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## Our Aesthetic Categories

SIANNE NGAI

**T**HE RECENT TURN TO AESTHETICS IN LITERARY STUDIES HAS BEEN embraced by some of its advocates as a polemical riposte to critique: a practice increasingly attacked from multiple directions but here specifically for doing artworks the disservice of reducing them to encryptions of history or ideology. But while the new or revived focus on pleasure (and, to a much lesser extent, displeasure)<sup>1</sup> has been vaunted for the way in which it seems to circumvent the reduction of artworks to historical or ideological concepts, our aesthetic experience is always mediated by a finite if constantly rotating repertoire of aesthetic categories. Any literary or cultural criticism purportedly engaged with aesthetics needs to pay attention to these categories, which are by definition conceptual as well as affective and tied to historically specific forms of communication and collective life. But how does one read an aesthetic category? What kind of object is it, and what methodological difficulties and satisfactions does its analysis pose?

The book I am working on makes a simple if no doubt contentious argument about the zany, interesting, and cute: that this quotidian triad of aesthetic categories, for all their marginality to historical accounts of postmodernism as well as to canonical aesthetic theory, is the one in our cultural repertoire best suited for grasping how the concept of “aesthetic” has been transformed by the performance-driven, information-saturated and networked, hypercommodified world of late capitalism. This is because the interesting, cute, and zany index—and are thus each in a historically concrete way about—capitalism’s most socially binding processes: production, in the case of the zany (an aesthetic about performance as not just artful play but also affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (a serial, recursive aesthetic of informational relays and communica-

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tive exchange); and consumption, in the case of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities). As sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which subjects work, communicate, and consume (and as the cute and zany in particular show, in ways directly mediated by gender and class), the domestic and commodity-oriented aesthetic of cuteness, the informational and discursive aesthetic of the merely interesting, and the occupational and cultural performance aesthetic of zaniness help get at some of the most basic dynamics underlying life in Western industrial societies. No other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to these everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way.

It is thus no surprise that the zany, cute, and interesting are omnipresent not just on television and across the Web but also in the postwar literature anthology, where one is likely to encounter an example of each style in rapid succession, from the vertiginous zaniness of Thomas Pynchon to the poet Matthea Harvey's aggressively cute tributes to objects like the bathtub and sugarbowl to the merely interesting serial texts of the conceptual writer Robert Fitterman. But while the uniquely intimate relation of these aesthetic categories to production, circulation, and consumption provides the best explanation for their pervasiveness, the zany, cute, and interesting are important for the study of contemporary culture not simply because they index economic processes but also because they provide traction to a series of long-standing problems in aesthetic theory that continue to inform the production, dissemination, and reception of literature and art in the present. These problems include the close relation between the form of the artwork and the form of the commodity; the ambiguous state of the avant-garde, which in zombie fashion persists even

as its "disappearance or impossibility" is regarded as one of postmodernism's constitutive features; the relevance of aesthetic to critical or other nonaesthetic judgments aimed at producing knowledge (or how one is permitted to link judgments based on subjective feelings of pleasure or displeasure to ones with claims to objective truth); the relation between artistic production and labor in a world where immaterial labor is increasingly aestheticized; and the "parergonal" relation between art and theoretical discourse, all the more pressured with the rise of an institutional culture of museums and curricula that has led art and criticism to internalize each other in historically unprecedented ways.<sup>2</sup> While central to some of the most important texts of modern aesthetic theory, these problems have also remained fundamental to contemporary literary practice in ways directly reflected by the three aesthetic categories in my study.

