The discipline of aesthetics is generally associated with art and the word ‘aesthetics’ is often taken to connote art that is valued as good or great. What that value is and how to assess it are central questions for aesthetic theory. Despite common usage, however, the word ‘aesthetic’ is not synonymous with ‘beauty’ and has applications far wider than to art alone. The etymology of ‘aesthetic’ emphasizes its central meaning of sense perception, and I use the word emphasizing that core meaning. However, sensory experience, and hence aesthetic experience, is not always positive, and when it is offensive, distressing, or has harmful or damaging consequences, the aesthetic leads us to the realm of the negative. In this essay I want to identify some of the conditions when aesthetic value is present but in unsatisfying, painful, perverse, or even destructive ways. I shall focus on the human environment and shows how the aesthetic fuses with the moral. We can give a name to sensory experience that has no clear positive value, the underside of beauty, so to say, and call it negative aesthetics.

I could have called this “Negative Aesthetics beyond Art” for, in following the theme of negativity, I have been led to occasions of aesthetic value that, fortunately or not, do not lie at the surface of conscious perception in everyday life for most people. But it will nevertheless be instructive to discover to what distant shores the winds of negativity can carry us.

It may seem strange to speak of the negative in a discipline so closely associated with the treasured values of art and beauty. Experiencing these values is among the most direct and powerful occasions of personal life. At the same time aesthetic values have become increasingly prominent and controversial in contemporary society when, as often happens, they conflict with values in morality, religion, economics, environment, and social life. The controversial issues that have emerged in these arenas have helped give the aesthetic greater prominence. Aesthetic values are no longer consigned to a region in which they are honored but kept isolated and innocuous. Let us step back and survey that scene.
Aesthetic Value

The range of aesthetic value is vast and complex. When, as is usually the case, it is associated with art or nature, it is seen as identifying what gives works of art or natural phenomena some of their special significance. ‘Aesthetic’ thus takes on a positive connotation, and for most people, it is equivalent to ‘beautiful’ or ‘good taste.’ For scholars and laypeople alike, ‘aesthetics’ connotes art or nature that is beautiful, great, or sublime. This sense of the word has seeped into general usage so that, when we see an object that is pleasing we are likely to praise it by calling it "aesthetic."

The scope of aesthetics radiates far beyond its historical focus on artistic and natural beauty. As a branch of philosophy, too, aesthetics has over time acquired greater complexity. ‘Aesthetics’ is actually a theoretical term, since developing and specifying its meaning involve identifying and attaining a comprehensive view of a distinctive kind of value we call “aesthetic” and understanding its significance. What that value is, where it is to be found, how it functions, and how it is to be appraised are questions that every theory of the aesthetic must deal with.

Aesthetics, then, has been concerned with the laudatory value we commonly ascribe to art and to natural beauty. Central in the experience of such value is its reliance on sense perception, on seeing and hearing, and, increasingly, on the other senses. Critical judgment rests on such evaluative experience: how well a performance succeeds, how effectively a novel or a painting holds us, how well an art object magnetizes our attention, how breathtaking is the view of a landscape. All such judgments assume that there are differences of aesthetic appreciation and hence of aesthetic value, differences that range from utter failure to our magical absorption in masterworks.

It is important to note at this point that, by acknowledging differences in aesthetic value we are not committed to affirming that such value can be measured in degrees or even by a graduated scale of values. To call values “higher” or “lower,” “better” or “worse” does not necessarily imply more or less or any such quantitative designation, nor does it require that. Even identifying a range of aesthetic value between positive and negative poles greatly oversimplifies its evaluative range. The situation is comparable to the presumptive poles of
beauty and ugliness: beauty can be discerned in many of the forms of ugliness since these are not opposites but only salient points of a nuanced, non-sequential, and complex range of aesthetic values that includes, for example, the bizarre, erotic, repugnant, and kitsch, along with the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime. Nor are aesthetic values singular or homogeneous. A dramatic situation, for example, may be at the same time bizarre, ludicrous, and pathetic, combinations of the sort that the English playwright Harold Pinter was a master at evoking. Moreover, in considering aesthetic value we need not be committed to seeking a quality or feature inhering in an object, as if beauty were simply an intrinsic property. We might prefer, as Deleuze does, to consider it a force in art that is exerted on the body and manifested in sensation.²

