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ORBIT AROUND A VOID

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting by Sianne Ngai. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 333; 44 halftones, 4 line illustrations. \$20.50 paper.

*"Now I'm happy for a time and interested": a state of being "interested," a disposition to prefer one thing to another, replaces definite interests and consistent preferences He's shopping without a list."*¹

Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*, 1927–40) led readers into the dream underside of everyday life in the heyday of bourgeois capitalism. Benjamin's high modernist notebook assumes both a comfort with formal gesture and the antisocial solitude of the European high literary reader of the early twentieth century, a person comfortable with the indirection of posited and disconnected things at the level of the text. Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* similarly plunges her reader into the dream underside of everyday life in our heyday of global capitalism, but hers is a plain style that feels personal, comfortable, and fluid—almost chatty. True to her training with Stanley Cavell, her style is at home in the ordinary, not wandering as the *flâneur* in the extraordinary. Hers is an approachable, infectious book, written around a set of tightly argued theses. Yet, *Our Aesthetic Categories* is an heir-ess of the *Arcades Project*.

Like Ngai, Benjamin thought we can unlock the meaning of quotidian things from the perspective of the tensions generated in them through their relation to the formal causes of capitalism. It may seem

strange to invoke the Aristotelian notion of formal cause to explain Benjamin's work, but one of his core assumptions is that the dynamics of capitalism literally form the way things appear in our world, straight down to their contradictions—and to the utopian possibility of overturning them. The mass-manufactured angel that even a poor wretch could buy under the translucent glass of an arcade in the 8th arrondissement grants a small piece of forgetting to end the long day of work and to assuage the children who sense their parents' anxiety over the next rent due. This forgetting is also a reminder of the higher order of noncalculative things once solid, now melting into air. Yet the manufactured quality of the trinket reduces its dreams to clichés. Stamped on the product is the formal quality of capitalism: exhausting what it can use, spreading its wares to all, dividing and maintaining class distinctions, reducing the order of what is in itself good, and deadening ideals through the appearance of their alienation from us.² Benjamin's brilliance is to teach a way of experiencing everyday objects that includes their wider productive context, social relations and all.

Ngai's thesis is that our *forms of judgment* similarly betray the formal causes of capitalism in our current round of global restructuring. She thinks our minds are made up, too. Yet, just as Benjamin

liberates us by showing us how to read objects, so Ngai might show us the direction to liberate ourselves by helping us read our judgments. Hers is a fascinating combination of critical theory with Cavell's focus on Kantian aesthetics, and, although she does not mention Hannah Arendt, her approach would be worthy of Arendt's work from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) on. Arendt ended her life working on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (*Critik der Urtheilskraft*, 1790), wanting to understand—after Adolf Eichmann's banal evil—how people keep alive a sense of meaning in the absence of clear rules to guide us. Ngai argues that in today's round of capitalist restructuring—a period stretching roughly from the onset of post-Fordism to today, but whose aesthetic judgments were forming from the end of the Second World War on—three forms of aesthetic judgment betray the formal contradictions of being a subject in capitalism. These three forms help us grasp where and how we are. Yet they are all so minor or paradoxical as to be aliens to the high tradition of post-Kantian aesthetics with its emphasis on the beautiful and the sublime. They are alien to Kant's inheritors in twentieth-century art criticism at the time of high American modernism—for example, surrounding the New York School and Clement Greenberg. Nonetheless, not only

do these minor judgments reveal our present situation, but they contain the possibility of being radicalized in ways that can liberate subjects within the very conditions of our alienation.³ The three forms of judgment are the *cute*, the *interesting*, and the *zany*. By showing how we have shifted from major to minor in common sensibilities, they help us consider how we have been thrown back on ourselves and focus the need for a dialectical counter throw.

