

book review

**Cute Studies**

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Sianne Ngai

*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*

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Most critics identified with cultural studies today would passionately protest the beauty and the beast rhetoric that, in certain circles, still regularly casts cultural studies against aesthetics in a kind of disciplinary duel. Indeed it is widely agreed that, as Rita Felski has argued, in both its preoccupation with pop cultural practices and its interrogation of high culture precepts, cultural studies' mandate is less 'to destroy aesthetics' than to make 'a much wider variety of objects aesthetically interesting'. According to Felski, 'the real challenge posed by cultural studies [is] not its denial of the aesthetic, but its case for multiple aesthetics'.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the diversity and quality of cultural studies work in aesthetics—from Simon Frith's work on beauty in popular music and Meaghan Morris's work on the Antipodean sublime, to the raft of work on trash culture and melodramatic sentimentality—one could be forgiven for feeling that little of it fully rises to Felski's challenge.<sup>2</sup> While the range of objects available to aesthetic analysis has expanded to include *Downton*

*Abbey* as well as Dante, *Twilight* as well as Tennyson, the aesthetic categories through which these objects are analysed remain oddly proscribed. An aesthetic vocabulary flanked by a reified 'beauty' at one end and a devalued 'trash' at the other remains an unexamined inheritance of the very elite culture whose hegemony these critics seek to dismantle.

One of the many exciting things, then, about Sianne Ngai's second book, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, is the extent to which, while hardly a work of cultural studies, it nonetheless seems to fulfill Felski's brief, enriching our aesthetic lexicon by plucking its vernacular categories direct from the flow of popular discourse, where the question of, say, a TV show's zaniness or a spongy bath toy's cuteness tends to be far more pressing than the question of either object's beauty or sublimity. As Ngai shows, these simultaneously critically marginalised and culturally ubiquitous categories lack both the metaphysical weight and the philosophical prestige of categories like beauty. Charged by conflicted and conflicting affects, and caught up in all-too-explicit power dynamics, they actively violate the ideas about play, distance and disinterestedness that have become foundational to our understanding of the properly aesthetic experience. Yet in Ngai's readings of a remarkably diverse array of texts—from Richard Pryor's *The Toy* to Henry James's meditations on the art of the novel, and from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* to the conceptual art of Sol LeWitt—the zany, the cute and the interesting, both as feeling-based judgments and as formal styles, are shown to possess a powerful purchase on what she calls 'late capitalism'. (1) For Ngai, in fact, our 'hyperaestheticized world'—in which the aestheticisation of daily life and the commodification of art go hand in hand—is such that 'neither art nor beautiful/sublime nature remains the obvious go-to model for reflecting on aesthetic experience'. (20) Rather, as she argues across three dense, syncretic chapters, it is the zany, the cute and the interesting, with their special affinity with questions of how 'contemporary subjects work, exchange and consume', that are best suited for understanding how aesthetics has been 'transformed by the hypercommodified, information saturated, performance driven conditions of late capitalism'. (1)

The clearest example of this argument at work—or play—is Ngai's analysis of the zany, an aesthetic category concerned with a particularly labour-intensive kind

of play or performance. For Ngai, the zany aesthetic, which often coalesces around a specific character, finds its most potent personification in the manic protagonist of Lucille Ball's long-running sitcom *I Love Lucy*, where Lucy Ricardo's comically dogged efforts to break into what she dreamily calls 'showbiz' demand the continuous assumption of new roles and the development of new skills. While there's a fun, playful element to these performances, there's also something decidedly unplayful and unfunny about them, a 'stressed-out, even desperate quality that immediately sets [the zany] apart from its more lighthearted cousins, the goofy or the silly'. (185) As Ngai shows, in part through reference to a host of social science scholarship, the peculiarly exhausting play at stake in Lucy's zaniness speaks to the problematisation of 'play' in a post-Fordist moment that has seen previously private dimensions of human life, like play, care, sociality and emotion, 'put to work' through what has variously been identified as 'immaterial labour', 'affective labour', or 'virtuosic labour'. (188) In a cultural landscape in which work is laminated to affective performance, and our affective lives in turn can feel very much like work, comic form becomes increasingly zany, and the longstanding aesthetic ideal of art as spontaneous, goalless play seems ever more remote.

