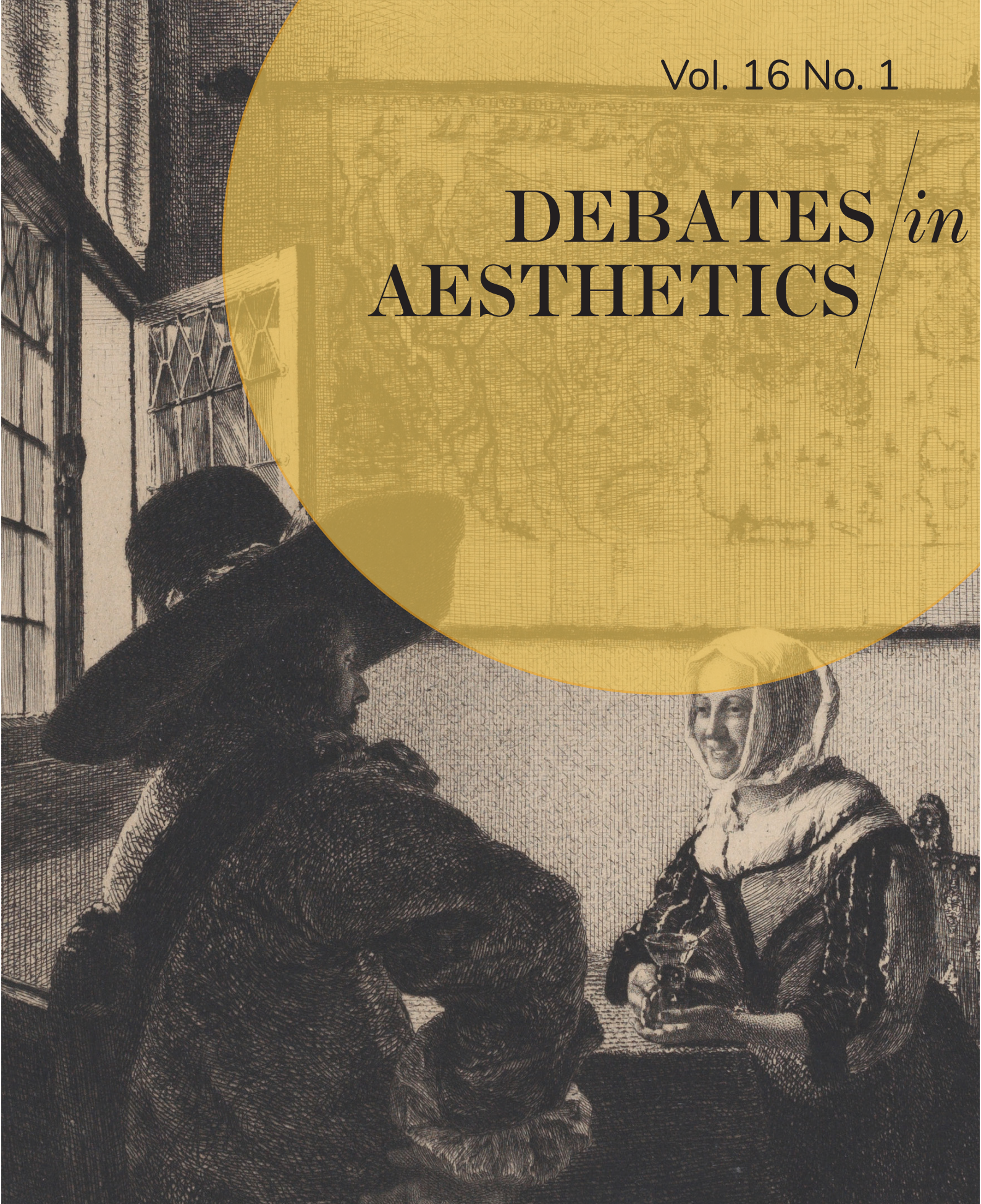


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Claire Anscomb and Eleen M. Deprez

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Contact
www.debatesinaesthetics.org
editor@debatesinaesthetics.org

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INTRODUCTION

Claire Anscomb & Eleen M. Deprez

It is our great pleasure to introduce this general issue of *Debates in Aesthetics* (DiA). In this issue there are three original articles tackling a diverse array of topics including: the ethics and aesthetics of the ‘body positivity’ movement (Frazier and Mehdi); what it means to read literature as literature (Ives); and Kant’s theory of laughter (Kuplen). There is also a review of the recently published volume, *Philosophy and Film: Bridging Divides*, which examines whether the title delivers on its promise (Harrison).

