

# BEAUTIFUL AND DISGUSTING POLITICS: TAMING EVIL AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTROLLING THE UNCONTROLLABLE

**Jaseff Raziel Yauri-Miranda**

Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Dpto Ciencia Política y de la  
Administración

## Abstract

Evil doing is part of everyday social life and is extremely difficult to be counter-balanced by "good"practices, let alone to be eliminated. Even in the realm of abstract politics, there is no simple solution or way to understand their overlapping nature. In that sense, this study explores the relationship between both sides through aesthetics and constructs a dialogical analysis transposed to politics. This relationship shows that beautiful and disgusting politics are not simply two sides of the same coin. The former has a limited potential to counterbalance the latter and, paradoxically, without its counter-part it has a limited potential to promote social transformations.

**Keywords:** DISGUSTING POLITICS, BEAUTIFUL POLITICS, AESTHETICS,  
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*Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
–These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.  
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable, and human squander,  
Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.*

(Wilfred Owen, Mental Cases, 1717)

## INTRODUCTION:

Is it possible to control evil and disgusting methods in politics by promoting beautiful ones? This question is essential to political theory and to foster social transformations in the “real” world. In that sense, it seems that the best “good” institutional designs and arguments cannot be constructed in the same magnitude and philosophical logic than abject practices. That is, if good and evil are opposite sides in the same coin and are not detached from real politics, the former has a different nature and perhaps a limited potential to promote effective social transformations. For example, it is very difficult to implement good democratic standards and values in a political culture during several decades. But this same effort could be easily obliterated in a short period of time by hundreds of circumstances and reasons. This is not saying that evildoers are stronger and are in more quantity. Rather, this study verifies whether evil, disastrous and pernicious practices are the symmetrical opposite force of goodness and beauty; or whether disgusting politics has a different logic that cannot be counter-balanced just by placing good intentions to pursue a certain goal.

To understand the different logic between evil and goodness in politics, we equalize them to disgust and beauty, respectively. This is explained because we shed light upon this issue with aesthetical terms. In the last century, the path of the main political theoretical trends consisted of emancipatory movements, vanguard intellectualities, deconstruction analysis, and lately of cultural studies and identity movements. After this sequence, it seems that politics has been reduced to a struggle between those who argue that political

terms and studies cannot really represent a certain object (de-constructionists) and those who still manage concepts as they truly 'represent' objects from the real world (cultural and identity studies). That is, discourses and practices in politics, at least epistemologically, have been jeopardized by the (im)possibility to represent and so to steer and digest their objects to offer clear solutions to social problems. It is not saying that problematizing objects prevent their representation or that politics studies are obligated to offer simple and practical solutions. It means, as stated by Hans Gumbrecht, that in the face of that struggle there is an alternative way to convince and orient an audience immersed in severe social problems. This way is appealing to aesthetical dimensions such as the 'presence', the capability to internalize and apprehend a certain issue by attributes such as beauty, sensibility, and ugliness (Gumbrecht 2004). Far from marketing strategies that deliver beautiful and finished products, political studies must enter into the dimension of aesthetics to communicate and leave an important message. Philosophers like Jacques Rancière (1995) affirm that the aesthetic dimension is the last place where politics were confined after the turns of political and artistic movements in the last century. After radical social movements in the 60s and their absorption into disenchanting common discourses that are the opposite of their initial criticism, either as a product of contingency or as the transformation of the vanguard thought into nostalgic thinking, Jean-François Lyotard already identified 'aesthetics' amidst the chaos of post-modernity as a privileged place in which the tradition of critical thinking receive orientation (Carroll 1987). In other terms, it is by esthetical dimensions that politics may abandon its poor dramaturgy which consisted, on the one hand, in a plot where we were victims of a linear narrative with a clear ending (emancipator ideologies and messianic movements) and, on the other hand, in a tragedy performed by lost souls in multi-linear paths with no endings or, what is worse, the repetition of the Fukuyamian 'End of History' in a neoliberal paradigm. If aesthetical terms can produce 'meaning' or give 'orientation' to transform the place of the political, without necessarily restoring great political narratives (even if they are still not dead as the ancient gods), it is by aesthetical terms that we structure this study.

## DEVELOPMENT

Let us consider relentless corruption, abuse of power, political clientelism, violent radicalization and other severe problems as examples and typologies of

*disgusting politics*. On the contrary, let us consider legitimate power, efficient accountability, public interest, social responsibility and democratic culture as *beautiful politics*. In philosophy of aesthetics, beauty is more feasible to be represented, performed and internalized by an external audience. On the other hand, disgust is more difficult to be represented as it has a component that cannot be appropriated by an external audience. This is because disgust is related to trauma or traumatic senses; feelings that can be represented as comparative allegories but not re-presented as aesthetical recreations. As Virginia Woolf argues, trauma “*is a zone of silence in the middle of every art*” or something not able to be expressed in words. According to her, “*nature and art will exist beyond a human life and [...] the bigger picture overrules personal suffering*” (cited in Moran 2007, 148). Trauma is perhaps the most difficult personal experience to be retold and shared.

