



Vol. 16 No. 1

# DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS

Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

**BSA**

BRITISH  
SOCIETY OF  
AESTHETICS

Vol. 16 No. 1  
March 2021

Edited by  
Claire Anscomb and Eleen M. Deprez

Published by  
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting  
Claire Anscomb, Eleen M. Deprez and Sarah Kiernan

Proofreading  
Sarah Kiernan

Typeface  
The Brill, designed by John Hudson  
Nunito, designed by Vernon Adams

Cover  
*Officer and Laughing Girl, after Vermeer (1866)* by Jules-Ferdinand  
Jacquemart (image courtesy of The Met)

Contact  
[www.debatesinaesthetics.org](http://www.debatesinaesthetics.org)  
[editor@debatesinaesthetics.org](mailto:editor@debatesinaesthetics.org)

ISSN 2514-6637

# Contents

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Claire Anscomb & Eleen M. Deprez . . . . . 5-11

## ARTICLES

Cheryl Frazier and Nadia Mehdi . . . . . 13-28  
*Forgetting Fatness: The Violent Co-optation of the Body Positivity  
Movement*

Eliza Ives . . . . . 31-46  
*Fiction, Poetry and Translation: A Critique of Opacity*

Mojca Kuplen . . . . . 49-62  
*Kant's Theory of Laughter*

## REVIEW

Britt Harrison . . . . . 65-70  
*Philosophy and Film: Bridging Divides*

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Cheryl Frazier, Eliza Ives, Mojca Kuplen, Nadia Mehdi, Britt Harrison 72-73



## 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-20<sup>th</sup> 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’.<sup>1</sup> 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.



# FORGETTING FATNESS

## THE VIOLENT CO-OPTATION OF THE BODY POSITIVITY MOVEMENT

Cheryl Frazier and Nadia Mehdi

University of Oklahoma and University of Sheffield

*In this paper we track the 'body positivity' movement from its origins, promoting radical acceptance of marginalized bodies, to its co-optation as a push for self-love for all bodies, including those bodies belonging to socially dominant groups. We argue that the new focus on the 'body positivity' movement involves a single-minded emphasis on beauty and aesthetic adornment, and that this undermines the original focus of social and political equality, pandering instead to capitalism and failing to rectify unjust institutions and policies. As such, we argue that the 'body positivity' movement ultimately marginalises further the bodies for which it initially sought justice and acceptance.*

## 1 Introduction

The ‘body positivity’ movement is a muddled, nebulous concept, the origins of which many pinpoint to 1960s anti-fatness activism in the United States. The movement was designed to promote the radical acceptance of marginalized bodies.<sup>1</sup> Proponents tried to shatter the perception that weight and health were conclusively linked and sought to remove the temptation to say that people needed to be healthy – and beautiful – to be worthy of dignity, respect and fair treatment.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, the ‘body positivity’ movement has strayed from its original aims and become a push for self-love for all bodies, including those bodies belonging to socially dominant groups.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, recent work in aesthetics on the marginalisation that people face in virtue of their bodies has laid the groundwork for us to assert that the appropriation of the ‘body positivity’ movement is at once a moral and aesthetic matter. In this paper, we explore the shift in focus of the ‘body positivity’ movement from dignity, respect, and fair treatment, to self-love and beauty. In particular, we focus on what is lost when fat bodies are no longer the focal point of the movement. We will argue that the most appropriate way to understand the changes in the movement is through the lens of co-optation, and that this co-optation is ethically problematic since it makes it more difficult to accomplish the goals of the original ‘body positivity’ movement and further marginalizes the bodies for which the movement was created. Finally, we will

---

1 See Alptraum (2017), Anon (2018) and Dionne (2017).

2 See Hobbes (2018), Eaton (2016) and Torish (2012).

3 It is worth noting that much of the historical ‘body positivity’ movement was aimed at protecting more than just fat bodies—original strains of the movement also sought to promote acceptance of queer, trans, and other marginalized bodies. Although our focus in this paper is more simply on fat bodies, many people at the front of this movement belong to multiple marginalized groups and seek protection and acceptance for all of their identities under this movement. As such, some of the language used throughout this paper may reflect its broader contexts, especially when citing activists from the original movement.

address two lines of counterargument: that the shift in the movement is necessary given the increasing or changing pressures of norms of beauty; and secondly, that the reframing of the movement to focus on beauty, empowerment, and self-love - even by some fat women - is not problematic.

## **2 A Brief (and Incomplete) Overview of the Body Positivity Movement**

The ‘body positivity’ movement that emerged in the mid-20th century sought to combat discrimination and help fat people gain “tolerance from a medical establishment that tortured and sought to eradicate them” (Alptraum 2017), as well as working to undo fatphobia in schools, workplaces, and advertising (Dionne 2017). There was also a focus on celebrating and empowering fat bodies and in 1967 a ‘fat-in’ was organised in Central Park, where demonstrators burned diet books and pictures of the supermodel Twiggy and arrived carrying banners reading “Fat Power” and “Take a Fat Girl to Dinner” (Dionne 2017).

Through the ‘body positivity’ movement, people have been able to challenge misconceptions regarding fatness and health and the notion that moral worth is inherently tied to health or appearance. The movement created an important space for fat people to communicate and commiserate with one another and advocate for better healthcare, fair treatment in employment, and a more fat-friendly society. This is especially crucial given the oppressive societal structures in place which regularly disadvantage fat people.<sup>4</sup> As Anne Eaton notes, “we live in a fat-hating world, one that regularly refuses to accommodate fat bodies; that openly and unabashedly teases, bullies, shames, and stigmatizes fat people...and that discriminates against fat people in a variety of ways” including medical care, and lack of adequate space on popular airlines. (Eaton 2016, 39-40) Historically, fat people have been subject to wage-gaps, the perception that “overweight” job applicants are less qualified

---

4 See Eaton (2016), Burgard (2009), Hobbes (2018) and Torish (2012).

than thin counterparts, and increased negative employment outcomes, among other related issues (Cawley 2004).

Additionally, the 'body positivity' movement originally aimed to combat a fatphobic medical system wherein physicians have feelings of "discomfort, reluctance, or dislike" towards patients who are obese, and associate fatness with conditions like "poor hygiene, noncompliance, hostility, and dishonesty." (Puhl and Heuer 2012) This pervasive issue and attitude towards fat patients results in poor healthcare and worsened health outcomes for said patients.

The 'body positivity' movement, then, arose out of a need to protect marginalized bodies, allowing fat people to celebrate their bodies in a world aiming to tear them down. Moreover, it was born out of a need to establish concrete legal protections that could prevent one's livelihood (via healthcare, job security, etc.) from being threatened.

However, much of today's discussion of 'body positivity' focuses on fashion, beauty and self-love. This shift in focus is concerning as it has overtaken

the radical roots of the original movement. Body positivity has become its own economy, and people with bodies that have been marginalized are no longer the centre of their own creation. (Dionne 2017)

The current 'body positivity' movement tries to promote empowerment, self-love, and representation of all types of bodies (or all 'acceptable' bodies) in the media, but in doing so, it "has failed to address [systemic] discrimination as its foremothers did" (Ibid.).

