

Of the monstrous and unnatural: thoughts on truth and beauty

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In competitive vegetable growing, there are two broad disciplines. The first, and oldest, is a race towards perfection, a contest to produce carrots, say, which approach most closely in their colour, flavour, shape, and so on, the ideal carrot. Growers know they are perpetually moving toward a point they cannot reach; all they can offer to the judges, like sinners before God, is the slimness of their failure.

In their imitative striving, growers of this type are busy in a kind of worship for the crop. This implies humility in another way. What they present to an audience is not just a nearly perfect carrot, it is an act of nearly perfect self-concealment. All the grower did – supposedly – was give this vegetable the ideal chance to express itself. As in a landscape garden or a realist novel, the burying of artistry is itself the artistry on show.

The second type of competition is the obverse of the first, and

it is more popular with audiences. This is giant vegetable growing. The carrot prized highest here needs no judging; it's the one that's heavier or longer than the others. And in the hope of producing it, growers take extraordinary pains. Joe Atherton propped soil-filled drainpipes up against his house for fourteen months in order to unearth the nineteen feet of wispy carrot root that hold the current world length record.

What is one to make of a carrot with nineteen feet of root? Its car-rothood is certainly no longer being worshipped. Its having to be a carrot, on the contrary, seems like the very limitation that its grower has attempted to transcend. The task is to reach as far from carrot-sized as it is possible to go. But with a carrot. One looks at giant vegetables like these and thinks about the time, the money, the rituals, the inconvenience, the neurotically gentle carrying that must have been involved. One wonders about the competition rules. Should Joe's two-storey piece of carrot fibre really be considered carrot? It's hard to argue why it shouldn't. Yet at heart one also feels that this is less a carrot one is looking at than a feat of carrot-growing. It is nature made unnatural, hubris unapologized, and not nemesized yet either. Look at the photographs (because there are always photographs), and you will rarely see a giant vegetable without its grower. Ideal ones are almost always shown alone.

Why do people take such trouble to produce enormous ugly vegetables? And why is looking at them popular? Most of us could fash-

ion a little guesswork to explain the human taste in large things. Large men's greater strength, for instance, despite its declining utility, may be the evolutionary root of women continuing to find them attractive. Large carrots make more food, a matter of perpetual importance in all but the last hundred or so years of human history, so perhaps the pleasurable response to seeing one is an echo from our hungry ancestors?

Or perhaps not. Spend time asking children how big or fast or tall the thing you're making ought to be, and you'll grow familiar with their preference for *very*. At times it looks like greed, this maximizing instinct. More often, though, there seems to be an urge at work – for the reckless thrill of scale. This comes, perhaps, from a spirit of adventure spiced with fear, close to Burke's conception of the sublime. The act of making something ever bigger, after all, is to embrace the unknown. It is riskier than imitating real proportions and thus, if all goes well, more fun. As we have seen, excessive size is a form of self-advertisement too. Representing nature, in gardening, or in the arts, is a way to display one's skill and hide oneself; exaggerating it, however, puts the artist in the show. Conspicuous unnaturalness is autobiographical.

As such, it is often seen as sinful, too. To consume a work of art is to submit oneself to manipulation by the artist. It is an act of trust performed by the audience, expecting the experience to be worth it. Disliking art, for this reason, is almost always a variety of disapprov-

ing of it. And if the artist commandeers his or her audience's trust for his or her own low ends – to make money, to draw attention – then this constitutes a violation (if detected). This puts the artist in a corner, though. Audiences want art that pleases them, of course, but they recoil from the idea of it being made specifically *in order to*. That would be a commercial relationship, and evidence of other motives. Give me what I want by accident: that is their paradoxical request.

The myth that genius correlates with madness is one way to fulfill it. So is the Romantic notion that great art should be a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Madmen, and those driven by uncontrollable emotions, it is presumed, are above being interested in fame or money. A work being dull, long, opaque, recondite, incomprehensible or otherwise no fun implies the same honourable attitude. The artist gets credit if they die, as well, because our anxiety about them benefiting from our trust dies with them.