What makes something aesthetically negative? This question introduces further complexity. One might say at first that the negative occurs when an aesthetic situation has a predominately negative character that outweighs the positive, for example by being trite, perceptually shallow, offensive, or even harmful. For value here designates a pervasive character of experience. What that character is and how to assess it are not obvious but are nonetheless key questions for aesthetics. Moreover, because the concept of the aesthetic is theoretical, what it means implies at the very least that it allows certain kinds of answers and excludes others. As our understanding develops, that direction becomes ever clearer and the conceptual landscape better articulated.

Aesthetic value, then, rests on experience and, as I have noted, the etymological heart of the word 'aesthetic' emphasizes the central place of sense perception. This involves sensation that is holistic and not exclusively psychological. It engages the human organism in a cultural modality that is as integral to the organism as its biological features. If, then, aesthetics starts with sense experience understood as a human capacity that, like all other human traits, is molded by shared historical, cultural, and material conditions, we have a basis for judgment that is not, as is often assumed, purely arbitrary, personal, or “subjective.” And since sensory experiences that are shared are not always equally rewarding and, in fact, not always positive, we have empirical grounds for recognizing and assessing the full range of aesthetic value.
Critical as well as popular discussion tends to center around questions of aesthetic merit, and disagreement about value forms the basis of much of the theoretical as well as the critical response to such experience. Logically speaking, however, this judgment should come not at the outset but only after a theoretical view is developed and the relevant data are identified. For how can the judgment of such a value be reasonably made without first coming to an understanding of what is meant by 'aesthetic' and by the value associated with it?

**Aesthetics and negativity**

When we come to critical judgment, we need to recognize that aesthetic evaluation is grounded in shared experience construed organically and culturally and under common material and geographical conditions. When evaluation becomes so severe that there is little or nothing that can be said in defense of an aesthetic experience, that is, when it is perceptually distressing, repellent, painful, or has effects that are harmful or destructive, then understanding the aesthetic obliges us to acknowledge negativity. So we can speak of negative aesthetic values, of negative aesthetics when, in the primacy of perceptual experience, the experience itself is in some sense distressing or harmful. Aesthetic experience is not always benign.

It will be illuminating to identify some of the many ways in which the negative occurs in aesthetics, but it would be misleading to attempt to classify distinct modes of aesthetic negativity. It is often difficult to distinguish aesthetic negativity clearly from the aesthetically positive, as well as from the different forms that it takes and from moral considerations that cannot be kept separate. The very complexity of the aesthetic contributes to obscuring the presence of the negative. But once we recognize the negative in aesthetic experience, we can begin to explore this often unacknowledged value. And when such a study is undertaken for its own sake and not merely to provide logical symmetry to positive aesthetics, we can identify a negative aesthetic domain.

Negative aesthetics is not the same as negative criticism. It does not refer primarily to the unfavorable assessment of individual art works or to the negative aesthetic judgment of something that is not art, such as a cultural practice. Such assessments are in the domain of art and aesthetic criticism. To identify inadequacies in the dynamic development of experience,
unrealized possibilities of perceptual expansion, unskillful workmanship, and the like is to make a critical judgment. This is the normative function of art criticism. It recognizes that aesthetic value is present but incompletely fulfilled: art that could be better, design that could be more successful, landscape that could hold more charm or be more accommodating, music that could engage us more fully.