In their article, Frazier and Mehdi trace the history and transformation of the ‘body positivity’ movement. They identify the original aim of this movement - which emerged during the anti-fatness activism of the United States in the mid-20th century - with the radical acceptance of marginalized bodies: proponents of the original movement sought to show that weight, health, and beauty should not determine an individual’s worthiness of fair, respectful, and dignified treatment in society. This aim changed however, Frazier and Mehdi contend, with

the ‘co-optation’ of the movement, which removed fat bodies from the picture and instead promoted self-love that, in imagistic representations, primarily centres on thin, fair, feminine, able bodies. While, as Frazier and Mehdi highlight, co-optation, or the uptake of the language and aims of a resistance movement by a dominant group, is not inherently wrong, it can carry some dangerous consequences for the suppressed members of the original movement. In this case, they argue that the movement has shifted to focus on the internal landscape of its members, and so fails to address the systematic discrimination against bodies that fall outside of the thin, healthy, able, cisgendered range. To put this more strongly, as Frazier and Mehdi do, the body positivity movement has been taken from a marginalized group and further marginalized the bodies that it originally sought to protect.

As Frazier and Mehdi consider, perhaps this shift in the movement was necessary, given the increasing or changing pressures of beauty norms, and maybe shifting the focus to beauty, empowerment, and self-love is not problematic. While they agree that “aesthetically directed self-love, self-empowerment, and self-respect in the face of a firmly entrenched narrow beauty ideal is worthwhile” (2021, 25), Frazier and Mehdi argue that it is possible to pursue these aims without appropriating the language and aims of the original body positivity movement. Moreover, as they posit, foregrounding thin, fair, feminine, able bodies as the recipients of body positivity may instead usher in a new ideal standard of normative beauty – one that is a marketing implement for capitalism and which continues to exclude those outside of the narrow range of ‘acceptable’ bodies. Indeed, much more remains to be said about the aesthetic dimensions of this co-optation, and in particular the role of visual culture.

Frazier and Mehdi touch briefly on the aesthetic strategies that were used to aid the original aims of the movement, including the burning of images such as those of the model Twiggy. As they outline, it

is often now the case that the use of visual images impedes, rather than abets, the aim to promote the radical acceptance of marginalized bodies by focusing on bodies within a narrow 'acceptable' range. So, the question arises then, how can aesthetic practices help the movement to achieve its original aims? It is very difficult to escape the idealisation of bodies in an Instagram-filtered and Photoshop-saturated age. These tools are frequently used to capitalist ends that, as Frazier and Mehdi highlight, continue to exclude bodies outside of the 'acceptable' range. Yet, it is important to remember that digital platforms such as Instagram, do also provide users, to a certain extent, with the chance to individualize their content and resist the mainstream myopia of body image. A number of accounts are dedicated to resisting the identification of body positivity with thin, fair, feminine, able bodies. This is bound to raise a number of further questions for future philosophical exploration, including for example, in what ways can the use of visual images promote aesthetic empowerment without producing exclusionary normative beauty ideals?

In her article, Ives examines and criticizes Peter Lamarque's claim that reading for 'opacity' is the way to read literature as literature. In this context, opacity refers to the dependence of the content on the specific wording used to present it. The content is 'fine-grained' so that, for example, should a synonym be used to substitute a word in the description of a subject, the content would accordingly alter. By contrast, 'transparency' entails reading for propositional content – the content then, is 'coarser', and its presentation interchangeable. However, when reading for opacity, or reading literature as literature, Lamarque claims that the reader's primary focus is on the particular way in which the subject is presented. No paraphrase can be equivalent for this experience. Lamarque demonstrates the phenomenon of opacity with examples of poems, such as Thomas Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush*, where the resources of language are used to produce formal qualities, including metre, rhyme, and alliteration, that are crucial for creating the salient

content of the work. Lamarque also extends the case for this kind of form-content indivisibility to prose narrative, such as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Ives questions the persuasiveness of Lamarque's claim for strict form-content indivisibility in such a wide range of literary narratives and proposes that we should instead ask: "Is a work's value as literature always and principally dependent on its formal qualities, on its precise wording?" (2021, 39)

To show the difficulties presented by Lamarque's approach to opacity, Ives examines the distinctive challenges faced by translators of poetry, and focuses on the case of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. This 'novel written in verse' compels translators to choose between prioritizing form or meaning. Ives uses this example to demonstrate that a work may continue to be of value and interest as literature even when divested of many its 'literary' qualities. Such cases, Ives contends, suggest that form and content are not always so essentially connected, as Lamarque suggests, and that there is more to reading literature as literature than reading for opacity. As Ives concludes, to elucidate the significance and value of literature as literature, it is necessary to consider other reasons that make a novel literature or art.