Cute, Interesting, Zany

Cute

According to Ngai, to think that something is *cute* is to make an aesthetic judgment that displays the contradictory nature of *commodification* in contemporary capitalism. Things taken to be cute cover over our social disconnection from each other in a highly competitive and individualized world through the sentimental promise of affection and—at the same time—allow us to retain a surplus of power over the cute object. That gives us a way to feel the potential of dominating something without thinking that we are being dominating. In other words, to judge that something is cute is both to push away that we have become objects in capitalism, recalling for an instant the warmth of affection, and to have the illusion

of being potentially powerful over things when we are often actually at their mercy. Taking something as cute displays a caste of mind that has internalized the contradictory nature of commodities in contemporary capitalism: these objects matter to the market more than we do, but, in order to extract value from people, they must appear helpless and affectionate, recalling a more humanized way of life while allowing us to feel that we could participate in dominating, that we are agents rather than victims.

Interesting

To Ngai, to claim that something is *interesting* is to insert oneself into the logic of *circulation*.⁴ Marking something as interesting makes discourse itself circulate, mirroring the underlying flux of capitalist circulation, a world where everything is sought as a potential source of value and where “everything solid melts into air” in a general mixing of meanings around the globe. The contradiction in the mentality of the interesting is found in the possibility that whatever is interesting could be *merely* interesting—that is, not really interesting at all. With the aesthetic category of the interesting, Ngai identifies the opportunism of subjects in scoring value or being able to walk away from their failure to attract interest. Moreover, she locates the

ambivalence and precariousness of the oscillation between value and valuelessness, the risk of collapse in value that characterizes the speedily circulating logic of capitalism with its urgent opportunism and global shuffling. The mindedness of those who rely on the interesting is an opportunistic form of defensiveness, allowing them to flicker around a potentially attractive site of meaning only to withdraw quickly if it fails to attract, like a snake smelling with its tongue.

Zany

Whereas the cute displays a mind mirroring the contradictions of commodification and the interesting displays a mind mirroring the opportunism of valuing that accelerates the circulation of value-seeking around the globe, to call something *zany* is to enter into the contradictions of contemporary capitalist *labor*, or what Ngai calls “performance.” According to Ngai, objects and people can be cute or interesting, but only people can be *zany*. Zaniness is a judgment about agency. When we find, for example, Lucy from *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) *zany*, we recognize in her both the hyperbolic pressure to perform at an absurdly high level of productivity or effectiveness and the possibility that her life is an imminent train wreck, that her

hyperbolic activity is potentially self-destructive. Finding her over the top—insanely productive and bad news—one might hold her at bay, isolate her, by calling her *zany*. Zaniness is a stigmatizing judgment. What it allows a subject to do is both to recognize the hyperbolic pressures to perform even against one’s comfort zone and to give oneself an out around those whose efforts make their lives implode—not an uncommon class of people in the labor force (academics not excluded). As with the cute and the interesting, the mentality of those who judge others *zany* displays a defensiveness around capitalism’s formal contradictions. Here lives the aesthetics of the defended.

Ngai’s work offers a significant advance in the tradition of Benjamin, because it explores the way mind mirrors world. To examine the utopian contradictions of the object, as Benjamin did, is not to delineate how the mind mirrors the object-world. Ngai begins to do that through her analysis of forms of judgment. And more than simply mirroring the object, her account accommodates some of the most dominant forms of the entire economy: commodification, valuing (or value liquidity), and labor.

Flow of the Chapters

Ngai's introduction lays out a clearly delineated thesis, spends some time defining her three aesthetic categories, and locates her work within both the tradition of postmodern cultural criticism and the lineage of Cavellian explorations of judgment. As I've already said, I find that her work—while clearly drawing on what she learned from Cavell about Kant's account of judgment—is actually better suited to Arendt.

Each of the three main chapters of Ngai's book illuminates in depth one of her aesthetic categories. Her first chapter on the cute examines the concept and its history through a hilarious argument by which she shows how the avant-garde is indebted to the cute. Ranging from everyday children's toys (with pictures) to the history of dolls in the late nineteenth century to Takashi Murakami's DOB figures that explode into violence, Ngai explores the claims about the cute that I rehearsed earlier with running dialogue ranging from J. L. Austin to Theodor Adorno, Karl Schlegel, and Kant to Karl Marx, Fredric Jameson, and Benjamin to Gertrude Stein, Robert Creeley, and William Carlos Williams. By interpreting disparate cultural phenomena, she shows that, indeed, the judgment that something is cute appears to mirror some important and contradictory formal

characteristics of life-with-commodities in contemporary capitalism. This interpretation does not exclude that there are other possible ways of interpreting what's under question, but shows the usefulness of the interpretation to helping us navigate our form of life.