Negative criticism may be directed toward the aesthetics of forms that are not ordinarily considered art: urban environments, cultural practices such as ceremonies and rituals, and the functioning of an organization. The criticism of art objects, of non-art such as environments, and even of cultural practices does not itself establish negativity. Negative criticism does not necessarily exclude all positive value but considers that the value here is in some way unfulfilled or unrealized. Criticism often finds some value present that may not be fully realized. This is a common condition and one of which the critic urges improvement. But there are circumstances where no positive value is present at all or where merit is fully obscured by negative factors. And, moreover, because aesthetic perception is direct and immediate, not always dramatic and often common and even commonplace, the aesthetically negative often slips by unnoticed and eludes critical scrutiny, settling into vague discomfiture. Part of this, as we shall see, may result from the subtle suffusion of negativity and from the very failure to acknowledge that aesthetic negativity does indeed occur quite apart from positive aesthetic value.

Negative aesthetics, then, includes a far broader range of judgment than the criticism of art. It takes many forms, and instances of it are common. One species of this is what is usually called bad taste, such as kitsch and sentimentality. These emulate or parody positive aesthetic value and may, indeed, become cultural criticism. Negative aesthetics here includes clichés, jargon, and all such formulaic writing, as common in scholarly literature as in scientific research papers and journalism. It also embraces all those cases of lauding the trivial or the mediocre where there is little that is aesthetically positive, as in some bathetic pop tunes and television soap operas. All these inhabit the negative side of the ledger of artistic value, represent its failure, and are very real forms of its degeneration.
Negative aesthetics also encompasses negative aesthetic judgment of art works when the work is considered to have failed utterly and to have no redeeming quality. Interestingly, it also includes criticism directed at social matters that uses aesthetic language to condemn practices that are unacceptable or thought to go over the line, as when a person's reprehensible action or a manifestly unfair governmental policy is called “ugly” or an offensive personality "unattractive." A key difference, then, between defective art and aesthetic value with no redeeming characteristic is that between a deficiency that reduces aesthetic value and cases in which no positive value can be discerned at all.

Although such designations and distinctions as these can be useful for identifying various forms of aesthetic negativity, it would be mistaken to think that modes of negativity can be arranged in neat categories and that each instance must clearly exemplify one or another. Fine categorial discriminations are not needed here since individual instances involve subtle distinctions and fluid categories that alter with the circumstances. Cases will also differ in intensity and extent but this need not alter the fact of their negativity, only their degree of negativity. The touchstone is the experience, not the category.

Instances of aesthetic negativity are so prevalent that we are insensible to most of them since they have become invisible from endless repetition. Relatively mild negative occurrences may be called "aesthetically offensive," which may go beyond being merely another expression for bad taste and may apply to art objects and artistic practices. The case of art that people find deeply offensive is difficult to adjudicate. It is important to separate personal feelings from those that are shared by virtually all those in a society who experience that art. And even common distaste does not itself invalidate an art work. Some artists deliberately press against the limits of perceptual and moral comfort. This may, in fact, serve as a social benefit by extending the range of endurable experience, as in scatological art, erotic art, pornographic art, and profanatory art. While deeply troubling to some, such art may perform a social function by accustoming people to face experiences that they consider unmentionable or anathema. Apart from any aesthetic value such art may possess, it may have value in enlarging our intellectual and physical as well as our emotional capacities. Even though some may find the art painful, it also may expand our capacity for experience and so enlarge our awareness and understanding. Art that is deeply disturbing to moral or religious feelings can, in fact, be artistically strong, as
evidenced in work by Courbet and Dali. It may be difficult to adjudicate between art that deliberately transgresses the limits of propriety to explore untrod regions of aesthetic sensibility and art that cynically contrives to be offensive merely to achieve notoriety.

My discussion here concerns art works that are judged to possess no positive aesthetic value, and there is much here that lies beyond the offensive. What of art that hovers on the border of masochism and sadism, such as body art, ranging from tattoos and body piercing to disfiguring plastic surgery and self-inflicted violence? It is probable that no general guide can be given and that the possible negativity of each instance and type of aesthetic experience needs to be examined and analyzed through its own features by identifying and evaluating aesthetic, cultural, moral, and other such considerations.