Equally exemplary is the chapter devoted to the cute, an aesthetic of smallness, diminutiveness and simplification most memorably elaborated through Ngai's analysis of a 'frog shaped sponge or baby's bath toy', with its exaggerated eyes, squishy texture and general mien of pleading helplessness. (64) As Ngai explains, to judge or experience an object as cute is to draw on reserves of both tenderness and suspicion, both on the desire to protect the object and on 'a desire to belittle and diminish' the cute object further. Ngai convincingly presses this 'aestheticization of powerlessness' into service as an aesthetic cipher of our fraught relation to the commodities that ornament contemporary emotional and economic life. (3) For cultural studies scholars, however, the real currency of the chapter may lie in the way in which Ngai's analysis of this widely dismissed and devalued aesthetic rubric taps into classic debates about the social codification of high culture and low, avant-garde and kitsch, true emotion and mere sentimentality, especially when Ngai turns from limning the function of the cute in the squishy, blob-like faces of children's toys to exploring its less immediately obvious role in avant-garde poetry. 'Conventionally imagined as hard or cutting edge', the avant-garde seems thoroughly at odds with an

aesthetic 'deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine and the non-threatening'. (59) Pointing, however, to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, to William Carlos Williams' 'plums' famously left 'in the icebox' and to Bernadette Mayer's 'puffed wheat cereal', Ngai shows that avant-garde poetry has drawn on the form and language of cuteness as a means of negotiating both poetry's increasing cultural marginalisation and its inevitable relation to the commodity.

As a defence of the value of aesthetic analysis for criticism today, *Our Aesthetic Categories* is at its most compelling, I suggest, in the chapter 'Merely Interesting', where it most directly addresses aesthetics' critical marginalisation and disavowal. While ubiquitous in evaluative criticism, the act of calling something interesting is rarely identified as an aesthetic judgment. Yet in her careful taxonomy of its signature formal and affective traits—from its association with specifically minor forms of difference or novelty, to its distinctive conglomeration of curiosity and boredom—Ngai makes a convincing case for the interesting's aesthetic status. (38) The chapter goes on to track the critical and artistic career of the interesting through the media-conscious conceptual art scene of the 1960s and 1970s, where an idiom of information, inventory, documentation and research dominates the movement's efforts to 'replace the look of art historical styles with what Donald Kuspit called "the look of thought"—as in John Baldessari's 1964 collection of slides, *The Back of All the Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles to Santa Barbara*. (144) Yet the real force of this chapter lies in its account of how the interesting's adjacency to non-aesthetic judgment has allowed it to circulate promiscuously through fields like conceptual art, the social sciences and certain brands of cultural studies that avowedly scorn aesthetic evaluation or taste. In arguing this, Ngai equips us with a set of interpretative tools that might be productively and provocatively applied to other fields and disciplines, allowing us to re-read, say, the objectivity prized by scientific inquiry, or the historical rigour reified by cultural studies, as clandestine aesthetic judgments.

Like Ngai's acclaimed first book, *Ugly Feelings*, *Our Aesthetic Categories* is impressive in its ambition, with each chapter striving to furnish its chosen aesthetic category with a cultural history, a rich phenomenological profile and substantial sociological import.<sup>3</sup> More impressive still is the fact that, by and large, the book succeeds in these aims. Supported both by brilliant rhetorical readings and by a

stunning citational range, Ngai makes a strong case for the value of these vernacular aesthetic categories to grasping the cultural profile of a moment that at once hails us 'as aesthetic subjects almost every moment of the day' and conjoins these 'feelings of being moved' to circulatory processes, commodity culture and the post-Fordist work ethos. (23, 27) The implications of this argument redound to the fields of aesthetics and cultural analysis in equal measure. On the one hand, the zany, the cute and the interesting provide powerful traction to abiding aesthetic questions—questions about the relation between aesthetic judgment and aesthetic style (the interesting's ubiquity as a judgment, for example, is balanced by its lack of relation to a specific form or style), or about the relationship between aesthetic judgments and aesthetic feeling (the zany subject's desperate, laboured antics, for example, seem to elicit a cool, distanced, decidedly *non-zany* response in the viewer). On the other hand, the zany, the cute and the interesting throw new light on the social, economic and cultural transformations that, according to Ngai, have afforded them such prominence. In her analysis of the zany, for example, Ngai provocatively recasts Michael Negri and Antonio Hardt's now-ubiquitous concept of 'immaterial labour' through the heavily gendered lens of male-oriented film texts such as *The Cable Guy* and *The Full Monty*, in which, as she puts it, 'for all the rhetoric of fluidity surrounding postindustrial work ... changes in the culture of work are not experienced by male workers as easy to adjust to'. (211–12)