Prompting us to think across our entire system of fine arts, the zany, cute, and interesting are also linked to major representational modes—comedy, in the case of zaniness; romance, in the case of cuteness; realism, in the case of the interesting—as well as to specific forms, genres, and media. As I have argued elsewhere ("Cuteness"), it is easy to see how the cute becomes a particular problem for twentieth-century poetry, a genre associated commonly (if not always correctly) with small texts focused on domestic objects. Reflecting what Hannah Arendt describes as the "modern enchantment with 'small things' . . . preached by early twentieth-century poetry in almost all European tongues," the "*petite bonheur*" of cuteness, or the "art of being happy . . . between dog and cat and flowerpot," is thus part of the expansion of the charmingly "irrelevant," which she links to the decay of a genuinely public culture: "What the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially

private character” (52). Since cute things evoke in us a desire to protect them, poetry might be considered cute in another problematic sense. Twentieth-century poetry’s smallness in comparison with novels and films, where the proportion of quotable unit—sentence or paragraph, frame or shot sequence—to the work as a whole is substantially lower, has made it excessively protected by copyright and thus, in a certain economic sense, protected from criticism: one literally has to pay in order to comment. Susan Stewart’s wry caveat in the preface and acknowledgments to *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (“Like anyone who writes on poetic forms, I have been restricted . . . by the availability of permissions for reproduction” [ix]) will be familiar to any critic who has tried to write on the genre, which copyright laws have indirectly defined as unusually tender or vulnerable speech. Poetry’s complicated and ambivalent relation to an aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and nonconsequential becomes all the more problematic in the case of the avant-garde, which has historically defined itself in opposition to everything for which cuteness stands. Yet in examples ranging from Gertrude Stein’s homage to lesbian domesticity in *Tender Buttons* to William Carlos Williams’s spare objectivist poems about ordinary household objects to Harryette Mullen’s exploration of fashion and groceries in *Trimmings* and *S\*perm\*rk\*t*, cuteness remarkably gives us leverage not just on the genre of poetry but also on two problems central to modern aesthetic theory: the ambiguous status of the contemporary avant-garde and the closeness between the artwork and the commodity. As Walter Benjamin writes, “If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle” (55; emphasis added).

If the cute is thus warm and fuzzy, the poetics of the merely interesting is cool, both in

the sense of the ironic detachment attributed to *das Interessante*, a style of eclectic novelty first explicitly theorized by Friedrich Schlegel and the German Romantic ironists as part of a larger agenda calling for art to become more reflective or philosophical (see Wheeler), and in the technocratic, informatic sense Alan Liu conveys in his book on postmodern knowledge work. And the zany, for its part, is hot: hot under the collar, hot and bothered, hot to trot. Pointing to the intensely embodied affects and desires of an agent compelled to move, hustle, and perform in the presence of others, these idioms underscore that the zany is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire with a special relation to affective or physical effort and is thus an aesthetic whose dynamics are most sharply brought out in performance: dance, theater, happenings, television, film. It is because the zany, interesting, and cute are respectively about performance, information or media, and domestic life—and more specifically about the ambiguous status of performance between labor and play, the ceaseless relaying of artworks through the medium of discourse, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to our household commodities—that the deepest content of these aesthetic categories concerns the socially binding processes of production, circulation, and consumption. And it is because the zany, interesting, and cute are about production, circulation, and consumption that they are so important, as a triad, to the genealogy of the postmodern and to our aesthetic theory.

Yet the interesting, cute, and zany are also undeniably trivial. Indeed, in contrast to the powerful moral and political resonances of the beautiful and sublime, each of the aesthetic categories in this triad revolves around a specific type of inconsequentiality: the low affect that accompanies the perception of minor differences against a backdrop of the generic, in the case of the interesting; physical smallness and vulnerability, in the case of the cute; and the flailing helplessness of impotent rage,

in the case of the zany. Because of a contradictory mixture of affects underscoring their politically ambivalent nature—for the zany, fun and unfun; for the interesting, interest and boredom; and for the cute, tenderness and aggression—we might say that the cute, interesting, and zany have a certain “mereness” at their cores. Yet this triviality is not itself trivial; it explains why these aesthetic categories are suited for helping us think more deeply about the shifting meanings of the aesthetic, art, and even culture in our time, a period in which, with the integration of “aesthetic production . . . into commodity production generally,” as Fredric Jameson notes, the “frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (4). In addition to posing unprecedented challenges for our understanding of the new and avant-garde, this increasing interpenetration of economy and culture has wrought two significant changes for the concept of art as such, Jameson notes: the weakening of art’s capacity to serve as an image of nonalienated labor (which it has arguably done since the eighteenth century) and the loss of art’s more specifically modernist, twentieth-century mission of producing perceptual shock (146–47, 121–22). With the waning of these older vocations for art and aesthetic experience, minor aesthetic categories crop up everywhere, testifying in their ubiquity to how aesthetic experience, radically generalized in an age of design and advertising, becomes less rarefied but also less intense. The romance of cuteness, the comedy of zaniness, and the realist and information-oriented aesthetic of the interesting are thus important to autonomous art’s attempts to reflect on the smoothness of its integration in mass culture. What better way to get traction on art’s diminishing role as the privileged locus for modern aesthetic experience than an aesthetic category of and

