

Martian Orders

By Theodore Dalrymple

A long-lived creature from Mars, who had paid the earth visits over several centuries, would be very much struck by modern man's thirst for, or indifference to, ugliness. He, she, or it would have noticed that, precisely at a time when humanity had



more disposable income than at any other time in its history, it had insisted not only upon spreading a hideous mess over the surface of the earth and thereby destroying much of its beauty, but on espousing personal ugliness in various forms.

He, she, or it would have remarked upon the curious paradox that, while people devoted a lot of attention to the purchase of clothes, and advertisements for clothes were everywhere, they dressed very badly. If such a creature could walk unnoticed down almost any street in the world, but particularly in the rich part of the world, he, she, or it would marvel at the way in which so many people made the worst of themselves and so few the best.

We cannot know what Martians would make of obesity, for example, but they would almost certainly be astonished at the way the obese squeeze themselves into ill-fitting, often brightly-colored tight clothes, as if challenging people to notice them and not to notice them at the same time, or as if daring them to make a comment to give them the opportunity to

become angry and self-righteous—anger having become self-justifying among modern humans, an emotion that automatically gives significance to a person's life and allows him or her to forget the emptiness of his or her existence.

He, she, or it would notice the inability of even the richest people to build beautiful houses, or of the wealthiest cities to create civilized and graceful public areas, such as were once commonplace, albeit that the poverty of the times in which they were created also produced noisome slums. Is it, or was it, inevitable that a society that fulfilled the basic needs of almost everyone, and provided them with a degree of comfort far greater than that of the kings of the past, should be so ungrateful on the eye?

How would the Martian account for the sheer ugliness of rap music, which is to real music what the sound of a disturbed hornet's nest is to the song of the nightingale? Is it that the moral and physical ugliness of the lives that rap singers lead, extol, and promote, and the life of those who listen to them, has to be reflected in the noise that they make? Is rap music the means by which getting what you do not like is transmuted into liking what you get? If the bad drives out the good for long enough, the transvaluation of values that Nietzsche thought so necessary has been achieved.

A downward aspiration comes as a great relief to many people: For beauty requires effort, ugliness none (the latter obeys the Second Law of Thermodynamics sooner than the former). We are all prone to listen to the siren song of taking the line of least resistance, of doing what comes most easily to us. Who does not know the temptation to eat the first thing that comes to hand when he is hungry and busy, because it is the easiest way to satisfy that hunger? To eat well is not merely a pleasure, but for those without professional cooks in their household—the great majority of people in the modern world—a self-discipline. And discipline of the self is not exactly the first characteristic of the modern person.

To dress well likewise takes self-discipline. It also takes effort and imagination—not imagination of a high order, perhaps, but of the minimal kind that requires a person to see himself as others see him. But that implies that others are and should be important in our eyes, which is an affront to our self-importance. As a corollary, a person who pays attention to the way in which he dresses is *ipso facto* trying to assert his superiority over us, and this is not only an affront to us but to the ideal of social justice; for it is clear that, for one reason or another, not *everyone* can dress well. Therefore, dressing badly is politically virtuous. One must be careful to be careless.

Those whom one might have expected to be most attached to beauty—art critics, for example—are terrified not only to use the word and its cognates, but even to think in its categories. Very little reveals as much about a person as his taste and what he considers beautiful, and in a world of easy resort to and wide publication of vilification, it is best not to put one's head above the aesthetic parapet. You can't go wrong with ugliness, it's always transgressive, to be which is now the highest term of critical praise. For an artist, it is better to disturb than to please, and it is far from uncommon to read that art may not only do so, but *must* do so: Its very function is to reorganize people's thoughts in some ideological fashion. Just as the personal was political, now the artistic is political.

This is not, of course, to deny that it *can* be political, that is to say that it can have an overt political message. Furthermore, since man is a political animal, some political meaning can be dragged, if only kicking and screaming, from any human artifact whatever. And all art, after all, is produced in certain social and political conditions.

But a political meaning is neither necessary nor sufficient for an artifact to be a work of art, and beauty is a realm of relative independence from all other considerations. It is not

necessary to be a Muslim, for example, to appreciate the beauties of Islamic art. That is why it is possible to appreciate the art of any civilization.

I am open to correction, but ours, I suspect, is the first age deliberately to turn its back on the category of the beautiful, not totally, perhaps, but largely. It is as if we are tired of being human.

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