This does not seem wholly at odds with Lamarque's work on literature but perhaps occasions a different, related question: what kind of engagement with a text maximises its value as literature? There could be a myriad of answers to this question, depending, not upon whether a work is a novel or a poem but, upon how the writing is crafted to induce particular aesthetic effects, which may not necessarily depend upon form and content, as traditionally conceived in relation to these arts. Consider, for instance, the use of footnotes and endnotes in writing. Both poets and novelists have made use of these traditionally academic addendums – sometimes to induce the reader to physically act in a way that realizes some of the salient content of the work. Take the extensive endnotes in *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace. Reading

the endnotes, along with the primary text compels the reader to go back and forth through the book, which, among other effects, mimics the story's thematic concerns. In addition to aesthetic reasons, Foster Wallace also had a practical reason for producing these notes as endnotes: to make the primary-text an easier read. That is, one could read *Infinite Jest* without engaging with the book's extensive endnotes. Certainly, one will have gleaned some of the value of the work as literature, but in order to maximise the aesthetic value of this work as literature, it would be best to read the endnotes along with the primary text. So, while different works of literature may share certain features - such as narrative or formal qualities, including metre, rhyme, and alliteration, that contribute to their value - depending upon the particular work, some writing may be better appreciated through transparent reading, while for others this may be opaque. One could even imagine a third mode of reading, a hybridization of opaque and transparent reading, or a new form altogether. As Ives proposes, it seems that there are good reasons to resist an essentialist understanding of the value of literature as literature and to look for the variety of ways in which literature is valuable.

Kuplen, in her article, examines the challenges offered by contemporary interpretations of Kant's theory of laughter and responds by offering an alternative interpretation. Kant presents laughter as a response to a representation that involves something nonsensical and which evokes the experience of displeasure and tension in the individual. Laughter is an affect that occurs when the individual's expectations are abruptly turned into nothing. Contemporary interpretations, as Kuplen outlines, generally explain Kant's notion of laughter as a species of the beautiful or the sublime. In the former case, theorists argue that the concept of laughter is similar to the beautiful: it originates in a disinterested play between cognitive faculties of the imagination. Unlike the experience of beauty, this play is disharmonious and so results in the feeling of displeasure. In the latter case, laughter shares similarities with the sub-

lime “in that its discordance evokes a purposive relationship between the faculties of imagination and reason, thereby resulting in the feeling of pleasure.” (2021, 50) However, as Kuplen highlights, this view fails to accord with Kant’s characterization of pleasure inherent in laughter as a kind of relief. Furthermore, the faculty of reason and its ideas, including of freedom, god, and immortality, appear to be at odds with the objects that occasion laughter, including irrationality, mortality, and clumsiness. Finally, Kuplen points out that interpretations thus far fail to account for the distinction between the notion of laughter and ugliness: if both depend on the mental state of disharmony between imagination and understanding, then why is the former, but not the latter pleasurable?

To resolve these issues, Kuplen argues that no appeal to the faculty of reason is required: laughter is instead “a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, which takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object.” (2021, 53) It stands in direct opposition to Kant’s notion of the sublime, as laughter reveals that our cognitive and rational system is insufficient to explain all of our experiences and perceptions of the world. Kuplen pieces together remarks that Kant offered regarding the pleasurable dimension of this experience to propose that enjoyment occurs when the illusion of nonsense disappears when a shift occurs from tension to pleasurable relief. Pleasure in laughter, Kuplen proposes “lies in detecting our own mistaken assumptions about the object and thereby relieving us from the nonsense provoking tension” (2021, 58), which she notes is consistent with the incongruity theory. What is laughable is thus, not the object itself, but the individual recognizing the rigidity of their own mind.

While, as Kuplen concludes, laughter may belittle our rational faculties and mourn their fall, there would be value in locating where the limits to this capacity lie. As Kuplen notes, objects that occasion laughter often bring to mind ideas that include irrationality, mortality, moral

weakness, foolishness, and ignorance. Yet, ignorance or moral weakness sometimes endorses directly or indirectly problematic views, which can divide the responses of audiences. For instance, some find no problem in laughing at racist jokes: comedian Rowan Atkinson for example, endorsed a dehumanising metaphor for Muslim women who wear burkas written by Boris Johnson (now UK Prime Minister) as a 'good joke'.¹ The 'joke' fits the pattern to occasion laughter but some try to stifle their laughter, while others do not laugh at all. It seems that moral concerns, part of the higher reason, call off the response of laughter. It is to be seen how Kuplen's understanding of Kant accommodates for this.

Finally, in her review of the edited volume, *Philosophy and Film: Bridging Divides*, Harrison reflects that, despite the hopeful subtitle of the volume, the divide between analytic and continental methodological approaches to philosophy of film persists in its intractability. Harrison expresses greater optimism however, at the fulfilment of the second aim of the collection: to consider the possibility that film might be, or be able to do, philosophy. Nevertheless, Harrison highlights a range of issues that she finds unanswered, or at least in need of further clarification, including what films might be of benefit to an audience seeking cinematic philosophising and why. As with the other articles in this issue, new avenues of philosophical enquiry await in the wake of these reflections.

1 Coates, Sam, 'Blackadder star Rowan Atkinson backs Boris Johnson in burka row', *The Times* (10 August 2018) < <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/blackadder-star-rowan-atkinson-backs-boris-johnson-in-burka-row-5frqhr7rq> > accessed 03 March, 2021.