A Google image search for 'body positivity' conducted in April 2020 offers an array of images centred on beauty and empowerment. Simple illustrations with catchphrases such as 'love your body', 'all bodies are good bodies', and 'more self-love' abound, but feature very few women

who the movement itself would term fat. While these are respectable and important aims, they fail to recognize the systemic injustices the ‘body positivity’ movement was designed to address. The shift in the movement has turned the focus onto thin, white, cis- and able-bodied individuals. Your Fat Friend, a blog writing anonymously about the realities of life as ‘a very fat person’, reflects on this shift, arguing that the original ‘body positivity’ movement was “before Dove defined *real beauty* as multiracial and multi-height, but still free of transgender people, still free of people with disabilities, still free of rolling fat or puckered skin...before *body positivity* became *pride in thin, fair, feminine, able bodies*” (Your Fat Friend 2017).<sup>5</sup> Investigating this shift in the body positivity movement will shed light on the implications of its popularization. The current focus on making fashion more inclusive and broadening beauty norms ignores several marginalized bodies that the original movement centred. The single-minded focus on beauty and aesthetic adornment undermines the original focus on social and political equality. The new movement plays into capitalist society, failing to rectify unjust institutions and policies.

### 3 The Co-Optation of the ‘body positivity’ Movement

In light of this, it is our contention that the ‘body positivity’ movement has been co-opted. Co-opting, Lisa Droogendyk and co-authors claim, occurs in situations in which disadvantaged and advantaged group members interact, and highlights the harm that can come from advantaged group allies undermining resistance movements—even when their intention is to help bolster those movements (2016). In the process of co-optation, a dominant group or its members takes up the language and aims of a movement, often with benevolent aims, such as to help dismantle oppressive societal structures and institutions or to support

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, Your Fat Friend is referencing the “Real Beauty” campaign created by the cosmetics company Dove which featured models possessing a more diverse range of bodies than was standard, but which failed to include a truly diverse range of bodies (importantly failing to include fat bodies).

those who are subjects of oppression.<sup>6</sup> But co-opting a movement has dangerous consequences. As Droogendyk *et al* note, “a movement that is co-opted and led by members of the group that currently holds power is inconsistent with [a] vision of a new and more equal world—no matter how benevolent the intentions of these “leaders”” (Droogendyk *et al* 2016, 324).

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a movement changing over time, the current ideology behind the ‘body positivity’ movement violently undermines the aims of the *original* movement. The original movement allowed people who were told their bodies were wrong or unacceptable to carve out space and seek equal treatment in society and under the law. In contrast, the contemporary ‘body positivity’ movement promotes bodies which society does not attack in the first place. These bodies (which are typically thin, healthy, cisgendered, and able-bodied) are not the bodies against which regular systemic and institutional injustices are committed. As Your Fat Friend argues:

Body positivity has widened the circle of acceptable bodies, yes, but it still leaves so many of us by the wayside. Its rallying cry, love your body, presumes that our greatest challenges are internal, a poisoned kind of thought about our own bodies. It cannot adapt to those of us who love our bodies, but whose bodies are rejected by those around us, used as grounds for ejecting us from employment, health care, and more. (Your Fat Friend 2017)

The ‘body positivity’ movement has been *taken* from a disadvantaged or marginalized group. Thin people have taken the language of ‘body

---

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Droogendyk *et al*’s account centers on co-opting in allyship contexts, while many cases of co-opting of the ‘body positivity’ movement occur outside of allyship contexts. Although this model is not a perfect fit given this context, it provides a fruitful starting point for assessing the ways in which co-option functions and is harmful to members of disadvantaged or marginalized groups.

positivity' to advocate for themselves, using it *for their own* purposes. When dominant groups practice this kind of taking from a marginalized group (be it a practice, language, symbol, or in this case, a campaign for justice), the taken thing sometimes becomes unavailable for those who used it originally. Indeed, the contemporary 'body positivity' movement seems to fit this model insofar as non-marginalized persons have taken the language of the movement to relate to and promote their own bodies and empowerment. Crucially, they have *taken this from* a marginalized group, making it such that fat people are now vilified or removed from the movement entirely—unless they are 'healthy'. When we understand the shift in the 'body positivity' movement *as co-opting* (as opposed to a natural evolution over time), several key ethical harms become apparent which we will now address.

#### 4 Three Key Harms

The first key harm resulting from the co-optation of the 'body positivity' movement is that the movement's original goals have been erased *without having been resolved or accomplished*. The current movement shifts the focus away from justice for fat people, towards acceptance of all bodies. However, justice for fat people has not yet been accomplished. The original 'body positivity' movement aimed to eradicate countless instances and structures of injustice from which fat people suffered. These structures and systems of injustice are still in place, continually harming fat people. As we discussed above, fat people face discrimination and exclusion in day to day life and are at the behest of false discourses equating fat with ill-health such that their medical care becomes inextricably bound to their perceived ill-health. Fat people regularly receive inadequate and discriminatory healthcare in which they are perceived as lazy, detestable, and noncompliant, and that is *if* they receive treatment.<sup>7</sup> They are routinely excluded from many facets of society, from clothing to transportation to equal consideration under

---

<sup>7</sup> See Puhl and Heuer (2009); Eaton (2016); Mull (2018).

law.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, fat people face regular microaggressions and bullying regarding their weight and health, unable to safely exist *as a fat person*.<sup>9</sup> The ‘body positivity’ movement was once one of few movements championing justice and acceptance of fat people. Its shift in focus where self-love and empowerment are front and centre, thus erases or (at best) ignores the unaccomplished goals of the original movement.

Secondly, in addition to the failure to address the original aims of the movement (ending discrimination towards fat people and gaining acceptance from the medical establishment), the current movement is ironically bathed in anti-fatness. Many of the companies who promote body positivity and inclusivity actively exclude fat people from their efforts. As Amanda Mull notes, clothing company Everlane “recently launched a new underwear line featuring a plus size model in its ad campaign,” in the interest of *appearing* inclusive and body positive, “despite making no actual plus-size underwear for sale” (Mull 2018).<sup>10</sup>

Further, many discussions of body positivity go as far as openly denigrating fatness. The ‘body positivity’ movement has effectively begun to move the goalposts of what body sizes are considered acceptable, bringing smaller fat bodies to the forefront and showing ‘real’ bodies with imperfections, textures, and different shapes than those historically highlighted in the media. However, many participants of and advocates for the ‘body positivity’ movement are anti-fat. They disparage fat women over a certain size, sometimes referred to as ‘pretty fat’ or ‘acceptable fat’ to denote a range of fatness that is sometimes deemed acceptable in relation to common beauty standards (Shakur 2017). Thus, larger fat people (often referred to as ‘superfat’ or ‘infinifat’) are kept out of the movement as their size is often deemed too unhealthy

---

8 See Cheap Air (2013); Hetrick and Attig (2009); Huff (2009).

9 See Your Fat Friend (2018); Rimm (2004); Weinstock and Krehbiel (2009).

10 At the time of this ad, Everlane sold underwear up to a size XL for a 84 cm [33 inches] waist, which corresponds to a UK 14 or US size 10 (considered straight-size, rather than plus-size).

or unacceptable to promote within the movement. Participants of the movement often claim that fat people who participate in the 'body positivity' movement are potentially dangerous and irresponsible as their participation is 'glorifying obesity'. These claims, rooted in anti-fatness, harm larger fat people by pushing them out of a space designed to protect and celebrate them. Given that the 'body positivity' movement at best moves the goalposts of what is considered acceptable fat, those who do not meet those standards are wrongly sanctioned and punished for their size, and are excluded from the mission of self-love and acceptance for which the current 'body positivity' movement advocates.