Sublime and beauty feelings, on the contrary, facilitate communication and re-presentation of internal experiences in a complete degree, even when they cannot be fully conveyed (Bennet 2003). Beauty –from Divine revelations to human actions– can spread the seeds of sublime and goodness. Moreover, beauty can treat wounds of trauma and manage personal disgust. That is, Disgust can be beautifully reprogrammed and re-presented but it does not mean that disgust is beauty or something beautiful per se. The poem of Owen in the introduction, for example, is an allegory of soldiers traumatized in a battle. The verses give an idea of their madness and confusion, but they are like veils or layers difficult to be transposed and so to understand their suffering. The aesthetical dimension gives us an idea of the horribleness and the ‘presence’ of war. Yet, trauma is refractory to logo centric communication and appears fragmented in its externalization (Luckhurst 2013). The wounds and suffering could be healed by replacing disgust with beauty, by the contingent and fading memory, or by using tropes of language and arts to solve its tension (Best & Robson 2005). Yet, in those cases disgust is covered by layers of beauty instead of being apprehended in its rawness.

In our view, one audience can imagine the degree and nature of disgust but they cannot internalize with the same degree and completeness as beauty. For Immanuel Kant, “*fury, disease, the devastation of war, etc., can be described as evil very beautifully, and even represented in paintings; but there is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be represented according to nature without ruining all aesthetic satisfaction and therefore all artistic beauty, it is the element which awakens disgust*” (cited in Trías [1982] 2011, 11). According to that Kantian principle, one can retell the tragedies committed by human societies in

the past; it is also possible to express the suffering of individuals in the hands of torturers, the deliberated execution of political foes, and the decomposition of kidnapped bodies that will never be found. In short, someone can mention how disgusting politics was exercised with different methods in different periods. For example, violence can be narrated appealing to images and personal testimonies, but it only will serve as an attempt of apprehension rather than something that can be truly re-presented. In Kant, disgust cannot be really assimilated as it breaks a beautiful apprehension of the social reality. Moreover, the pace of time tends to erase its immediate understanding. Hence, disgust cannot be totally counterbalanced even with the best arguments from the politics of beauty. In the real world, both beautiful and disgusting politics are executed and are intertwined when it comes to analyze and understand social practices. But whereas the former can be represented and incorporated to awaken new realities and foster political transformation, the latter execute transformations without the necessity of being fully represented and justified. For Oscar Wilde, *“Only what is fine, and finely conceived, can feed Love. But anything will feed Hate”*. Besides, it means that disgusting politics cannot be simple juxtaposed with beautiful politics with the hope to override evil. They do not share the same logic and magnitude. For Wilde, again, *“[Love and Hate] cannot live together in [a] fair carven house”* ([1905] 2010, 76).

Disgusting politics will continue to be committed not because good men are incapable of deterring the banality of evil, as coined by Hanna Arendt. Evil will be committed because even if we are affected by evil actions, our answer and good intentions will always be performed by a lesser understanding and imperfect assimilation of evil practices, especially if they are compared to good ones.

In a micro-social example, the disgusting execution of torture by security forces upon a political dissident was written by Isaac Rosa in the novel *El Vano Ayer* (*The Vain Yesterday*, free translation). Despite of being a fictional story, the author brought up literary mechanisms to reconstruct the experience of suffering torture. First, he quoted a manual of instructions of torture which was released by security officials in order to maximize the physical and mental pain to accelerate the collection of information. As this technique was insufficient to depict the experience of torture, Rosa used distinct tropes of speech to narrate the intensity and the details of two sessions of torture, including psychological delirium, crushing bones and internal bleedings as completer images that described a case of deviation of power in the Spanish Franco regime (Rosa 2004). This type of narration is completer than vague statements such as *“torture was a common practice”*, or *“thousands of men and women were tortured*

*in those times*” as expressed in historical narratives. Literature brings up the experience of trauma; yet, we still need to rethink the forms to counterbalance and restrain the banality of evil.

