

“Another, Less Traveled Pathway in Aesthetic Theory”: Attending to Other Aesthetic Categories

PAUL ARDOIN

Sianne Ngai. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard UP, 2012. 333 pp.

Sianne Ngai's 2005 *Ugly Feelings* offered a major contribution to a rapidly-growing body of work in the still-young field of Affect Studies. Her first book focused on often-neglected negative emotions such as envy, anxiety, paranoia, and “stuplimity,” a term she coined to describe “a strange amalgamation of shock and boredom” (2). Such minor emotions have received much attention in recent years, as have small affective differences. Far from an esoteric, strictly academic field, Affect Studies actually invites a sort of armchair participation, as evidenced by the novelist Zadie Smith's recent reflections on “Joy” in *The New York Review of Books*. (“It might be useful to distinguish between pleasure and joy,” she begins her essay.) Studies like *Ugly Feelings* (or Sara Crangle's *Prosaic Desires* or, in another way, Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*) are perhaps most useful and fascinating for the way their opening pages seem immediately vital and make the reader wonder how these affects could have been so understudied for so long.

Ngai's second monograph, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, adds three more to the list while making the case that these affects operate as both “subjective, feeling-based judgments, as well as objective or formal styles” (29), allowing her to ground her argument in close readings of literary texts and works of art—an option less available to affect theorists like Teresa Brennan (*The Transmission of Affect*), who write in a sort of interdisciplinary negotiation with the cognitive and other sciences. The result is that work like Brennan's veers mostly toward the prescriptive, identifying dangerous side effects of global capitalism and urging remedy and reversal. Ngai operates in the realm of the descriptive and is perhaps most fascinating for her lack of urgency; her project enacts a slow and precise exploration of ways of feeling and experiencing.

With her new volume, Ngai uses about as many pages as in *Ugly Feelings* to cover fewer than half the categories. Cuteness, interestingness, and zaniness get an extended

and very wide treatment: her citations and readings range from Marx and Adorno to Tom and Jerry, cover Henri Bergson and the antics of the cartoon *Animaniacs*, reference Pynchon's conspiracies and Ben Stiller's *The Cable Guy* (which I had honestly forgotten even existed). An early *Slate* review fairly describes *Our Aesthetic Categories* as "almost compulsively thick with references" (para. 9). And Fredric Jameson is not exaggerating in his blurb praising the "startling extensiveness" with which Ngai knows "contemporary literature and culture," a breadth Ngai amply demonstrated in *Ugly Feelings*. *Our Aesthetic Categories*, somehow, never feels bogged down in all this. Ngai's wide-ranging examples so effectively demonstrate her claims and are so well illustrated that the reader learns as much about Philip Glass and On Kawara as he does about their "interesting" aesthetic category.

Occasionally, one of Ngai's asides will feel too brief to serve that dual purpose. An example: in the middle of a discussion of the zany in such films as *The Toy*, *The Full Monty*, and *The Cable Guy*, Ngai offers a parallel to Richard Wright's radio play "Man of All Work" as radio play, all but eliminating the possibility that any single reader shares her wide body of artistic experience, while at the same time bypassing a real engagement with or new reading of Wright's text. It is simply another text in which a "male African American protagonist . . . masquerades as a woman . . . to get hired as a domestic servant for a wealthy white family" (210). One wishes all Ngai's asides could receive the attention of her longer examples. I cite the Wright example specifically because more time with it may have led to the kind of fascinating work she produced on race and affect in *Ugly Feelings*.

The results of Ngai's critical range and acumen, though, are clear and impressive. Certainly, she convinces with her

simple argument about the zany, the interesting, and the cute: that these three aesthetic categories, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory and to genealogies of postmodernism, are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. (1)

One could imagine an Affect Studies industry in which an author—particularly with Ngai's referential range—could spend a career producing a volume on three new affective categories twice a decade or so. There are, after all, "a stunning variety of aesthetic styles and terms" from which to choose (233). But the cute, the interesting, and the zany do indeed emerge in this study as fundamental "for grasping [the] aesthetic situation" of late capitalism "as a whole" (233).

The cute, exemplified by the creations of Sanrio (the Hello Kitty company), Takashi Murakami's Mr. DOB artworks, and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, is rooted in the viewing "subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object" (54). That is, the cute is not concerned with "fairness, symmetry, or proportion" (54). Rather, it evokes "helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" (65). In its commoditized incarnation "as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject" (60), cuteness "epitomizes the minoriness of not just 'minor aesthetic categories' but arguably all art in an age of high-tech simulacra and media spectacles" (59). It is "the name of an encounter with difference—a perceived difference in the power of the subject and object" (87), and the "small, helpless, or deformed object" we find cute (78) foregrounds its deformation and potential deformation—that is, the violence that might be done to it. The cute object "bears the look of an object unusually responsive to and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject's feeling or attitude toward it" (65). In this way "cuteness might also be said to epitomize the process of affective 'objectification' by which all aesthetic judgments are formed" (65).