Perhaps more important and prevalent are forms of aesthetic negativity not directly associated with art objects. These are practices of aesthetic import that may have no recognizable compensating features and may be perpetrated through ignorance, insensitivity, callousness, or sadism. While explicit violence is relatively easy to recognize, more insidious are forms of covert violence: Violence to human sensibility is sometimes difficult to detect but nonetheless frequently profound and even devastating. Like the permanent physical damage caused by persistent malnutrition, habitual drug use, or extremely loud sounds, the damage to both perception and health may be deep and lasting. Here one can count things that may not be directly apparent and dramatic but are pervasive and damaging, such as the many forms of environmental pollution, among them smog, loud noise, impure water, and over-crowded space. It is worth noting that although pollution is condemned on ethical grounds for its adverse effects on health and well-being, forms of pollution also contains perceptual insult and cause aesthetic damage, as well. High levels of sound or noise, bad air, excessive visual stimulation, and overcrowding are aesthetically as well as physically damaging.

Most of these have been widely discussed, but spatial pollution may need an explanation because space is not ordinarily considered something capable of being polluted. Yet spatial pollution nonetheless takes various forms, such as overcrowding in vehicles, in classrooms, in auditoria, in public spaces of all kinds. It can result from dense construction:
private houses packed so tightly that they have inadequate outside private space, residential apartment districts that compress people in both inside and outside spaces, impeding movement, even constricting breathing. Space pollution can take a vertical dimension, as in apartment buildings so high that people can be trapped in the upper floors by insufficient or inoperative elevators and stairways too long to descend in an emergency. Such conditions produce bodily experience that is oppressive and claustrophobic, as well as physically exhausting. Space may be abused by disuse. Commercial districts and public plazas in large urban areas are lifeless at night because no one chooses to be there except of necessity. They become oppressive and threatening to a lone pedestrian.

Signage on commercial strips is another example of spatial pollution. Gaudy colors, oversize panels, exaggerated features of all kinds thrust themselves on our sensibility. Not only is there generally little positive that can be said about the sensory experience; such signage also affects driver safety by distracting attention from operating the vehicle. Even granting that we can become inured to common cultural practices, physical and psychological resiliency and toleration are not infinitely expandable.

The study of the aesthetics of negativity, then, is not a simple enterprise. Some mild instances of aesthetic offense are "artless," we may say, as in children's or amateur painting or in a beginner's playing a musical instrument. And there are cases when aesthetic value is deliberately attempted but fails badly, such as in the clichés of suburban landscaping or a front lawn decorated with plastic lawn ornaments, or perhaps when aesthetic value is deliberately parodied as camp. But many instances of aesthetic offense display great differences of intensity and extent from the innocently negative, and they may be perpetrated deliberately through callous disregard or by intention, producing such extreme perceptual discomfort that they must be singled out. It would not be difficult to make a long list of these, but two examples will suffice here. These are the vulgar co-optation and commercialization of the natural landscape by billboards and other signage, and of public space by canned music or loud noise. These acquire a moral dimension not only by their negative consequences but because they are perpetrated knowingly, designedly, and deliberately. These are not only negative aesthetically but also negative morally. The negation of aesthetic values, then, clearly exceeds the realm of the arts to become a general condition, indeed what we might call a pathological social
condition. The forms of such negativity may differ in intensity and in the kind and character of their effects. So we can speak of social and physical environmental situations that are so thoroughly bland that they dull our sensibilities as a condition of aesthetic deprivation, species of sensory deprivation. Deprivation so complete that the capacity for aesthetic pleasure is fully suppressed and entirely extinguished actually diminishes our capacity for sensory experience. Conditions of such deprivation may actually be harmful, producing aesthetic damage either through the loss of the capacity for perceptual satisfaction or by withholding aesthetic occasions. When carried out persistently and systematically, the damage may assume such proportions as to cause active harm, aesthetic harm. We can undoubtedly distinguish other modes of aesthetic negativity, and aesthetic criticism can make an important contribution by identifying and exposing their occurrences and their effects.

