically perpetuated by such arbitrary constructs.

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