Finally, these societal attitudes, informed by an anti-fat 'body positivity' movement, help reinforce oppressive structures in society, resulting in an anti-fat society with few (if any) legal protections for fat people. As previously mentioned, an anti-fat society results in other legal, institutional, and structural inequalities that harm fat people. With very little prohibition of systemic discrimination based on weight, an anti-fat 'body positivity' movement deepens the threat towards fat people's wellbeing and livelihood. Fat people cannot afford to be excluded from one of the only movements originally centred on advocating on their behalf, as the lack of organised activism on their behalf allows society to remain stagnant and apathetic towards legally sanctioned or excused discrimination against fat people (Hobbes 2018). As such, co-opting the 'body positivity' movement and turning it into a movement that advocates for self-love as opposed to acceptance of fatness is ethically impermissible, as it threatens the lives of already marginalized people.

## 5 Two Objections

We will now briefly address two objections pertaining to our framing of the 'body positivity' movement as a harmful co-optation. Firstly, some might quibble whether the change in the movement is best summarised as a co-optation. Social movements change over time in scope and focus as the social context they are situated in changes. Could it not be the

case then that new (or perhaps different, or stronger) ideological aesthetic demands are being made on women's appearance, such that the empowerment strand of the movement – that which addresses one's relationship to oneself – has come to appeal to more people, and, as such, the radical political aims of the movement to restructure society's treatment of fat people have become a smaller focus as the movement has grown?

Heather Widdows argues that the beauty ideal—the ideal standard of feminine beauty against which women are judged—is becoming an ethical ideal (2018). The beauty ideal is not a single model, but a (relatively narrow) range of acceptable models, centring on women's bodies and faces, favouring thinness (perhaps with curves) and firmness. Widdows argues that the beauty ideal is emerging as a standard against which we judge our own (and others) success and failure, goodness, and practices of daily existence. She argues that we are beginning to see engagement in practices that will bring us closer to beauty norms as “good in and of themselves, not just prudentially or to comply with a social norm, but intrinsically” (Widdows 2018, 28). Rather than tying into other goods, such as wanting to be healthy, beauty work, such as everyday grooming or cosmetic surgery, appears to be valued because we are coming to esteem the act of attaining beauty as a good in itself. Failure to be or strive to be beautiful effectively ends up as a failure of the self. When one has ‘let oneself go’ then this is deemed a morally bad action; it is shameful and the unbeautiful person is deemed disgusting. Widdows contends that shame does the same work in accounts of beauty failure as in traditional accounts of moral failure.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 We can see evidence of the all-encompassing nature of the beauty ideal on one's self-conception in statistics about current relationships to our bodies. Widdows writes that “preschool girls between three and five exhibited strong preferences for thinness” (2018, 69) and that “there are a whole host of things that girls report they do not do because of their low body confidence: from wearing clothes they like, to having their pictures taken, to taking part in sport, and to speaking up in class. If we add this to the evidence the harms of body dissatisfaction, then unquestionably worries about appearance severely limit what girls can be and do” (Ibid).

As such, perhaps we can see the shift in the ‘body positivity’ movement as an expansion of the original movement, aiming towards resistance of the aesthetic and moral imperative the beauty ideal has come to dictate. We might even want to deem this expansion as good insofar as it is more inclusive, recognising that *all* bodies are ‘good’ bodies. The beauty ideal is clearly oppressive and the ‘body positivity’ movement has reacted by expanding to resist the ideal.<sup>12</sup>

However, this is precisely the problem that we have attempted to outline. We are not trying to suggest that the social context in which the movement exists has not changed such that more and more people are beholden to various aesthetic (and perhaps ethical) norms pertaining to our bodies. But we do wish to challenge that the ways in which the norms effect and play out within our lives differs. As long as one is in possession of a body more in line with the beauty ideal, the less structural and institutional barriers one will face in their day to day life and, we contend, the more strongly one might be able to leave behind the affective dimension of the beauty ideal. Whilst the beauty ideal is so stringent as to make many people feel they do not meet it, not meeting it by a small degree is different to not even existing on the same plane as it. Positioning thin, white, cisgendered, youthful, and beautiful women as the recipients of the ‘body positivity’ movement may do some work to undermine the aesthetic and ethical imperative of the beauty ideal, but unless it addresses its anti-fat rhetoric then the serious ethical harms that we outlined above will remain.<sup>13</sup> ‘Body positivity’ will remain a marketing implement for capitalism and a salve for some women’s under-confidence, without rectifying unjust institutions and laws.

---

12 Examples of body confidence campaigns that aim towards this are the Dove Real Bodies campaign, discussed above, and Radhika Sanghani’s Side Profile Selfie campaign.

13 We contend that whilst the body confidence movement might be able to slightly alter the beauty ideal, as it currently stands it is more likely to create a new ideal standard of normative beauty. Whilst this new standard might have slightly larger goalposts, it will not ultimately change the game.

Framing the shift as an incidental evolution in the ‘body positivity’ movement ignores the serious ramifications that allow ‘body positivity’ to be turned into what Rutter calls ‘Socially Acceptable Body Positivity’: a movement primarily centred on bodies that are already accepted anyway (2017). The contemporary ‘body positivity’ movement promotes bodies which society does not attack or target in the same way. These bodies are not the bodies against which regular systemic and institutional injustices are committed in virtue of their body and appearance. In other words, part of the issue in *all* bodies being a part of the ‘body positivity’ movement is that society has not discriminated against or disenfranchised *all* bodies as such. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a movement changing over time, the current ideology behind the ‘body positivity’ movement undermines the aims of the *original* movement in ways that are violent, as we have outlined above. Again, whilst these people are entitled to, and deserve the social conditions to, love their bodies, and acceptance of *all* bodies is an important aim, the use of the hashtag or language of ‘body positivity’ redirects that movement’s focus away from marginalized bodies.

This leads us to the second potential objection to our argument: that the new focus on *empowerment* in ‘body positivity’ discourse will perhaps be even more necessary and useful for those who were the recipients of the movement’s initial aims. In an increasingly looks-obsessed culture, with a beauty ideal that values thinness and firmness becoming more entrenched, is the capacity to demand a broader understanding of beauty not important, both personally and politically?