Aesthetics and Social Function

Now I want to apply a moral overlay to the aesthetic by identifying situations in which a moral dimension, often a negative but sometimes a positive one, cannot be separated from the aesthetic. A moral factor is not only present in oppressive signage, which is dangerous as well as offensive; a moral element is also inherent in the omnipresence of advertising, itself, that practice of commercial manipulation that rests on creating interests not intended to promote a person’s well-being but to stimulate often false desires. Indeed, commercial environments are gardens of aesthetic and moral symbiosis. The ubiquity of canned music in public spaces, which I have already mentioned, is a particularly flagrant aesthetic-moral intrusion, the former in attempting seduction by perceptual techniques and the latter in psychologically manipulating moods to promote vulnerability.

It is hard to participate in the life of Western society without having to endure continuous perceptual, that is, aesthetic offense, from billboards defaming highways and sports fields to advertising posters confronting the eye on the inside and now commonly on the outside surfaces of buses, trolleys, and subway cars, and especially along the roadside. Indeed, every large or small publicly visible surface becomes an opportunity for advertising display. What makes the people who engage in these practices morally culpable is the fact that the practices are perpetrated intentionally, their motive being to impinge on passersby for the purposes of influence and profit. Such practices extend to television, film, and the Internet, not to mention
their long history in the print media, all of these being ‘public surfaces’. At times, the aesthetically positive and the morally negative may coincide, as they do when fine graphic design is used for the purposes of advertising. These introduce another moral dimension in the commercial exploitation of art.

Furthermore, the effects of commercially motivated persuasion are frequently deleterious to the recipient, sometimes relatively mildly by encouraging unaffordable expenses or imprudent behavior, sometimes flagrantly by enticing the victim into unhealthy or dangerous activities. The moral dimension of such intentionally negative aesthetic practices is especially devious and vile when extended to subliminal television advertising and advertising directed at children. And this negative aesthetic is yet more vicious in encouraging the abuse of health by presenting the practice of smoking, drinking alcohol, or drug-taking as hip or cool, not only openly through advertising but by using covert persuasive techniques such as television and film drama, employing techniques from a commercial motive that deliberately ignores the effects of such behavior. Such harmful behavior is incited by seductive features designed to evoke tension and promise relief, as well as by being deliberately and openly misleading. The skillful adoption of such practices by political operatives may indeed be considered diabolical. Indeed, commercial, social, and political motives underlie much aesthetic negativity. Using aesthetic techniques in the service of the morally negative describes a long and growing history and widening usage. The complex and subtle interpenetration of the aesthetic and the moral has central importance in charting the domain of the aesthetically negative, and this will become increasingly apparent as we proceed. In the technologically-oriented social world that has developed since the industrial transformations of the dominant technology, the aesthetically negative is represented in the many "quick and dirty" solutions that disregard both their environmental consequences and their human ones in the interests of speed, convenience, and profit. The list here is endless, from the polluting runoff from the hills of slag resulting from mining operations and the utility poles disfiguring and obstructing the streetscape, to roadways that blast a straight course through every geographical configuration in the name of efficiency. In its extreme form the aesthetics of negativity includes actual physical pain that follows the massive abuse of human sensibility. It may appear bizarre to construe all of these as in part aesthetic, but insofar as their impact lies in their perceptual force, they have as much a claim on the aesthetic as a good work of art whose effectiveness likewise resides in its perceptual force.