While the book's argumentative and theoretical reach seems beyond doubt, perhaps its greatest feat is methodological, in parrying of some of the perils and pitfalls of aesthetic theory. Whereas much work associated with the so-called aesthetic turn casually collapses aesthetic criticism into formal analysis, Ngai keeps thorny, high-stakes debates around style and form, subjectivity and objectivity, pleasure and interest, in continual play throughout the book. Yet if this attention to the specificities of aesthetic criticism is a mark of Ngai's scholarly diligence, her avoidance of some of the less appealing practices that have plagued aesthetic criticism is a mark of her methodological dexterity. In focusing on flexible, mobile aesthetic categories rather than on a fixed, delimited domain called 'art', she circumvents the kind of empty meditations on the existence and nature of art that prompted Steven Connor's recent sardonic lament for a time in the 1980s when 'things looked encouragingly grim for aesthetics'. At the same time, in taking it as

axiomatic that 'our aesthetic experience is always mediated by a finite is constantly rotating repertoire of aesthetic categories', she just as wisely avoids the critical tendency that Jacques Ranciere deplors in his denunciation of fetishisations of the ineffable, 'pure encounter with the unconditioned event of the work.' This methodological balancing act is one of the book's coups.

Yet it is also at the methodological level that the book will, I suspect, be most vulnerable to criticism from within cultural studies. Among the heavyweight endorsements that adorn the book's back cover is this suggestively ambivalent praise from Fredric Jameson:

This wonderfully original book (I hesitate to call it 'cute, zany and interesting', but that wouldn't be wrong) invents fresh and incisive new categories for that tired old study called aesthetics.

As Ngai's book makes clear, 'to call something zany, cute or interesting is often to leave it ambiguous as to whether one regards it positively or negatively'. (19) While half-retracted, there are real reservations lurking behind Jameson's attribution to the book the aesthetic quirks it analyses. Yet if these reservations may be traced in part to Ngai's implicit and explicit resistance to Jameson's contention in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), that aesthetic categories can no longer give us a real diagnostic purchase on the social, they must also be traced to something in *Our Aesthetic Categories* itself.<sup>4</sup> There *is* something zany about some of her disciplinary and historical jump-cuts (from Lucille Ball to Friedrich Nietzsche, for example), something cute about her all-too-neat mapping of the cute/zany/interesting triad onto a series of economic, generic and psychoanalytic categories, something merely interesting about some of her dense discursive endnotes.

To the extent that the book's broadest thesis is a historical one—namely, the argument that the zany, the cute and the interesting can shed light on aesthetics' transformation by contemporary social processes—perhaps the most serious charge here involves the book's zany historical method. *Our Aesthetic Categories* is poorly served by Ngai's continued recourse to 'late capitalism' and 'postmodernism' as loose markers for a seemingly elastic present, where the temporal and geographical co-ordinates of 'late capitalism' remain undefined and 'postmodernism' is deployed without reckoning with its widespread critical problematisation as a periodising

term. The book is just as poorly served by Ngai's tendency to ride roughshod over the disparities in historical, discursive or national context that might render what the interesting meant to Friedrich Schlegel in the 1790s (120–7) categorically different from what it meant to Henry James a century later, (136–40) or the 'agitated style of doing' that she identifies as zany in Lucille Ball's televisual persona (175–82) substantially distinct from the delirious chauvinism that she identifies as zany in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. (184–8)

Ngai defends her defiance of classic historicist norms with the argument that the categories' wide distribution across time and space makes restricting their analysis to 'a single artifact or even to a cluster of artifacts produced in a thin slice of time' impossible. (30) Yet if this apologia seems unlikely to sway cultural studies critics, whose tolerance of historical boundary-crossing is tempered by their insistence on historical difference, my own hunch is that she needn't have offered one. While *Our Aesthetic Categories'* cover blurb makes a historical claim, the book's real worth is phenomenological and descriptive. Since my encounter with this book, the aesthetic categories it particularizes have illuminated virtually everything I have watched or read, from 30 Rock to regreetsy.com to Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley*, and I suspect that while their theoretical development is not always exemplary of cultural studies practice, these categories will be richly suggestive and valuable to cultural studies practitioners. Indeed I would suggest that one of the book's quieter boons may lie precisely in the extent to which its zany defiance of historicist norms and its overly cute taxonomies flaunt the norms of historical rigour and contextual sensitivity that are the aesthetic benchmarks against which work in cultural studies is more commonly measured. Ngai's zany historical leaps are inseparable from her zany counter-intuitive readings. Her all-too-cute connections, meanwhile, encode a series of exceedingly acute insights. To this extent, a dose of Ngai's zaniness, cuteness and interest might prove salutary in ensuring that some of cultural studies' more celebrated methodological customs don't devolve into those rather less exalted habits whose attributes were enumerated in Meaghan Morris's landmark essay, 'Banality in Cultural Studies'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Felski, 'The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies' in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, Michael Berube, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2005, pp. 32, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: The Value of Popular Music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998; Meaghan Morris, 'White Panic, or, Mad Max and the Sublime' in *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, Sage, London, 2006, pp. 80–104.

<sup>3</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', in (ed.), *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990, pp. 14–43.