In a macro-social example, historians have tormented themselves questioning the better forms to retell traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, in order to promote historical memory on these episodes and to develop ethical values in the present. Notwithstanding, this kind of events are refractory to historiography representations and aesthetic apprehension. We do not fully represent and understand them because we do not recognize their disgusting horribleness; we fail to admit or represent (even in fictional terms) the size of human horror and are incapable of giving meaning to such terrible violence. In that sense, Fernando Garcia infers the human inability to recognize its own potential for evil. Hence, to describe this kind of traumatic events, he argues that historians put this kind of experiences as limit events of apprehension where individuals who participated in are represented as monsters or infra-human victims (Garcia, Mendes & Vieira 2014). Thus, denying their humanity to promote human values was the main way to understand this kind of disgusting events.

Incapable of fully understand and answer to traumatic and severe disgusting politics, our relation with evil is controversial. On the one hand, we are attracted by the attempts to understand it even when this promise will not be fulfilled. This attraction causes curiosity to consume disgusting symbols or produces vertigo at the imminence of imposing disgust, as in the case of some serial killers who feel pleasure inflicting pain over victims. On the other hand, we divert our apprehension of disgusting politics using alternative tools, such as constructing humoristic narratives, or simply escaping of the range of disgust. The latter is crucial to understand why many people are not interested in hidden policies as they prefer to ignore actions leading with disgusting elements that must remain buried. Sometimes, it is better that the darkness of our governments continue in the shadows. In that sense, “*the beauty is the beginning of the disgusting continuum that we can still bear*”, in Rainer Marie Rilke words; or “*the disgust is a part that should have remained hidden but has been revealed*”, in Friedrich Schelling terms. In sum, beauty and disgust maintain a dialectic relationship which is deeper than the simple contrast or juxtaposition of opposite forces.

Now, let us describe the central piece of this study: the dialectic relationship between beauty and disgust based on aesthetical philosophy propositions. According to Eugenio Trías, firstly, beauty, without the menace posed by ugly-

ness or disgust is scarce in force and vitality to be considered as beauty. Secondly, when disgust appears without a previous mediation or transformation (metaphorical or metonymic), it destroys the effect of beauty. Therefore, disgust can be considered as the limit or borderline of beauty. Thirdly, beauty is a veil through which chaos must be felt. Disgusting elements are fetishistic, as they locate the audience in a position of vertigo, in which the subject is about to tell or see what cannot be told or seen (Trías1982) as in the sense of trauma. For him, the aesthetical representations of beauty are like a veil, a penultimate position with respect to disgust, a revelation that does not occur because of the first and second propositions.

In a political allegory, beautiful and disgusting politics maintain a similar dialectic. Whereas we can appreciate the great value of beauty in politics (such as a deeper democratic culture and efficient accountability), this appreciation cannot be really done without the constant menace of disgust (such as the return of tyranny and the lack of civic virtues). Besides, the latter erodes the apprehension and the effects of beauty as well as its promise for a better future. Abuses of power and other disgusting examples are the limits or borderlines that can erase an attempt of beautiful politics. Finally, disgusting politics are always one position ahead of those of beauty. When both sides encounter each other, the latter works as a veil that cannot be transgressed as beauty cannot reach the core of disgust (otherwise it will be destroyed) and because disgusting politics cannot be rhetorically expressed and aesthetically full revealed. Again, beauty and disgust are not just symmetrical or opposite forces. These poles maintain a relationship that escapes from a zero-sum game as they constitute a dialectical logic with the preeminence of the latter.

In light of the above, beautiful politics are limited by disgusting politics. For example, a corrupt activity is *per se* the target and the limit of an anti-corruption attempt. The disgust caused by corruption, when executed by disgusting means such as extreme violence, cannot be completely re-presented, assimilated or shared. Ultimately, this violence cannot be entirely covered by anti-corruption discourses and practices because they are like veils that cannot unveil the last layer of disgusting violence executed against someone. And if anti-corruption deploys disgusting means (like a violent police institution that murder with impunity) to counterbalance disgusting politics (like money laundering from human trafficking) the 'good' intentions turn up emulating its anti-value, in this example, by creating more violence when combating violence. What is worse, those means turn up creating new sources (of violence) that expand the

layers that cannot be unveiled and reached by good politics, such as anti-corruption ethics and good legislation.

If the disgusting potential committed by evil is like the last frontier that never will be reached, why beautiful politics are necessary to tame disgusting ones? Isn't it a lost battle in *a priori* terms? To answer this, first we need to remind that disgust will be executed by several political players despite of beauty intentions and reasons. Evil and hate can be an auto-referential practice. Second, even if severe disgust is not fully understood, beautiful politics still could enhance more politics of beauty. There is no zero sum-game between disgusting and beauty; rather they could be interpreted in aesthetical terms as mentioned above. If beautiful politics has its own limitations and depends on disgusting targets, beauty can be improved and fostered in many dimensions. Any attempt to replenish beautiful politics can nourish good changes in the social reality. For instance, government, law, and enforcement institutions might pave the road to beautiful politics but only if they avoid disgusting methods. Otherwise, as in the anti-corruption example, the expansion of disgusting and abject methods turns up expanding the layers where beautiful politics cannot penetrate. This is one reason that stands the importance of controlling the uncontrollable, beautiful politics must pursue the sinister even if the latter is unreachable in a dialectic relationship. A second reason comes from one characteristic attached to disgusting politics: secrecy.