Again, we are sympathetic to this claim. Some of those who are furthest from the standards that it sets up will no doubt feel the beauty ideal intensely. But until the institutions and structures change it is likely that this insistence will remain necessary. Altering our relationship to fatness politically might turn out to be a precondition to altering it aesthetically. It does not seem likely that personal and societal acceptance

that someone who is fat is merely fat, or even beautifully fat, will do the necessary work to dismantle the correlating false discourses surrounding what it currently means to exist in a fat body: namely, that one must or may be unhealthy or unintelligent.

We take both counterarguments to be addressing the same thing: that the co-opted movement's search for aesthetically directed self-love, self-empowerment, and self-respect in the face of a firmly entrenched narrow beauty ideal is worthwhile, and we agree. Nevertheless, we contend that it is possible to pursue these goals without appropriating the language and destroying the efficacy of the original 'body positivity' movement.

## 6 Conclusion

We have argued that today's 'body positivity' movement is a violent, harmful act of co-opting, one which further marginalizes the very people it initially aimed to protect. As the movement has become inextricably tied up with a fight to un-norm beauty norms and combat the crisis in confidence that these instil, what was originally a movement aiming towards respect, dignity, adequate medical care, and justice for fat people, has further entrenched the fatphobia it initially sought to eradicate. Moreover, this marginalization helps foster further social stigma around fatness, which in turn perpetuates legal and structural inequalities against fat people.

It is crucial that we critically reflect on our learned fat-phobia and the ways in which the 'body positivity' movement has shifted over time, hurting the very groups it aimed to protect. As Dionne argues,

body positivity can't focus on thin, white women and simultaneously tackle discrimination against fat, trans, and disabled people. Expanding legal protections must be the focus [of the body positivity movement], otherwise the outcomes of our lives will continue to be determined by fatpho-

bia, transphobia, and ableism. Until body positivity centres that, the message will continue to be that all bodies are good bodies, but some bodies are still treated better than others. (Dionne 2017)

There is a genuine question regarding the best way to continue and to navigate the current 'body positivity' movement. Given its extensive popularisation, it would be difficult (if even possible) to return the movement to its rightful owners without first educating people on the oppressive structures which gave rise to the movement in the first place.

Regarding the aims of self-empowerment that have overtaken the current movement, Sonya Renee Taylor's concept of 'radical self-love' may be of use to resist the beauty ideal (2018). This concept allows people to tear down self-judgment and body shame, both of which are a result of "ancient, toxic messages about bodies" (Taylor 2018, 10). Radical self-love is an ongoing process that requires an ability to recognize and accept differences in bodies, experience, and lives, and to accept and refuse to apologize for your own body (Ibid 19-24). Moreover, this movement requires critical reflection on the commercialization of beauty in order to unpack the harmful learned prejudices we have developed against certain body types. With time, Taylor argues, we can and should learn to unpack our desire to apologize for our bodies, dismantling body-based hierarchies and challenging our learned assumptions about bodies, health, and shame (Ibid 33-34).

Regardless of whether we focus on this aim of body neutrality or radical self-love (or a combination of the two), it is crucial that we recognize how corporations have perpetuated body discrimination and self-hate in ways that uphold oppressive institutions and policies in society. It is only through recognition of this destructive pattern that we can begin to confront a fat-phobic society and address the aims of the initial 'body positivity' movement.

## References

- Alptraum, Lux, 'A Short History of 'Body Positivity'', *Fusion* (published online 2017) <<https://fusion.tv/story/582813/a-short-history-of-body-positivity/>> accessed 29th May 2020.
- Anon, 'History of Body Positivity', *Passion Blog* (published online 2018) <<https://sites.psu.edu/halepassionblog/2018/02/26/history-of-body-positivity/>> accessed 29th May 2020.
- Burgard, Deb, 'What Is 'Health at Every Size'? In Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (ed.), *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 43-53.
- Cawley, John, 'The Impact of Obesity on Wages', *The Journal of Human Resources* (2004) 39:2, 451-74.
- CheapAir.com, 'Airline Policies for Overweight Passengers Traveling This Summer', CheapAir (published online 2013) <<http://www.cheapair.com/blog/travel-tips/airline-policies-for-overweight-passengers-traveling-this-summer/>> accessed 29th May 2020.
- Dionne, Evette, 'The Fragility of Body Positivity', *bitchmedia* (published online 2017) <<https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/fragility-body-positivity>> accessed 29th May 2020.
- Droogendyk, Lisa. Wright, Stephen C. Lubensky, Micah. and Louis, Winnifred R., 'Acting in Solidarity: Cross-Group Contact between Disadvantaged Group Members and Advantaged Group Allies', *Journal of Social Issues* (2016), 72:2, 315-34.
- Eaton, Anne W. "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression." In Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 37-59.
- Hetrick, Ashley. and Attig, Derek, 'Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess', In Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (ed.), *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 197-204.
- Huff, Joyce L. 'Access to the Sky: Airplane Seats and Fat Bodies ad Contested Spaces', In Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (ed.), *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 176-86.
- Friend, Your Fat, 'Body Positivity and It's Discontents', *Medium* (published online 2017) <[Medium.com/@thefatshadow/body-positivity-and-its-discontents-f9034e98957a](https://medium.com/@thefatshadow/body-positivity-and-its-discontents-f9034e98957a)> accessed 29th May 2020.

Friend, Your Fat, 'On Your Concern for Your Fat Friend's Health', *Your Fat Friend* (published online 2018) <<https://www.yourfatfriend.com/home/2018/5/10/on-your-concern-for-your-fat-friends-health>> accessed 29th May 2020.

Hobbes, Michael, 'Everything You Know About Obesity Is Wrong', *The Huffington Post* (published online 2018) <<https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/everything-you-know-about-obesity-is-wrong/>> accessed 29th May 2020.

Irvin, Sherri, 'Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach', *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* (2017) 3:4, 1–26.

Mull, Amanda, 'Body Positivity Is a Scam', *Vox* (published online 2018) <<https://www.vox.com/2018/6/5/17236212/body-positivity-scam-dove-campaign-ads>> accessed 29th May 2020.

Puhl, Rebecca M. and Heuer, Chelsea A., 'The Stigma of Obesity: A Review and Update', *Obesity* (2009) 17:5, 941–64.

Rimm, Sylvia, *Rescuing the Emotional Lives of Overweight Children* (Emmaus, PA: Roadale Press, 2004).

Rutter, Bethany, 'How 'Body Positivity' Lost Its True and Radical Meaning', *Dazed Digital* (published online 2017) <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35746/1/how-body-positivity-lost-its-true-and-radical-meaning>> accessed 29th May 2020.