about inconsequentiality? As styles about our complex and often conflicted affective relations to commodities, labor, and media or communicative systems, the cute, zany, and interesting are also suited for helping us figure out what the discourse of aesthetics might mean or become in the wake of aesthetic idealization—when reverence for the aesthetic as such, though still advocated by many, no longer seems self-evidently desirable or even defining of what an aesthetic attitude is.

To be sure, the zany, cute, and interesting are not exclusive to the late twentieth or the twenty-first century. Deriving from the character of the *zanni*, an itinerant servant in *commedia dell’arte* who is modeled after peasants seeking temporary work in Venetian households, zaniness has a history that stretches back to the sixteenth-century division of labor and the theater and marketplace culture of what is now Italy (Henke 23). Two hundred years or so later, Schlegel and the German Romantic ironists codified the interesting as *das Interessante*, a modern style of literature opposed to the beautiful art of the Greeks (*die schöne Poesie*). Coinciding thus with the professionalization of literary criticism in the eighteenth century, in a newly emergent bourgeois public sphere made possible by the rise of a literary marketplace and the expanded circulation of printed matter (which is to say, the very conditions that gave rise to aesthetics), the interesting appears to be the one aesthetic category in our contemporary repertoire invented expressly by and for literary critics<sup>3</sup>—hence its continued popularity in this circle today. Cute, finally, is the youngest of the triad, emerging as a term of evaluation and a formally recognizable style in the nascent mass culture of the industrial nineteenth-century United States and so with the ideological consolidation of the middle-class home as a female space organized around consumption.

While the zany, cute, and interesting have separate if overlapping histories, all three are



modern, emerging in tandem with or against the development of markets, the rise of civil society, economic competition, and an increasingly specialized division of labor. These aesthetic categories also cut across modernism and postmodernism, considered here less as distinct episodes in the history of culture than as diverging responses to a single process of modernization involving “new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications) and consumption (the rise of mass markets and advertising)” (Harvey 23). From the *zanni*-ness of commedia to the zany sitcom of Lucille Ball, or from Henry James’s championing of “interesting” as the only aesthetic standard appropriate for evaluating the modern novel (191) to the attempt to marry art and information in the “merely interesting” conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, the zany, interesting, and cute have been present in modern culture—across mass culture and high art—for several centuries. But only in the late twentieth century, I would argue, did these categories become useful for thinking about the meaning and function of aesthetic experience in general, and perhaps in a way that accounts for their pervasiveness across media, movements, and genres.

But what does it mean to work on aesthetic categories in the first place—rather than on more ontologically stable objects like authors, genres, or movements—to “reconstruct a feeling for what is peculiar and specific, original and historic, in the present” (Jameson 301)? Why choose entities of such ambience and scale—and thus inherent vulnerability to historical and conceptual imprecision—as a site of analytic engagement with contemporary culture?