A similar pattern shapes her last two chapters on the merely interesting and on zaniness. The central focus of her chapter on the interesting is an extended discussion of the rise of conceptual art in the late 1960s. And the central focus of her chapter on the zany is the depiction of over-the-top comedic characters in contemporary mass media—from Lucille Ball in the still rerunning *I Love Lucy* or Richard Pryor's character in *The Toy* (1982) to Jim Carrey's *The Cable Guy* (1996) or Crazy Eddie. As a setup, too, Ngai gives an abbreviated genealogy of the *zanni*, the character from *comedia dell'arte* that gave us the idea of zaniness. Along the way, we are treated to a circus of philosophers, literary critics, poets, artists, and social theorists. Sometimes, the parade is merely interesting; more often, it borders on being zany, but mainly it is fascinating.

The book concludes with an afterword, not a conclusion, since Ngai's chapters have adequately shown her introductory theses to be plausible and effective. Here, Ngai takes stock of aesthetic theory today and argues that contemporary aesthetic *experience* is not

barren—as those who remain wedded to the centrality of the beautiful and the sublime might think—but rather that aesthetic *theory* is. Ngai wants to diversify aesthetic theory through marginal and actual categories of everyday judgment. Although she doesn't call it such, this is inching toward Georg Hegel after Kant, toward the analysis of a concrete community and its intertwined, axiological forms. Good stuff.

Other Uses of the Aesthetic

Of course, Ngai's neo-Kantian work is not the only kind of work in aesthetics today. Ngai seems unaware of a number of cogent critiques of the entire notion of the *aesthetic*, whether Karsten Harries's historical deconstruction of *aesthesis* in *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1998) or the most conceptually compelling work I've encountered on the meaning of art, Lauren Tillinghast's work, found in her dissertation "The Thought of Art" (2000) and in a few select essays she wrote before becoming a philosophical counselor. Tillinghast argues, convincingly, that to call something "art" invokes a logical category similar to the kind of "gear switch" Michael Thompson explores in relation to life, action, and practice.⁵ This form of judgment is grounded in the norms

of making, not an *experience*. Consequently, to approach objects through the analysis of forms of experience is not to approach art. It's to do something else—social-economic critique, in Ngai's case.

Still, Ngai's approach is welcome because of how it helps us understand ourselves in our social and economic contradictions. It also helps us tarry with the negative. Ngai's aesthetics has the merit of *acknowledging*—to use Cavell's word—the dense conflict in commonly shared forms of mind and life and in trying to understand, very much as Arendt did, under what conditions people might be able to have independent minds keyed to common life and its main, social challenges. In this way, Ngai has done work to help us further understand the banality of evil, a world where suffering is "interesting" and masochism is "cute," where pathetic self-destruction is "zany."

Avoiding Commitment

My only substantial criticism is this: in examining the forms of mindedness that mirror the economy of contemporary capitalism, Ngai neglects the role of moral *subjectivity*. Ngai draws us a compelling portrait of contemporary consciousness while missing the extent to which she has also shown

us a particular kind of desperate subject, moreover, a subject who, if she were to be accountable to her moral relationships, might approach the experiences of what she calls “cute,” “interesting,” or “zany” differently. She might, for instance, see these aesthetic judgments as moments on the way to reconnecting with what is *innocent* (and so to be protected), *absorbing* (so to be pursued regardless of the bored chatter around one), and *outraging* (and so to be taken as a cause of human dignity worth standing for). In effect, Ngai’s categories hold *only if* the subject using them is herself uncommitted to moral experience. This is a form of what Bernard Williams called “amoralism.” Ngai assumes “amoral” subjects.⁶ Isn’t that begging the question?