Shakur, Aaminah, 'On Fatness: Acceptable Fat, Respectability, & the Silencing of Super Fats', *Medium* (published online 2017) <<https://medium.com/@aaminahshakur/on-fatness-acceptable-fat-respectability-the-silencing-of-super-fats-e061f5d84170>> accessed 29th May 2020.

Taylor, Sonya Renee, *The Body Is Not An Apology* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2018).

Torish, Yofi, 'The Right to Be Fat', *Yale Journal of Health Policy, Law and Ethics* (2012) 12:2, 264–355.

Weinstock, Jacqueline. and Krehbiel, Michelle, 'Fat Youth as Common Targets for Bullying', In Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (ed.), *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 120–6.

Widdows, Heather, *Perfect Me* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).





# FICTION, POETRY AND TRANSLATION

## A CRITIQUE OF OPACITY

Eliza Ives  
University of New Brunswick

*This essay will criticize Peter Lamarque's claim in *The Opacity of Narrative* that reading for 'opacity' is the way to read literature as literature. I will summarize the idea of 'opacity' and consider the plausibility of this claim through an examination of Lamarque's related comments on translation. The argument for 'opacity', although it insists on the importance of attention to a work's form in the apprehension of its content, involves, at the same time, a certain obliviousness to form, indicated in the first instance by an unpersuasive conflation of lyric poetry and prose fiction. Through a comparison of opposing approaches to the translation of a novel written in verse, and an analysis of why the translation of poetry is generally understood to be more challenging than the translation of prose, I will argue that reading for 'opacity' does not adequately capture what it means to read literature as literature.*

## 1 Opacity

What is opacity? In the first essay of *The Opacity of Narrative*, ‘Opacity, Fiction and Narratives of the Self’, Peter Lamarque provides an initial characterization, claiming that opacity is a “prominent feature” of “literary fictional” narratives:

In the literary fictional case, the events and characters that make up the content are *constituted* by the modes of their presentation in the narrative. Their identity is determined by the narrative itself such that they are not merely contingently but essentially connected to the descriptions that characterise them. (Lamarque 2014, 3)

A novel’s events and characters exist in the precise words and sentences written by its author. It is not possible to describe the events and characters of a novel in different ways or to consider them from other perspectives. The narrative descriptions are not “a window through which an independently existing (fictional) world is observed” but “an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it” (Ibid.).

## 2 Two Related Kinds of Opacity

By way of W.V.O. Quine, Gottlob Frege and Roger Scruton, Lamarque describes two parallel ways in which opacity might occur: referential and representational opacity. Referential opacity is the idea that “in certain contexts names or singular descriptions do not act in a ‘purely referential’ or ‘transparent’ manner” (Ibid., 4). In an opaque sentence, substituting synonyms or “co-extensional terms” alters the content. In a transparent sentence, content is not dependent on a specific wording. The same content can be accessed in different ways. Opacity can also occur in visual forms. Representational opacity depends on a contrast between photography and painting. In a painting “the way an object

is depicted *matters* as much as mere denotation” (Ibid., 8). Lamarque quotes Scruton’s claim that a painting “is *itself* the object of interest and irreplaceable by the thing depicted” and that, therefore, the “interest is not in representation for the sake of its subject but in representation for its own sake” (Ibid., 8).

### 3 Transparency, Opacity and Art

In a transparent sentence, depiction, or narrative the aim is to communicate or present the subject clearly and the subject itself is the proper focus of interest whereas in an opaque sentence, depiction, or narrative the particular way in which the subject is presented is the primary focus of interest. The content of a transparent sentence is ‘coarse’ because it is not tied to a particular composition of words. Transparent sentences are interchangeable. The content of an opaque sentence is ‘fine-grained’ as it is tied to a particular composition of words. Opaque sentences are singular. A sentence, depiction, or narrative may be both transparent and opaque, may have both a ‘coarse’ and a ‘fine-grained’ content, depending on the interest that is taken in it. The claim that a work of art is opaque is, in essence, the claim that the work’s salient content is ‘fine-grained’. It is singular: tied inextricably to form and inseparable from it.

### 4 Opacity, Fiction and Literature

A narrative, on this account, is the simple notion of a story: “the representation of two or more events, real or imaginary, from a point of view, with some degree of structure and connectedness” (Ibid., 1). Lamarque’s particular focus is on “narratives that aspire to be *works of art*: narratives that we call ‘literature’” (Ibid., 2). Although on this view literature includes some works of non-fiction, the intention is to examine literary fiction: “it is the combination of their literary and their fictional qualities that is of special interest” (Ibid.). However, while the initial characterization of opacity is presented in terms of imagined or invented events and characters, the first example used to demonstrate

opacity is a poem, *The Darkling Thrush* by Thomas Hardy (Ibid., 3). The events and characters of this narrative are not “constituted” by their “modes of presentation” in the way that might be claimed of those of Hardy’s novels and so the choice is initially puzzling. But Lamarque gives a reason: “[n]arratives in poetry provide clear examples of the phenomenon.” (Ibid.) Therefore, although Lamarque’s stated interest is literary fiction, the phenomenon of opacity is not specific to fictional narratives. It is, rather, argued to be a phenomenon of all literature. The argument for opacity is an argument about how literature should be read when it is read as literature.

## 5 Reading a Novel as a Poem

The claim that *The Darkling Thrush* provides an example of the phenomenon of opacity amounts to the observation that its formal qualities—its texture, vocabulary, metre, rhyme scheme, sibilance, and alliteration—are all crucial in creating its salient content:

To bring to mind the requisite images, these epithets must play an essential, not merely contingent, role. It is not as if other ways of capturing the scene would be just as effective, for the scene itself derives its very identity (including its mood and character) through these exact lines. (Ibid., 4)

The claim is persuasive enough with respect to this poem. Hardy uses a distinctive poetic diction. The poem has a musical rhythm and a regular rhyme scheme. It is easy to agree that substituting a synonym—such as ‘feathers’ for ‘plume’—would corrupt the poem. But while this suggests something about the indissoluble form-content identity of poetry, or, more precisely, of this particularly dense and lyrical poem, what does it indicate about fiction or literature more broadly?

In the eighth essay of the collection, ‘Thought, Opacity and the Values of Literature’, using another Thomas Hardy poem, *After the Burial*, as his

example, Lamarque observes that in the context of poetry “the thought that form and content are somehow intimately connected is a commonplace of the literary community” (Ibid., 152) and that this is “sometimes explained in terms of unparaphraseability” (Ibid., 154). A poem can however, as Lamarque observes, always be paraphrased. The real issue is that “it is not a matter of indifference if a reader reads the poem or a paraphrase”:

Part of the reason for this is that if one is taking an interest in the poem *as a poem*, then one should be receptive to the overall *experience* that the poem affords, and that experience is partially determined by the very words and structures themselves. There is always more to a poem than just a core meaning that could be expressed in other ways. (Ibid.)