If none of these strategies will do, then humility – or an effective semblance of it – is the best alternative. Realist authors and figurative artists, who focus our attention on their subject rather than themselves, are easier to trust. (In Lucien Freud's superb mock-humble phrase, the artist in his work should be visible "no more than God in nature.") If the artist must be seen, however, it is good to come equipped with moral purpose, implying pure intentions. Evidence of hard work: that's good too. It helps us feel that our attention

has been earned.

Apart from its thirteen-and-three-quarter billion years of practice, this is what makes nature the supreme artist: it has no motives to suspect. In its blank expression we see innocence, and mistake it for virtue. Unnaturalness, by contrast, can only bring corruption. The bias stains our language. So many of our ways to say *immoral* – perverted, deviant, debauched, degenerate – begin as opposites to nature’s way.

(Two points of peripheral interest here. First: giant vegetables should not be smeared with intensive farming’s sins. The world’s heaviest carrot, which weighed 8.61kg, was grown organically by John Evans in Alaska. Second: one of humanity’s most venerated products – wine – does naturally occur. The dusty bloom on dark grapes contains yeasts which will just about ferment the juice inside should, let’s say, a falling tree or passing aurochs crush them. Thriving grapes do not make the best vintages, however. Ample sun and water causes them to grow large, meaning that the ratio of juice to skin becomes too high to produce a drink of any character. “*Il faut que la vigne souffre,*” the great vigneronns say, to tourists. Read an intention into this, in other words, and nature seems to be instructing everyone to drink bad wine.)

Being the disputed borderland between nature and humanity, the body has become a common site for moral skirmishes. An interesting one arises from the choice of many women, to the horror of many

others, to enlarge their breasts. The practice itself shouldn’t be surprising. Along with fruit and vegetables, breasts are among the most frequently appraised things on earth. (Penises, by comparison, remain resolutely functional, having never been much valued for display.) And larger than average breasts, like tall men, are ever popular, as any glance at the productions of the breast-showing industry will tell you. Some precariously speculate that this preference has its origins in maternal feeding, but I see no reason to look beyond the unsophisticated syllogism that, if people like breasts, and people like big things, then people like big breasts.

Until recently, however, only nature could produce them. Before augmentation surgery became widely available, the most popular Page 3 girls, such as Maria Whitaker, Kathy Lloyd, or Samantha Fox, were simply women with naturally large breasts and a transparent willingness to bare them. It was even common practice in the *Sun*, as it still is on the paper’s website, to publish a model’s bust measurements beside her photograph, suggesting that the size of her breasts was in itself of such importance to the people looking at them that they needed their arousal justified statistically.

In the 1990s, when cosmetic enhancement at last became affordable, this changed. The two most successful Page 3 girls of that era, Melinda Messenger and Katie Price, both had unnatural breasts (although Price modelled for the paper before her first operation). Indeed, like Anna Nicole Smith and Pamela Anderson in the US (and

Lolo Ferrari on a planet of her own), they were famous for it.

Price first appeared topless in the *Sun* in 1996, *Messenger* in 1997. Yet in July of that year, 82 percent of *Sun* readers, despite their clear enthusiasm for both women, voted to exclude models with enhanced breasts from the page. The apparently self-defeating nature of this decision is revealing. What the *Sun* had offered was a choice between knowing that all the breasts on Page 3 would be natural, and the opportunity to ogle a greater range of them. Yet with that range would come uncertainty. Even authentic breasts, once shadowed with suspicion, will start to conjure disarming thoughts of surgery. A possibly augmented Page 3 girl, though she might only be eighteen, ceases to be a passive specimen and becomes tainted with ambition. At once, it is the viewer who must worry if he is being exploited. To be blunt, Page 3's readers decided that it was an ideal-carrot show, not a giant one.

Yet Page 3 is not life. Fourteen years later, the popularity of breast augmentation among the general public is still growing annually. In the UK, the procedure was carried out 9,430 times in 2010, a 10 percent increase on 2009. (Compare this with the second-most common cosmetic enhancement, eyelid surgery, which was performed just 5,779 times despite costing roughly half as much.) Why is this still happening, if men prefer real breasts? Are modern implants more convincing? Maybe. But even if they are, women surely must expect their friends to notice the difference. Perhaps that is the point,

though? They are supposed to notice. As Price recognized, authenticity is unimportant for those who live outside the *Sun*'s judging tent. For her, indeed, it would have been a hindrance.