What we have discovered so far is the need to recognize the facts of aesthetic negativity and also to acknowledge negative situations in which there is an inseparable moral presence. From a traditional standpoint, negative aesthetics would seem to be an oxymoron. How can the values of beauty and art be negative? Yet it is necessary to acknowledge the factual presence of such work, of such events, of such conditions as I have identified. Rather than dismissing them as aberrant or ignoring their aesthetic dimension, it is essential to view these occurrences clearly and to ask what they represent. For we have here a different category, a different condition: aesthetic negativity in the interpenetration of art and the aesthetic throughout the human world. Often, it is art-making that becomes the vehicle of the negative. On a different tack, art and aesthetic experience can have a compensatory role in revealing the morally negative. And conversely with the convergence of moral values and aesthetic ones, the question may be asked whether ethical grounds may sometimes be an appropriate basis for judging art. The unavoidable questions are "Why?" and "How?"

It is recognized increasingly that moral considerations often intrude into the aesthetic situation and that it is difficult to keep them apart. Can we even compare and judge such different kinds of value? Although there have been times when aesthetic and moral values were considered exclusive, each in its own separate place, the fact is that they are perhaps often fused in the same situation and that their inseparability demands recognition and adjudication. Occasions where both aesthetic and moral values are conjoined may take different forms and it will be useful to consider their possible combinations. These include situations where both aesthetic and moral value are positive, situations where both are negative, and situations where one is negative and the other positive. And of course the positive and negative may not be univocal and can occur with different intensities.

The argument that aesthetic values should outweigh moral ones has been familiar since the aestheticism of the late nineteenth century. Other Victorians maintained the converse, that moral considerations must take precedence over aesthetic ones. There may also be cases where both aesthetic and moral values are negative. And there are often times when the moral and the aesthetic cannot be considered separately, when the force of the one lies in the force of the other. It could sometimes be claimed that a social ethic underlies the morally negative. It
will be illuminating to approach these possible relationships but they are only the more salient of the many forms these interrelations may take, and the considerations I shall mention do not exhaust their possibilities.

When both aesthetic and moral factors are in play, does the aesthetic ever take precedence? A positive answer recalls “the aesthetic movement,” where the notion of *l'art pour l'art* was held to override all other considerations: consequences be damned! This view has generally been put aside as unduly romantic in eulogizing aesthetic values at the cost of all else. Given the suffusion of the fine and applied arts throughout modern industrial societies, it would be blindness to deny the profound influence of the arts on the environments of daily life, not only in industrial and environmental design but on behavior and on awareness in general. Indeed, popular culture has become a fashionable academic subject and nearly always exemplifies ways in which artistic and aesthetic interests pervade modern social life. The moral factor cannot be suppressed.

Since art and the aesthetic embody perceptual interests, it might be argued that expanding perceptual possibilities and capacities is important, and that repugnant objects and malevolent actions presented in an artistic context need to be tolerated for their overall benefit in enlarging the scope of our awareness. Isn't expanded consciousness inherently valuable? Sounds once considered noise may become music, dissonance consonance, cacaphony harmony. Writing deemed incoherent or incomprehensible may later be venerated as high literary achievement. Painting called banal or child's play may come to be admired for its skill and subtlety; erotic images may become artistically acceptable. Indeed, can even bad taste harbor good?

Then there are cases where practical advantages seem to compete with aesthetic ones. Does the safety presumably provided by the increased visibility of the bright yellow covers of cables securing utility poles compensate for the aesthetic affront to the landscape from the ubiquitous yellow slashes that line city streets and country roads in many parts of the U.S.? Does the opportunity for advertising on billboards along highways justify co-opting scenic vistas in rural surroundings by turning them into backdrops for huge splashes of commercialization and forcing drivers into becoming an involuntary audience? There is also the
opposite situation where, instead of sacrificing aesthetic values to commercial ones, significant harm may be produced by preserving aesthetic advantages. Does the discomfort in breathing the air or the increase of asthma and lung cancer among city residents outweigh the enhanced color of the sunset or the moonrise viewed through the atmospheric miasma? Moreover, perceptual experience itself can be harmful and even damaging, as in the effects on health from the prevalence of garbage on city streets or exhaust fumes suffusing pedestrian walkways and filtering into dwellings. Just as pleasant, delightful, or beautiful surroundings can shorten medical recovery time, we should recognize the depressing emotional effects of ugly or oppressive environments. Here, too, our terminology must expand beyond aesthetic deprivation to include aesthetic harm and aesthetic damage, as I mentioned earlier. Many kinds of competing values do not directly involve the aesthetic, such as economic, political, social, religious, and legal ones. But this makes it all the more important to recognize the aesthetic consequences they introduce. The rehabilitation of historic districts, for example, can often be justified on aesthetic as well as historical, cultural, and economic grounds.