For me it is crucial to approach aesthetic categories as rhetorical judgments and as objective styles: *cute* as a verbal evaluation compelled by subjective feelings called up by objects in a certain context and cuteness as a

sensuous quality attributed to objects themselves. As sites where ways of speaking or aspects of human intersubjectivity routinely intersect with qualities or aspects of the thing world, aesthetic categories are thus challengingly double-sided in more ways than one: objective and subjective, descriptive and evaluative, conceptual and sensuous. Aesthetic categories like the ones in my study are not for all this in the least bit abstruse but part of the daily texture of social life: central at once to our vocabulary for sharing and confirming our aesthetic experiences with others (where *interesting* is notoriously pervasive) and to postmodern culture in general (where cuteness and zaniness surround us from all directions). Yet with notable exceptions, such as Daniel Harris’s landmark work on the styles of consumerism in *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic* and Judith Brown’s brilliant *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, which tracks the origins of glamour, a bewitchingly negative and even deathly style, to modernist literary form, aesthetic categories have rarely been singled out as primary objects of analysis in literary and cultural studies. This is no doubt related to the fact that even when considered solely as styles or appearances, as opposed to ways of discursively compressing fact and value or of publicly sharing, disputing, and confirming pleasure, aesthetic categories occupy a peculiar place in a vast and already quite complicated continuum of styles. For, as George Kubler notes, “style” is a tricky concept whose “ambiguities and inconsistencies mirror aesthetic activity as a whole” (4) and that is at times difficult to distinguish from mode (as in comedy and melodrama), artistic movement or school (brutalism and surrealism), and even genre (romance and epic). The zany, for instance, is a subspecies of comedy, while cuteness, as a style that speaks to our desire for a simpler relation to commodities, is arguably a kind of pastoral. Though less institutionally codified than the primitive, baroque, and gothic, which are in turn less

chronologically restricted than styles such as minimalism or art deco, aesthetic categories like cute, zany, and interesting can be easily related to these more particular styles (all of which are already prone to overlap), as well as to broader categories for organizing cultural objects (such as realism and romance). Complicating things further, vernacular styles like the cute and zany can slide dangerously close to simpler aesthetic qualities like the stark and robust, qualities that, while carrying the same axiological charge or implicit claim to positive or negative value that distinguishes aesthetic from nonaesthetic qualities, have not given rise to styles (not even to ones as informal as the cute and zany).

Like literary affects or tones, aesthetic categories such as cute and zany are thus unusually vulnerable to accusations of subjectivism and impressionism. Though no less rooted in history than other categories used by critics to classify cultural products (baroque, postmodern, etc.), the cute, zany, and interesting are more tricky from the standpoint of the kind of historicism that has dominated literary and cultural studies over the last three decades, in that they slide across wider spans of time. The interesting's rise to prominence as an informational, antiretinal aesthetic in the serial photographs, distributed media, and theory-driven work of conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s only appears in its full significance, I argue, if traced back to the eighteenth-century writings of the German Romantic ironists, for whom *das Interessante* played a key role as sign of a vaunted becoming-criticism of art. Similarly, the historical significance of postmodern zaniness, as evinced by virtuosic performers ranging from Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* to Richard Pryor in *The Toy* and Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*, is only made fully clear if we take account of how this performative aesthetic's conflation of role playing and affective labor, already prefigured in the *zanni's* way of bridging the worlds of cultural performance and service work, gets

mulled over specifically by Nietzsche as a problem for the philosophy of art in *The Gay Science*: a late-nineteenth-century work of aesthetic theory written in a famously aggressive, fast-paced, overheated style as arguably zany, in its own way, as an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

Thinking in the way the analysis of an aesthetic category demands—broadly, across heterogeneous domains of culture and historical periods—presents methodological challenges. A difficulty posed by the historical analysis of aesthetic categories—in striking contrast to styles, such as primitivism; genres, like the novel; and modes, such as comedy—is their relative resistance to institutionalization. While there are museum exhibits, anthologies, and university syllabi devoted to primitivism, the novel, and comedy, the cute and zany do not seem capable of drawing structures around them in quite the same way. Though aesthetic categories like the cute and zany are associated with practices, they do not give rise to practices stable or consistent enough to be captured by institutions. Aesthetic categories thus become harder to track in time and space: a point that by no means suggests we abandon their historicization but rather calls on us to historicize differently. Indeed, if in the effort to grasp the present by way of these spatially and temporally distributed objects one sacrifices a historical precision more easily available to the study of specific authors, genres, and movements, one gains perhaps a stronger way of critically approaching culture as a “whole way of life” (Williams viii). Here one of Pierre Bourdieu's arguments is surprisingly apposite. The autonomy of the restricted field of production ensures that in the works, genres, and movements produced in it, “states of the social world” are mediated by the state of the field. One cannot read a Sylvia Plath poem, for instance, as a “reflection” of cold war gender politics; one first has to understand, through a principle of “structural homology,” how these struggles in the “field of power” inform the internal dynamics of the postwar