Her career is instructive. Price is famous for breasts she did not grow and books she did not write, as well as for the public failure of her many relationships; she has also experienced real misfortune. Yet in her hands, a lack of talent and personal misfortune become useful tools. If success can visit even the benighted Price, her story seems to teach us, then it is available to everyone. She lives the high life not with gracious otherness, like most big stars, but with incongruous vulgarity, as if on her fans' behalf. Her latest venture, *Katie* magazine, with its revelations that "I like to clean and sweep the kitchen after cooking" and "I hate having my car's petrol warning light on," shares details of her life in a manner that exceeds frank, and approaches comprehensive. Having started out as a sex object for men, she has steered her career towards something far more lucrative and long-lasting. Now she is a symbol to women of how far the sex-object game, well played, can take you.

It was the flamboyant unnaturalness of Price's breasts, in short – their flaunted debt to surgery – that made her a multi-millionaire. The honest alteration of her body to achieve success assures us that her mind remains unchanged by it. She is an ambassador for the common woman in a glamorous world, and she got there using surgery that is available to everyone. Led partly by her example, many

women now regard large and not necessarily convincing breasts as a symbol of self-advancement, albeit towards a dubious goal. Most men see little here worth quibbling with. No doubt some love the effect, at least in preference to the unenhanced alternatives.

Even manufactured goods may possess a naturalness that invites perversion. When an object has been shaped to do a job, rather than for kicks, it effectively absents designer from design. It is the ordained shape of hands and wine bottles that we take to be the co-authors of our corkscrew, not Archimedes. There are people creating these objects – that is obvious – but their role, in letting function dictate form, is merely to approach perfection like an ideal carrot grower. And as with other kinds of Realism, this approach is apt to suppress some important things.

Nothing shows us this more clearly than the car. Were safety regulations not so stringent, the price of petrol not so high, and family life not so terribly demanding, there might be scope for modern cars to resemble the fantastical machines we make as children, or the ones we choose to watch in films and video games. In order to be safe, reliable and cheap, however, the cars that people actually drive have converged towards a drably uniform consensus. They give us what we need, with at best a hint of what we want.

Monster trucks, however: these are cars with breast enhancements. To look at one is immediately to understand the story of its creation: someone (often said to be Bob Chandler, in 1975) took a

conventional pick-up truck, a more exotic sight in Europe than it is America, and augmented its wheels monstrously. Augmented them not sensibly, for a reason, but recklessly, without one. Not then or since has any useful purpose been discovered for a truck with ludicrously outsized wheels. In this sense, even the sleekest Ferrari is less a work of art than Chandler's Bigfoot, the most famous monster truck of all.

Today, most monster trucks are made from scratch, yet they still carry that unnaturalness in their design, the disproportion between wheels and body that reminds the audience of the machine's flippant origins. (The word "monster" itself acknowledges this, with its senses of "abnormal" and "unnatural.") Machines like these are built – we all know this without even having to consider the matter – because a truck with giant bouncy wheels is something more than half the world would like to play with. The audience at a monster truck rally has thus been given what it wants, but not by accident at all. The machines they watch are there because they willed it.

The audience itself, in other words, has become the artist. Bigfoot is a consensual folly, created by Chandler and then sustained by corporate sponsors at the whim of an adoring public. They were not consulted, but they did not need to be. It is the invisible hand of the market that has done the sculpting. In this sense, monster trucks are modern *acheiropoieta*, icons made miraculously (literally "without hands").

Yet monster trucks are also made to move. So what does the audience have them do? They crush conventional cars. To watch a monster truck show is to see one's dreams of what a vehicle could be obliterate the tedious reality of what it is. Their noisy orchestrated smash-ups are a release from the ignominy of survival. Survival, after all, is what the natural world is stuck with; hubris and absurdity are humanity's alone. Drunk on their own mad grandeur, triumphantly forgetting their irrelevance, *Hooray for us*, they say. *Hooray for human beings!*

Leo Benedictus's most recent book is The Afterparty, a novel