Ngai's exploration of the category of the interesting likewise serves to reveal much about the formation of our aesthetic judgments. Through a discussion of the prevalence of the series form in 1960s and 70s American conceptual art, Ngai reveals the judgment of "interesting" as primarily a placemaker, "a euphemism, filling the slot for a judgment conspicuously withheld" about an object to which we intend to return "for judging at a later moment, like putting a sticky note in a book" (134). To say something is interesting is to say it is worthy of another look. A non-professional, non-vocational viewer's assessment of a work of art as interesting is "a silent promise to the self: come back to this later" (134).

Interestingness, then, is deeply tied to temporal experience. This is why the mundane photographic series (for example) produced by the conceptual artist is so aptly described as interesting. It, too, is dependent upon temporal experience:

Indeed, no other aesthetic category in our contemporary repertoire (not the beautiful, not the sublime, and certainly not the cute or the zany) has the same relation to time, not to mention the interesting's complex involvement with a multiplicity of temporalities: the temporality of ongoingness or sequential progression, of anticipation, of recursion, of lingering, and of transience or change in general. ... The extended time frame of the interesting seems to partly explain why it is so prone to not being recognized as an aesthetic value, even in contexts where feeling-based judgments are explicitly called for or expected. (134-35)

Having one's work described as "interesting" by a professional critic is also part of a

process. From the critic, the declaration “interesting” “suggest[s] that some texts are more worth paying attention to than others” (171), and contemporary criticism is, in general, “an implicit provision of evidence for why the object that the critic has chosen to talk about is interesting” (171). This provision of evidence becomes the first step in another interpretive series: it acts as “the demand for justifications that it solicits from others, which in turn creates the occasion for one to supply them” (172). Interestingness emerges as a way to “enfranchis[e] others” in the process of interpretation, judgment, and meaning-making, as “an aesthetic of and about circulation” (172). The most “interesting” art has the effect “of making the act of perceiving less instantaneous and more durational” (172).

A mere two pages after invoking a “durational” affective experience, Ngai invokes key philosopher of affect, Bergson. Curiously, as in *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai will make use only of Bergson’s theory of laughter (rather than his theories of, say, qualitative states of emotional duration). She offers, though, an intriguing application of Bergson’s theory of the comic (from his *Laughter*): Bergson defines the comic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (qtd. in Ngai 174), the apparent “transformation of a person into a thing” (Bergson 36). Ngai wonders: if, in Bergson’s time, we “laugh[ed] at characters incapable of adjusting to new roles and social situations quickly,” then how are we to react in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries “to characters who seem almost too good at doing so” (174), such as the zany Lucy Ricardo characters who take on one job immediately after another? “If the rigidity of others is what makes us laugh, can an absolutely elastic subject—one who is nothing but a series of adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another—be genuinely funny?” (174). Bergson might call such “momentum” merely another type of “rigidity” (Bergson 12), but Ngai is right to note the complexity of “the zany’s incessant activity” (Ngai 187).

For Ngai, zaniness, too, is specific to our moment of capitalism because “this playful, hypercharismatic aesthetic is really an aesthetic about work—and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work” that results in “a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working” (188). At the same time as zany portrayals of this condition become more common, “zany” “as an aesthetic judgment or verdictive speech act” is “slowly vanishing from our lexicon of feeling-based evaluations” (231). There are, according to Ngai, resulting implications about “the increasingly ambiguous aesthetic status of ‘performance’ under conditions of capitalist production” (232). The zany antics of *I Love Lucy* teach us as much about performance as cuteness teaches us about commodities, and as interestingness teaches us about information and interpretation (233).

Our aesthetic categories, it seems, can be revelatory. Through careful attention to

the implications of the zany, the cute, and the interesting, Ngai illuminates “another, less traveled pathway in aesthetic theory” (106). That is, contemporary affect theory continues to prove at its most useful when cataloging and unpacking the ambiguous, curious, or in-between feelings and aesthetic experiences, instead of, say, sublimity, beauty, or terror.

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Paul Ardoin is a PhD candidate at Florida State University and the co-editor of *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*. His work is forthcoming in *Studies in the Novel, Philosophy and Literature*, and *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*.