Considerations of this sort lead to cases in which negative moral factors appear to outweigh positive aesthetic ones. How should we adjudicate situations where grave social ills accompany the production of great art, as in the princely courts of the Renaissance, or those in which an artist’s work is carried on at the expense of the welfare of his or her associates? Do the pyramids vindicate the enormous human cost involved in constructing them or the great medieval cathedrals outweigh the sacrificial poverty of generations? And is the displacement of the residents of poor neighborhoods of urban districts, neighborhoods that may possess a distinctive identity and character, a just sacrifice in order to clear land for clean and orderly redevelopment? Is it better to retain the narrow, twisting pedestrian lanes of medieval towns and old districts in modern cities in order to preserve their history and distinctive ambience or to sacrifice them to commercial interests served by improved automobile accessibility and traffic flow? Obviously no general answer can be given to whether aesthetic or moral values should take precedence, and the complexity of factors makes each case unique. It is essential, however, to recognize the aesthetic values that are involved and to give them significant weight in decision-making.
Conflicting aesthetic and moral values are often obscured by conflicts between economic interests and social justice. Values of freedom and human rights seem to chafe against political concerns for safety and security, but the requirement to choose between them is often misrepresented. Like such false alternatives, moral and aesthetic values are not always in conflict and can, in fact, enhance each other. Comfortable, pleasant, harmonious working conditions are not an unnecessary amenity for the workplace but are actually conducive to greater productivity and social harmony. Humane personnel policies not only embody a social aesthetic in the intrinsic satisfactions of harmonious social relations but moral and economic values, as well, in greater job satisfaction, less inefficiency and wastage, and the social stability that comes from feelings of loyalty. Humane vision and humanitarian policies may be both aesthetic and moral.

Instances where both aesthetic and moral values are negative might seem to be the least controversial. It is unlikely that negative aesthetic concerns would come under discussion if the negative moral judgment had overwhelming force. But this happens more rarely than one might think. Few would object to tearing down slums and replacing them with comfortable, healthful, and attractive housing. But what if this utterly destroyed the cultural fabric of the neighborhood or if the housing proposed were economically segregated high-rises or closely-packed, uniformly designed tract housing? Here the aesthetic and the moral are inseparable. Negative aesthetic values may be the compelling reason for rejecting a practice in which the moral objection may not be strenuous or when the choices that are proposed are not necessary or the only ones. Must inexpensive clothing be ill-cut or decorated with banal print designs? Could not the aesthetically negative be at the same time morally negative? Similarly, bad art involving negative moral values, such as much pornography, by enhancing their visibility, might contribute to re-making the world into one that is more just and more humane. Art may thus have a social or political agenda, and negativity in the interconnection of the aesthetic and the moral could serve a positive function.

But when moral and aesthetic negativity coincide, the instances are more extreme and the issues become more complex. Nazi and Soviet propaganda art forces us to ask further questions about the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, and the complexity of their relations needs to be uncovered. Art that embodies social criticism is not by that fact
negative art. It may actually have a social function in revealing moral negativity, and the more perceptible its revelations, the more aesthetically positive it may become. Marcuse's observation is apposite: "The truth of art lies in this: that the world really is as it appears in the work of art." Can we ignore de Kooning's women or Kiefer's landscapes?