American poetry scene: “What happens in the field is more and more linked to a specific history of the field, and hence it becomes more and more difficult to deduce it directly from the state of the social world at the moment under consideration” (243). Since vernacular aesthetic styles like the cute and interesting, as opposed to individual artworks, genres, and movements, are not products of restricted fields (though of course by no means unmediated by them), by this account they could, at least theoretically, index states of the social world and struggles in the field of power more directly, thus providing certain advantages for the analysis of culture as a whole.

However intriguing, this thesis needs to be measured against Jameson’s argument to the opposite effect in *Postmodernism*: that due to the “well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche,” a metastyle made possible by late capitalist culture’s “stupendous proliferation of social codes,” the contemporary analysis of styles can no longer count as a legitimate way of doing history (17). Yet this argument about the decline of style’s ability to function as an index of sociohistorical conditions needs to be stacked up against the way Jameson uses stylistic categories to make the historical claims about postmodernism that underlie this very point. The **messy and glossy**, in particular, stand out in this magisterial work as styles unusually pregnant with sociohistorical meaning; the general appearance of the photographed interior of a Frank Gehry house in Santa Monica, for example, reflects the “messiness of a dispersed existence, existential messiness, the perpetual temporal distraction of post-sixties life,” and thus, in snowballing fashion, “the general informing context of some larger virtual nightmare . . . in which psychic fragmentation is raised to a qualitatively new power, the structural distraction of the decentered subject now promoted to the very motor and existential logic of late capitalism itself” (117). Messiness and glossiness are closer to cuteness and zaniness

than to styles such as art deco or cubism, as if, when it comes to postmodernism, only the less institutionally codified, less chronologically restricted set of styles can still be historical.

To consider aesthetic categories not as styles but as discursive judgments—culturally formalized ways of publicly sharing our pleasures and displeasures—is to go to the heart of Kantian aesthetic theory in a way that might make us wonder why so little attention has been given to this aspect of them. Yet in a sense the asymmetry is not hard to understand, since the discursive life of aesthetic categories, subtly woven into the fabric of ordinary conversation, is both less visible and also arguably more complex. For one thing, as Stanley Cavell has shown, aesthetic judgments belong to the “troublesome” class of performative utterances that J. L. Austin classified as perlocutionary: verbal actions such as praising, criticizing, complimenting, soothing, or insulting, which, in contrast to illocutionary acts like betting and marrying, are more successfully performed in an inexplicit rather than explicit form. Saying “Nice haircut!” is a more effective way of complimenting than announcing “I compliment you.” The most important feature of perlocutionary utterances for Cavell, however, and particularly of the affective subset of perlocutions he calls passionate utterances, is the way in which the power to assess their accomplishment shifts from the speaker to the interlocutor. It is the person in the position of receiving a compliment or apology rather than the one who offers it, in other words, who ultimately determines whether the act of complimenting or apologizing has successfully taken place (if my friend takes “Nice haircut!” as a sardonic insult, for example, my act of complimenting failed).

Cavell thus brings out the surprising relevance of Austin’s theory of performative language for aesthetic theory—and particularly for our understanding of “the feature of the aesthetic claim, as suggested by Kant’s descrip-



tion, as a kind of compulsion to share a pleasure, hence as tinged with an anxiety that the claim stands to be rebuked” (9). Though forming judgments of beauty silently in our heads seems possible, making aesthetic pleasure a feeling that does not need to be publicized and confirmed by others, this is not the way in which Kant describes it.<sup>4</sup> In his account, it does not seem possible to judge something beautiful without speaking or at least imagining oneself speaking and without making the “error” of putting one’s judgment in the form of a descriptive, third-person statement (“X is cute”) rather than a first-person statement that looks more openly like the subjective evaluation it is (“I judge X cute”). There is thus something rhetorically stealthy in a curiously open way, about the work of aesthetic categories, as Gérard Genette underscores in his account of aesthetic predicates as “persuasive or valorizing descriptions that bridge the abyss between fact and value *without becoming too conspicuous*.” Because interesting and cute (and perhaps we could add glossy and messy) are “semidescriptive or semijudgmental,” they are essentially “means [by] which one judges under cover of describing” (92; emphases added).