A poem “never just makes a statement in which *what* is stated is indifferent to *how* it is stated” (Ibid.). The mention of indifference connects to an earlier formulation of opacity: “Opacity occurs when the narrative is not indifferent to how the items are identified or characterised.” (Ibid., 6) Poetry might therefore be thought to provide clear examples of the phenomenon of opacity because it is in poetry that the resources of a language are often most fully exploited. But Lamarque claims that a lyric poem and a prose novel are alike in this respect:

It might be thought that form-content indivisibility is a peculiarity of poetry in which fine-grained attention to language is integral to the kind of experience that poetry offers, and for which it is valued. But narrative opacity also shows how form helps determine content in prose narrative. In a literary novel, it is not a matter of indifference how scenes are depicted, as if *the very same* scenes might have been described in any other manner. (Ibid., 154)

The claim is that a prose novel, if it is literature, if it aspires to be a work of art, will possess a form-content indivisibility similar to that of a lyric poem. As an example, Lamarque highlights Dickens' use of the word 'peep' in *Bleak House*:

A single word in so long of a novel might seem of marginal significance—and thus easily substitutable—but the lesson from narrative opacity is that there is a standing assumption that the form of narration *counts* in the characterisation of content. The word “peep”, in this example, is not accidental; it has a function and salience in the narrative: it connects scenes, it holds nuances (“childish inquisitiveness”), it contributes to an atmosphere (“a partial and fragmented view of things”). Part of the pleasure of reading Dickens is savouring his use of language; the distinctive features of his characterisation and scene depiction are determined by their precise linguistic delineation. In that sense, form and content are indivisible even in novelistic narrative. Part of the pleasure of reading Dickens is savouring his use of language; the distinctive features of his characterisation and scene depiction are determined by their precise linguistic delineation. In that sense, form and content are indivisible even in novelistic narrative. (Ibid., 155)

But is the word 'peep' in *Bleak House* as essential as the word 'plume' in *The Darkling Thrush*? Changing the word in the novel wouldn't cause issues with the scansion, nor would it disrupt a rhyme scheme. To substitute a synonym—'peek' or 'glimpse'—would be a subtler alteration than 'feathers' for 'plume'. Lamarque asserts that form and content are indivisible in a novel just as they are in a poem, and then he seems to demur: “[p]erhaps,” he considers, “all the vital meaning in a literary narrative could indeed be preserved through such (small, intermittent)

substitutions”—but, even if true, “the idea that this might somehow licence rewording of literary works is absurd at many levels” because “changes, even preserving sense, would be unacceptable and undermine work identity” (Ibid, 154-155).

This comment seems to ignore the role of first readers and editors. Rather than undermining a work’s identity, their suggestions, alterations, substitutions, and cuts arguably strengthen it, or at least aim to. There are famous examples in both poetry and prose: Ezra Pound and *The Waste Land*; Gordon Lish and Raymond Carver’s short stories. Furthermore, poems and novels seem to have divergent exigencies, pressures, and preoccupations. That poets and novelists tend to use language in quite different ways is suggested by the fact that few writers excel in both forms. Hardy is a rare exception. But it is not necessary to insist on this, nor to argue for a hard distinction between poetry and prose, so much as to recognise that the argument for strict form-content indivisibility is very persuasive when attributed to certain literary narratives and much less persuasive when applied to others. In fact, Lamarque himself recognises this when he states that narratives in poetry provide “clear examples” of the phenomenon of opacity. His ultimate claim, however, is that transparency and opacity should be seen as forms of attention a reader pays to a work rather than as properties of certain narratives or as “intrinsic qualities of a text”:

We can read (or interpret) a narrative transparently or opaquely relative to the interest we bring to it and the kind of attention we give to its linguistic form. (Ibid., 11-12)

Poems and novels can be paraphrased, and they are always transparent in this sense, but no paraphrase of a literary work is equivalent to the original because of the importance attached to the “precise fineness of expression in identifying the work’s content”:

Relative to certain interests (“what happens in the novel”), a good plot summary has the “same content” as the novel itself. Of course, relative to other interests (“the literary qualities of the novel”) the plot summary is not substitutable and its content is not the same. (Ibid., 12)

Reading transparently, a paraphrase is equivalent to the original work. Reading opaquely, a paraphrase is not equivalent. And reading opaquely is reading the work as literature.

## 6 Opacity as Attention

The swerve to present opacity as a kind of interest or attention that a reader elects to pay to certain narratives when reading them as literature, rather than as a property that certain narratives possess and which compels and rewards this kind of attention, makes the claim of opacity seem rather tenuous. If the phenomenon of opacity is more evident in certain narratives than others, then reading for opacity is surely a more appropriate reading strategy in these cases. But if reading for opacity is a mode of attention that a reader elects to pay to a narrative, the attempt to establish a connection between opacity and literature fails unless there is a further claim about *how* precisely narratives aspire to be literature or works of art. And, indeed, Lamarque argues that there is a “substantial connection” between opacity and literature precisely because the “value of literature” is “deeply involved with the intricacies of linguistic artifice”:

The form in which a literary work is constructed is not a merely contingent fact about it; it is absolutely essential to both its identity and its value as literature. (Ibid., 13)

The argument for opacity is therefore based on a formalist preconception that the value of literature is found in its formal features, in the language used to create it, and, consequently, it exhibits circular reasoning.

If genuinely considering the question of the value of literature, it is not sufficient to assert that form is “absolutely essential”. Instead, we should ask: Is a work’s value as literature always and principally dependent on its formal qualities, on its precise wording?

## 7 Two Kinds of Reader

The weakness of the argument is perhaps revealed by Lamarque’s brief comments on translation. Translation, he claims, is a “special case of paraphrasability” and:

The ambivalent attitude that readers have towards translations of literary fictional narratives reflects the view we have taken about the interest-relativity of narrative content. For some, a good translation is indeed substitutable for the original such that to have read the translation counts as having read the work itself. For others, however good a translation, it is never substitutable without loss. Those in the former camp are satisfied that a fairly stringent criterion of “sameness of meaning” will preserve the content that needs to be preserved. Their interest in the narrative as, in effect, propositional content will be served if propositional meaning is retained. Those in the latter camp make even stricter demands of narrative content. Propositional meaning matters, as do far more fine-grained aspects underlying the precise way that meaning is conveyed, including nuance, connotation, tone, character and so on. Their reading maximises opacity. (Ibid., 12)

Lamarque characterizes two supposedly prominent attitudes to literary translation that reflect the two perspectives that can be taken on the question of whether or not a paraphrase preserves salient content: readers who are interested primarily in plot or “what happens in the

novel”—propositional or ‘coarse’ content—will be satisfied that a good translation is substitutable for the original whereas those interested in this content but, moreover, in the “literary qualities of the novel”—‘fine-grained’ content—will have an ambivalent attitude towards translation. The latter kind of reader reads for opacity and therefore reads literature as literature. Such readers have an interest in the “intricacies of linguistic artifice”, in the more nuanced and subtle experiential content of the work and its significance, in addition to and beyond the propositional meaning of the words.