It is crucial to distinguish between art that is itself aesthetically negative and art that exposes negativity. The art in the last of these need not itself be negative; indeed, if it were, it would be ineffectual. One could actually argue that art revealing or portraying moral negativity dominates the aesthetic of our time. In various forms, from expressionism and Dada to Pop Art, both personal anguish and social criticism are dominant. Moral negativity is embedded in Zola's and Steinbeck's novels. It is portrayed in the condemning images that populate the work of artists of the Weimar Republic such as George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, and Otto Dix. It is dramatized vividly in Guernica's visual condemnation of the savagery of the Spanish Civil War. Many artists at work today devote themselves to documenting a century of the greatest atrocities perpetrated thus far in human history. Such art is not itself negative; it is the iniquity it reveals that is. Clearly, the interrelations of the morally and aesthetically negative and positive are manifold. Delineating their presence in particular situations and in careful detail is necessary before just judgment is possible. "Cruelty is not only a moral category but an aesthetic one: it always targets sensibility."

Another mode of negativity, as important as it is often unnoticed, must be included here. This is art or art-like actions that are aesthetically positive and directly embody moral negativity in order to expose social negativity, that is, the presence of the morally negative on a social scale, as in war, oppression, and exploitation. The Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siquieros exhibited this in striking ways. Work of the sort I have just mentioned may evoke a sense of moral negativity but that does not turn them into negative art. Social negativity frequently calls for the honesty of art to expose it. Judged on aesthetic grounds, such art may actually attain its heights on the shoulders of negativity, as, to take an entirely different example, Bach's St. Matthew Passion transfigures the agony of Jesus.
Socially generated violence does not lie outside the purview of the arts. Art works depicting military brutality and massacres have a long history, from the chilling literary descriptions in Biblical accounts of battles and even more graphic descriptions in the *Iliad*, to the bitter harvest of novels and films about modern warfare. Painters have often glorified military actions but they have also exposed their brutality in such unforgettable works as Goya's "The Third of May 1808" and Delacroix's "Massacre at Chios." And poets are no exception. War elegies abound, such as Wilfred Owen's "Spring Offensive," and even massacres are memorialized in John Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piemont" and Y. A. Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar." Dmitri Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony was inspired by this last poem and led him to observe, "People knew about Babi Yar before Yevtushenko's poem, but they were silent. And when they read the poem, the silence was broken. Art destroys silence."

At the same time it is ironic to consider how readily art has been made to fire the engines of war. The arts have been freely employed for this purpose, from marches and songs of battle to the glorification of "victories" in monuments, paintings, photographs, films, and national holidays. Theatrical metaphors, curiously enough, have even become part of the vocabulary for describing military procedures: areas of military action are called war "theaters;" plans of attack, "scenarios;" even the deployment of troops or matériel is termed "staging." The image at work here seems to be that of the theater director devising how best to achieve a desired effect on the audience, while the practices to which these figures refer are, in fact, deliberately planned acts of social, physical, and even environmental violence.

The verbal picture I have painted may not be attractive but it has the moral virtue of truthfulness and the intellectual virtue of truth. It opens a field of investigation in which much more needs to be said. Yet to recognize a need is a precondition to fulfilling it. I hope that the complexity of this portrait does not obscure its principal figures, and that it also reveals a direction forward. Being prepared to recognize and to identify clearly the forms of negativity and their actual presence is a prerequisite to positive change.
ENDNOTES


4 Katya Mandoki, Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Plan of Culture and Social Identities (Ashgate, 2007). “That someone can watch death, pain, or a conflagration as a spectacle and feel pleasure is, unfortunately, a fact. The proof is their repeated display in films and television. This attraction to the tragic in real life explains the crowds that gather at traffic accidents or similar events, the repeated transmission of tragic and violent images in the mass media and even the existence of something as monstrous as snuff. This attraction, perverse or not, amoral or immoral, is aesthetic, embarrassing as it may be.” p.40.

5 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Bks. 4 (1127) and 6 (1141). Moral virtue is concerned with choice while intellectual virtue concerns demonstration.