The rhetorically clandestine work of aesthetic categories thus throws further light on a problem for criticism that, I have elsewhere suggested, the interesting embodies (“Merely Interesting”): why it is so strangely easy to mistake criticism that identifies with and strives to participate in the making of aesthetic judgments with criticism in which the main goal is analyzing aesthetic judgments. The fact that they are so frequently conflated is itself of theoretical interest. For mistaking aesthetic evaluation with analysis mirrors not only the constitutive “error” of Kantian taste, which necessarily “confuses” subjective judgments with statements of objective fact, but also the way in which it is paradoxically internal to the interesting to toggle between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgments. I want to turn our attention to this issue, since it

surfaces explicitly around the interesting, in what I think is still one of the most forceful accounts of contemporary culture.

Though Jameson’s *Postmodernism* is not often read as a work of aesthetic theory, its tour de force, 118-page conclusion opens with a discussion of this problem. Jameson notes how “despite the trouble I took in my principal essay on the subject to explain how it was not possible intellectually or politically simply to celebrate postmodernism or to ‘disavow’ it,” the mere act of writing about postmodernism was widely viewed as an act of aesthetic advocacy or opposition—that is to say, as an aesthetic judgment on the postmodern (297). The confusion leads Jameson to try to more sharply differentiate three kinds of intellectual activity: “taste,” a practice performed by “old-fashioned critics and cultural journalists” that includes judgments ranging from personal opinions to aesthetic judgments proper; “analysis,” the “investigation of the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms”; and the explicitly sociopolitical work of “evaluation,” a judgment of the value or “quality of social life itself by way of the text or individual work of art.” For Jameson the more subtle and important difference is not between analysis and evaluation but rather between the more sociologically and economically removed practices of evaluation and taste. Though a wider gulf would seem to separate “cultural journalists” from the main practitioners of evaluation (Marxist critics) than the latter from literature professors who do “analysis” or “literary and cultural study” (Jameson himself is a prime example of the overlap between the last two groups), because taste and evaluation are fundamentally judgmental, the difference between them becomes “more important to secure” (298).

The paragraph in which taste, analysis, and evaluation are differentiated is immediately followed by one in which Jameson finally acknowledges the presence of judgments of taste in *Postmodernism*, though in

an amused and desultory way that seems intended to highlight their irrelevance:

As far as taste is concerned (and as readers of the preceding chapters will have become aware), culturally I write as a relatively enthusiastic consumer of postmodernism, at least some parts of it: I like the architecture and a lot of the newer visual work. . . . The music is not bad to listen to, or the poetry to read; the novel is the weakest of the newer cultural areas and is considerably excelled by its narrative counterparts in film and video (at least the high literary novel is; subgeneric narratives, however, are very good, indeed . . . ). My sense is that this is essentially a visual culture, wired for sound—but one where the linguistic element . . . is slack and flabby, and not to be made *interesting* without ingenuity, daring, and keen motivation.

(298–99; emphasis added)

“Interesting” is clearly being used here as a judgment of aesthetic quality, along with other aesthetic predicates (“slack,” “flabby”) and purely evaluative or nondescriptive verdicts (“not bad,” “very good”). In case of any doubt, Jameson underscores his judging in his next sentence: “These are tastes, giving rise to opinions; they have little to do with the analysis of the function of such a culture and how it got to be that way.” Indeed, “even the opinions are probably not satisfactory in this form, since the second thing people want to know, for the obvious contextual reason, is how this compares to an older modernism canon.” Jameson accordingly reformulates his initial opinions to accommodate this comparison, though with little difference in language: “The architecture is generally a great improvement; the novels are much worse. Photography and video are incomparable (the latter for a very obvious reason indeed); also we’re fortunate today in having *interesting* new painting to look at and poetry to read.”