Still, as a way to show us the amorality of capitalism, I believe that Ngai is right to begin with common forms of judgment that reveal fundamentally amoral or desperate subjects—subjects who have lost their grip on what matters in life. But she should not stop there. The omission of Kierkegaard from her discussion of the interesting in chapter 2 is perhaps the only major scholarly oversight of her book. It is an *interesting* one because, if she were to have discussed Kierkegaard’s extremely thorough engagement with Schlegel and the Athenaeum circle, she would have had to modify the

core of her book, which presents, so to speak, the negative—that is, our world’s formation of our judgment as a lack, an orbit around a void that keeps us avoiding what we lack. But as Kierkegaard explored so well in *Either/Or* (1843), *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), the ironic form of the judgment of the interesting is contained not in the quicksilver nature of its oscillation between boredom and fascination, but in the way it both covers and yet delivers over the capacity of each of us to develop moral conviction—that is, to become accountable and real, not fake or sold-out, people.

Ngai should return to the core of the subject, in Charles Larmore’s sense,⁷ a self capable of commitment, of living for what she finds valuable. Here is idealism, in the moral sense. A being who comes to recall the helplessness and affectionateness of living beings even through contact with representations in inert things *and who is committed to the values of help and affection* will see in the cute a distorted or semiserious recollection of the innocent, *who deserve protection from abuse*. Someone who sees the interest in something *and who is committed to truth* (to getting to the bottom of *why* something is interesting) will see in the merely interesting an object of fascination to be pursued, deeper and deeper so long as it reveals, until she is absorbed

in really understanding it.⁸ And the agent who witnesses the overwrought efforts of someone trying to perform in capitalism *and who is committed to human agency* will see in that sight not zany comedy but potential tragedy. She will instinctively move toward action, challenging the dominance of economic valuation and reasoning where agents become parodies of themselves running after productivity instead of having the opportunity to flourish.⁹

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NOTES

1. Michael Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55–56. Clune is discussing Frank O'Hara's "Personal Poem" (1964).
2. Aristotle would have said that the form of the angel—for instance, that worked into the iron press—was the formal cause of the material thing. Expanding the thing's phenomenality to include its orbit of meaning, the way it makes meaning appear in its context, and so what context it carries with it, is to look toward Martin Heidegger's transposition of Aristotle's formal cause in Heidegger's understanding of a thing: the constellation of a zone through which phenomena arise. Here, the zone is one of capitalist production and reproduction. *Phenomena* arise shaped by the contradictions of capitalism, carrying their form.
3. I use "alienation" in a different sense than Karl Marx did. I consider it a possible feature of the subject's relation to what she values, not simply a laborer's relation to the objects of his labor.
4. To be precise, she claims the interesting concerns the circulation of *information*. Hence, she means to pick up this category as mirroring the information economy that has formed contemporary capitalism, "postmodernism," and global restructuring according to Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000). However, I think her claim can be broadened, as she sometimes speaks, to take in circulation generally. It is the circulation of value—itsself the primary kind of information—that matters in capitalism.
5. Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Lauren Tillinghast, "The Thought of Art" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000); and Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
6. Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Canto Classics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3–13. In my terminology, she assumes subjects without *ethics*, with the consequence that these subjects are then likely to be morally ambivalent. The domain of the moral is the domain of interpersonal responsibility.

The ethical is broader, taking in all that is of value in terms of a good life.

7. Charles Larmore, *The Practices of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
8. In what is one of her most interesting minor arguments that I have not gone into here, Ngai argues that the flip side of the merely interesting is the invitation to others to come join one in discussion about what is interesting. This is the moment when she rearticulates, as a process, the *sensus communis* of Kant. The argument is ingenious on a number of levels, not the least in the way it notices the “purposive purposelessness” of aesthetic judgment in Kant and aligns it with the “*inter-esse*” (being

driven between things) of discussion, rather than with “dis-interest,” which Kant sticks to when conceptualizing the aesthetic mind. Ngai could write a short book—a long essay—examining just this tension in Kant and letting it develop in her own terms, probably away from Kant toward Hegel or Arendt. Here would be the subject standing in the *locus* of *ethos* giving sense and meaning to the world, to echo the wording of Anne-Christine Hubbard.

9. To be fair to Ngai, she said in e-mail correspondence that my reading of what is unsaid in her book both coheres with what she would want to explore further and is something toward which she is initially disposed.