In multiple approaches, there are no doubts that power is executed also in obscure dimensions where the 'shadows' enhance discretionary abilities to create disgusting politics. The premise of secrecy, the *arcana imperii*, is not detached from the capability to produce and maintain a certain level of power. However, secrecy neither is negative nor is the automatic response to 'realism' in politics: the competition with other powers and the response to threats posed by political enemies. Secrecy is a dispositive that could cover disgust practices because politics without a level of secrecy is not politics. In the same logic of disgust, power needs and contains a last layer that cannot be revealed. At the imminence of being unveiled, and when it becomes totally transparent, it turns into something else except power. "*Without a secret sphere, politics becomes corrupted into a theatrical form that can only be understood as a stage with spectators*" says Byung-Chul Han. For the philosopher, "*the more political a performance is, the more it covers up secrets*" (2015, 46). Even when beauty is equalized to transparency which in turn can be transposed to sincerity, it is permanently difficult to counterbalance and assess lies. For Vladimir Jankélévitch, "*sincerity is valid only in an opaque world in which the consciences are not*

*transparent to other ones and in which sincerity has a function to introduce light into the folds, into the shadow of lies*" (cited in Marques 2017, 137). Ultimately, politics will never be completely detached from lies, secrecy and disgust. Far from fatalism, this is not something disgusting *per se* but this is something that can be interpreted as disgusting. When power contains lies and mask secrets, they even can be beautifully represented. Yet, they continue to be lies and secrets affecting real people and leaving consequences. Aesthetics and morals are intertwined to each other but must not be mistaken.

As mentioned, political actions embodying disgusting elements are unreachable for beautiful attempts such as anti-corruption, transparency and accountability. Beautiful attempts cannot be understood in the same level or as mere solutions to disgusting politics. Rather, they must be interpreted as restraining mechanisms that enhance other dimensions of beautiful politics, affecting and redirecting the execution of power in a dialectic form. And at this point, one statement against the dialectic relationship between beautiful and disgusting politics could be related to the fact that the roads to beautiful endings might be permeated by disgusting methods worth of trying. In this case, disgusting politics are disguised by beautiful methods and goals. For example, anyone looking into the past is forced to find several examples where violence appears to be dissimulated. When war is the Clausewitzian continuation of politics by other means, or when violence is the lubricant for economic development, those disgusting practices never appear as ending goals *per se*, they never show their completeness and full nature. Instead of being revealed, they are protected by layers of beauty. Without them, they cannot be performed and assimilated by an audience. Their full revelation would produce the mentioned fetishist effect of vertigo or repulsiveness. In that sense, and to conclude, even language is modified in the attempt to describe or execute disgusting politics. The vocabulary used by the Nazis in their 'Final Solution' and the invention of the term 'genocide' suits this case (Lang 1991; Barel et al. 2010). In addition, euphemisms to describe objects such as "*aerial vehicle of accelerated response*" to describe bombing drones, or "*plant of manufacturing of tactical and defensive logistics*" instead of "*factory of missiles*" support the idea that war is not the ending goal of warriors; is the 'last resource' to achieve the 'irresoluble peace'. In those examples, disgusting actions are unrevealed because they are covered by 'beautiful' layers even in language.

## FINAL REMARK

The use of disgusting methods to reach beautiful ends overlaps with the attempts that seek beauty by beautiful means. However, considering the dialectic relationship shown above, the former could produce side effects that are transformed into new sources of disgust, of evil, that in turn constitute new limits to beauty. In both cases, beautiful prospects are possible but they will ultimately never cover the last layer of disgusting politics aimed to be transformed. The beautiful part in this quest will be eliminated insofar disgusting politics are the limit that cannot be transposed, retold and tamed. Paradoxically, due to the propositions that frame the relationship between beauty and disgust, alternative political paths neither will achieve 'happy endings' as a permanent condition nor will fully counterbalance evil objects by appealing only to good practices. This is a death end for beautiful politics as they cannot cover the last layer of disgust which is unreachable in dialectic terms but not in historical perspective. In dialectic terms, beautiful futures and utopias are eliminated as a final goal to be aimed, but in historical terms, it does not mean that imperfect and provisional better futures are possible, either by appealing to abject or to beautiful means. If there is not a simple solution between those sides, and despite the limitations posed by abject and disgusting politics, controlling the uncontrollable is (and will be) important in politics.

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