The next sentence, which also introduces a new paragraph, is as follows: “Music, however (after Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Thomas

Mann), ought to lead us into something *more interesting and complicated than mere opinion*.” Suddenly, “interesting” no longer seems part of the vocabulary of taste but rather a sign of a movement beyond taste into the “more . . . complicated” realm of evaluation that it seems to facilitate. Why is it music whose study might “lead us into something more interesting and complicated than mere opinion”? Because music “includes history in a more thoroughgoing and irrevocable fashion, since as background and mood stimulus, it mediates our historical past along with our private or existential one and can scarcely be woven out of the memory any longer” (299; emphasis added). Regardless of our take on this explanation, the very idea of a shift from mere judgments of taste (such as the finding of painting and poetry “interesting”) to “something more interesting and complicated than mere opinion” (evaluation) allows Jameson to arrive at his final suggestion, that perhaps aesthetic evaluations of postmodernism are relevant to its theorization after all:

We therefore begin to make some progress on turning our tastes into “postmodernism theory” when we step back and attend to the “system of fine arts” itself: the ratio between the forms and the media (indeed, the very shape that “media” itself has taken on, supplanting form and genre alike), the way in which the generic system itself, as a restructuration and a new configuration (however minimally modified), expresses the postmodern, and through it, all the other things that are happening to us. (300; emphasis added)

In toggling between and thus helping the critic cross the divide between tastes and evaluations (much in the same way aesthetic categories cut across the individual arts), the judgment of “interesting” also helps the critic arrive at the following conclusion: judgments of taste are not only more intimately related to the work of criticism and theory than may initially appear; if performed at the proper scale, they can be turned into criticism and theory.

Note how Jameson's effort to negotiate the relation among aesthetic taste, historical analysis, and sociopolitical evaluation over- turns, along the way, presumptions we might have about the proper unit of aesthetic judgment and experience (and, indeed, about the proper objects of literary criticism). His text makes it clear that judgments of taste do not apply exclusively to individual artworks, as the canonical texts of philosophical aesthetics would seem to have it, nor even just to bodies of work by an individual author or artist. As evinced in his claims about the weakness of the serious novel in postmodernism (and claims about the interestingness of poetry and painting), the unit of aesthetic judgment can be as large as a genre, a medium, or even an entire art. If, moreover, judgments of taste at the level of "cultural journalism" are immanently evaluative in that they unconsciously point to the social worlds that make them possible (even becoming readable as allegories for modes of production or for ways of life "that extend far beyond the aesthetic or cultural as such"), aesthetic categories generated by and for the world of taste can become a useful tool for the political evaluation of large-scale cultural phenomena (301). I wager that this argument can be extended to our current repertoire of aesthetic categories. Finding a way to grasp this set (if not exactly system) of aesthetic concepts—a structure in which certain ones will prevail over others as judgments and styles and inhere to specific forms and genres at a higher ratio than others—will be similarly salutary for getting a handle on postmodernism and "through it, all the other things that are happening to us."

## NOTES

I am grateful to Mark McGurl for his comments on this essay. I would also like to thank Jonathan Culler and Cathy Caruth.

1. It is worth noting how quickly displeasure seems to drop out of the picture not just in contemporary aesthetic theory but also in *The Critique of Judgment*, where Kant first mentions "dissatisfaction without any interest" side by side with "satisfaction without any interest" but never gives us an account of what the former is (leading to much debate about whether or not Kantian aesthetics can genuinely account for the ugly; 96). Would the widely held idea that aesthetic judgments have no place in critique be less prevalent if it were recognized that the aesthetic includes displeasure as well as complicated mixtures of displeasure and pleasure? This is in fact the case for all the aesthetic categories featured in my study.

2. On the "disappearance or impossibility" of the avant-garde, see Jameson 167. On the "parergon" as index of the relation between art and theory, see Derrida.

3. Thanks to Mark Goble for helping me see this.

4. See par. 6 and esp. par. 7, in which the difference between the pleasant and the beautiful is described first and foremost as a difference in how we converse about them.

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