## 8 Translation and Value

Is this an adequate characterisation of translation and of readers’ attitudes to it? In all works of literature, form and content are in productive interplay — but translation is quite unlike paraphrase in that it aims to capture not just the meaning or sense of the original, but also its salient formal qualities. Competent, sensitive, or ‘serious’ readers, when considering the question of whether a translation is a good substitute for its original, will surely have a nuanced understanding that is based on the narrative in question and the competence of the translator, rather than an unqualified ambivalence. Significantly, as poet and translator Martha Collins observes in the introduction to *Into English* (Collins and Prufer 2017), poetry presents a distinctive challenge to translators. Part of the reason for this may be that poets tend to use language in a more ‘opaque’ way than novelists. That is, they might select words as much or more for their material qualities as for their meaning. A poet might use the sounds of words—their first letters, stresses, vowels, syllables, and endings—to create a notable pattern of metre, rhyme and rhythm, and the etymology of words, their synonyms, homophones, associations, and nuances may be as significant to the poem as what they denote. This creates a synergy between form and content. Novels too may pose different levels of challenge to translators. Novelist and translator Tim Parks, for example, notes the “current enthusiasm for the practice of

literary translation” and the “frequent claims” that translations have captured the originals, but he argues that “some literary styles remain elusive in translation” (Parks 2019, 17). Such literary styles might be characterised as opaque or as inviting opaque readings.

A translator, like an editor, critic, or ‘serious’ reader, pays attention to language and to meaning, to form and content, and to their interaction. She interprets the work and makes judgements about what is significant and what incidental. The fact that some works of literature exploit the resources of the language they are written in to the extent that they are considered ‘untranslatable’, or translatable only with significant loss, while others can be translated with comparative ease, suggests that the value of literature is not, in all cases, “deeply involved with the intricacies of linguistic artifice”, as Lamarque claims, and also suggests that form and content are not always so “essentially connected” as he insists. The content that is inevitably lost or altered in translation is significant for certain works of literature and much less or hardly significant for others. In the translation of prose it is generally more possible to capture both the salient formal features and the precise meaning of the original work, and therefore it is more likely that a good translation can be considered a good substitute.

### 8.1 *Eugene Onegin*

Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* provides an interesting and instructive example of the tensions at play in this discussion as it is, unconventionally, a novel written in verse; notably the ‘Onegin’ stanza—fourteen lines of iambic tetrameter that end in a repeating pattern of both masculine and feminine rhymes. David Bethea remarks that “capturing *Eugene Onegin* in English has come to represent something like the ‘three minute mile’ of translating skill”:

The question is not whether the barrier—that is, a precise English substitute, in *all* respects, of Pushkin’s Russian—can

be reached, but how close one can come, given the obstacles. (Bethea 1984, 112)

When it is impossible to capture both, should the translator preserve the verse form at the expense of meaning and sense, or capture meaning and sense at the expense of the verse form? The answer depends on what the translator chooses to prioritise and therefore on what is perceived to be more essential to the literary work and its value as literature. Walter Arndt's translation, published in 1963, prioritises form. The first stanza reads:

Now that he is in grave condition  
 My uncle, decorous old prune,  
 Has earned himself my recognition;  
 What could have been more opportune?  
 May his idea inspire others;  
 But what a bore, I ask you, brothers,  
 To tend a patient night and day  
 And venture not a step away:  
 Is there hypocrisy more glaring  
 Than to amuse one all but dead,  
 Shake up the pillow for his head,  
 Dose him with melancholy bearing,  
 And think behind a stifled cough:  
 'When will the Devil haul you off?' (Pushkin 1963, 5)

Vladimir Nabokov, contemptuous of this approach, argues that Arndt's version corrupts the meaning of the original to an unacceptable degree. "Passive readers" perhaps might derive "a casual illusion of sense".

A sympathetic reader, especially one who does not consult the original, may find in Mr. Arndt's version more or less sus-

tained stretches of lulling poetastry and specious sense; but anybody with less benevolence and more knowledge will see how patchy the passable really is. (Nabokov 1964)

Nabokov accuses Arndt of a “chancrous metaphor”, “meretricious” and “burlesque rhymes”, “crippled clichés”, “mongrel idioms”, “vulgarisms”, and “stale slang” (Ibid.), although he acknowledges the difficulty of the task and in fact claims that to “reproduce the rhymes, and yet translate the entire poem literally” is “mathematically impossible” (Pushkin 2018, xxvii). Nabokov’s own translation, published in 1964, prioritises “completeness of meaning” above “every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity” as well as “elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar” (Ibid., xxviii).

My uncle has most honest principles:  
when taken ill in earnest,  
he has made one respect him  
and nothing better could invent.  
To others his example is a lesson,  
but, good God, what a bore,  
to sit by a sick man both day and night,  
without moving a step away!  
What base perfidiousness  
the half-alive one to amuse,  
adjust for him the pillows,  
sadly present the medicine,  
sigh—and think inwardly  
when will the devil take you? (Pushkin 2018, 1)

Nabokov acknowledges that the work “loses its bloom” but nonetheless considers the project of “literal” translation worthwhile and preferable

to the alternative of “paraphrastic” translation. Nabokov also produced an extensive commentary to help English readers understand *Eugene Onegin*’s exact contextual meaning.

To some degree, the dispute between Arndt and Nabokov reflects the two kinds of reader that Lamarque has identified, one focussed on formal qualities and the other on propositional meaning, but the divergence occurs not because of ‘strict’ or ‘loose’ demands on narrative content, but because of the distinctive challenge *Eugene Onegin* presents and which compels a translator to choose between a translation strategy that prioritises form and one that prioritises meaning. Nabokov’s approach is certainly unconventional. Despite his derision, “paraphrastic” translations of *Eugene Onegin* continue to appear—each one attempting again to preserve both the precise meaning and the formal aspects of the Russian in English<sup>1</sup>—and this common approach of translators indicates support for the notion that the experiential or aesthetic content of the verse is generally considered to be of more importance than its precise sense. But Nabokov’s position compels deeper reflection on the extent to which it is accurate to consider propositional content ‘coarse’ and experiential content ‘fine-grained’. His protests highlight, perhaps surprisingly because he is known as a stylist, that a reader interested primarily in the sensuous or experiential qualities of the language is just as much a ‘passive’ reader as one who is principally interested in the plot. Furthermore, *what* the language is being used to say, to the extent that this is separable from *how* it is said in the exact words of the original, is of such significance that, on Nabokov’s view, *Eugene Onegin* remains of interest and value as literature even when stripped to a large extent of its ‘literary’ qualities. Both Arndt and Nabokov surely agree on the importance of the original work’s sense as much as its cadence. The disagreement arises over which ought to be prioritised when it is impossible to preserve both. The practice of

---

1 These include translations by Charles Johnston (1975), James E. Folen (1995) and Stanley Mitchell (2008).

producing prose translations of narrative poems, particularly of ancient works, highlights the significance of ‘propositional meaning’ to the value of literature and also suggests that there is more to reading literature as literature than reading for opacity.

## 9 Conclusion

As Lamarque acknowledges, the ‘referential opacity’ characterised by Quine can occur “in discourse of any kind” (Lamarque 2014, 5). Translator and writer William Weaver notes that “literary or writerly language is much easier to translate than dialect and popular speech” (Weaver 2003), which indicates that form and content may be just as indissolubly connected in vernacular as they are in verse. Opacity therefore doesn’t seem to be so much a phenomenon of literature but of language in certain occurrences or uses. Lamarque instead insists that:

We do not discover that certain fine writing is unparaphrasable, but we insist that no paraphrase of a literary work is substitutable for the original because of the importance we attach to that precise fineness of expression in identifying the work’s content. We read for opacity. (Lamarque 2014, 12)

But it is important not to conflate “literary” or “fine” writing with ‘literature’. These are not equivalent terms, as Lamarque elsewhere observes, and for certain narratives: “Other reasons altogether qualify the writing as literature or as art.” (Ibid., 175) Different works, surely, require readings with different emphases. Certain works may be valued principally for their “precise linguistic delineation” or “precise fineness of expression”, but if literature is a supple and expansive category—one that includes lyric poetry and free verse, everyday speech and formal registers, dense narratives in which language occludes propositional content and lucid narratives written in simple sentences—then it is necessary to consider each work and its value *as literature* in its singularity. To eluci-

date the significance and value of literature as literature, it is necessary to consider what these “other reasons” might be.

## References

Bethea, David M., ‘Review’, *The Slavic and East European Journal* (1984) 28:1, 112-114.

Collins, Martha. and Prufer, Kevin, *Into English: Poems, Translations, Commentaries* (Toronto: Graywolf Press, 2017).

Lamarque, Peter, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

Nabokov, Vladimir, ‘On Translating Pushkin: Pounding the Clavichord’, *The New York Review of Books* (30 April, 1964) <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1964/04/30/on-translating-pushkin-pounding-the-clavichord/>> accessed 30 January, 2020.

Parks, Tim, ‘Full of Words’, *London Review of Books* (2019), 17-18 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n16/tim-parks/full-of-words>> accessed 30 January, 2020.

Pushkin, Alexander, *Eugene Onegin*, transl. Walter Arndt (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963).

—, *Eugene Onegin*, transl. Vladimir Nabokov (1964; Princeton: Princeton Classics, 2018).

Weaver, William, ‘The Art of Translation No. 3’ Interview by William Spiegelman, *The Paris Review* (2002) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/421/william-weaver-the-art-of-translation-no-3-william-weaver>> accessed 30 January, 2020.





# KANT'S THEORY OF LAUGHTER

Mojca Kuplen  
Alfred University

*In this paper I offer an alternative interpretation of Immanuel Kant's theory of laughter that can meet the challenges left behind by the interpretations that have so far been given. I argue that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, which takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system: namely, that it is insufficient to explain all of our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world. In this respect, laughter stands in a direct opposition to Kant's notion of the sublime.*

## 1 Introduction

In this paper I offer an alternative interpretation of Immanuel Kant's theory of laughter that can meet the challenges left behind by the interpretations that have so far been given. Contemporary interpretations tend to explain Kant's notion of laughter as a species of the beautiful, sublime, or both. In short, they argue that the concept of laughter is similar to the concept of the beautiful in that it originates in a disinterested play between cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding, yet dissimilar to the beautiful in that the play is disharmonious, rather than harmonious, resulting instead in the feeling of displeasure. On the other hand, laughter also shares similarities with the sublime in that its discordance evokes a purposive relationship between the faculties of imagination and reason, thereby resulting in the feeling of pleasure. As Patrick Giamario, one of the proponents of this view, writes:

The pleasure of laughter consists in how the contrapurposiveness of a joke paradoxically stimulates the free activity of reason. The joke is purposive from the perspective of reason because the laughter it generates stimulates reason to freely transform its principles for thinking about and acting in the sensible world. (Giamario 2017, 172)

However, there are many difficulties with such an interpretation. Firstly, it fails to accord with Kant's characterization of pleasure inherent in laughter as a kind of relief (KU 5:332, 209). Pleasure characterized as a relief signifies a reduction of that something, which produces tension and frustration and thus a reduction of the disagreement between cognitive faculties. This suggests that the source of pleasure lies in the elimination of disharmony between the imagination and understanding rather than in additionally acquired harmony between imagination and reason.

Secondly, the interpretation of pleasure in laughter as originating in the satisfaction of the faculty of reason and its ideas does not appear to be consistent with the material content distinctive for objects that occasion laughter. Namely, the faculty of reason is associated with ideas of freedom, god, and immortality, and as such it expresses ideas that celebrate the rational and moral side of our being, such as life-affirming ideas of compassion, peace, virtue, gentleness, courage, altruism, etc. Yet objects that occasion laughter tend to express ideas that are opposite to rational ideas, such as ideas of irrationality, mortality, moral and physical weakness, clumsiness, absent-mindedness, etc., all of them emphasizing the finite, the sensuous, and the smallness of a human character. For example, we laugh at Mr. Bean's clumsiness and helplessness in practical matters, at the dishonest, insecure, stingy, and selfish nature of George Constanza in *Seinfeld*, or at the confrontational, irritable, and socially awkward manners of Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Since comical objects tend to communicate ideas that stand in opposition to the ideas of reason, it does not seem to be a tenable position to explain pleasure inherent in laughter as the result of the purposive relationship between imagination and reason.

Thirdly, interpretations given so far fail to account for the distinction between the notion of laughter and ugliness, presumably both depending on the mental state of disharmony between imagination and understanding. As Giamario explains:

The subject laughs when the understanding cannot make sense of the world with the empirical concepts and rules it normally employs. As the world of appearances diverges from its expectations, the understanding experiences a certain frustration before suddenly relaxing and providing the subject with the paradoxical pleasure of laughter. (Giamario 2017, 167)

However, Kant explains ugliness in a similar way, namely as the result of the object's resistance to be subsumed under the established concepts and rules of the understanding. Ugliness depends on the feeling of displeasure due to the "discord of freedom, in the play of the power of imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding" (Anthr 7:241, 137). We find an object ugly when the sensible manifold apprehended by the imagination conflicts with the understanding and its need to establish order and unity over the heterogeneity of the manifold. Accordingly, this interpretation raises the question as to why it is the case that, even though both laughter and ugliness depend on the state of mind of disharmony between imagination and understanding (i.e. they both involve a certain kind of incongruity that is ill-adapted to our cognitive faculties), we should after all feel pleasure in the former, while not in the latter.

Appealing to the similarity between Kant's notion of laughter and the sublime cannot solve this problem. This is because the disharmony involved in the sublime takes place between the faculties of imagination and reason and not between imagination and the understanding as in laughter. As Kant writes, the experience of the sublime is the result of the failure of imagination to satisfy the task given to it by the faculty of reason: namely, to sensibly present the rational idea of infinity (infinite size in the mathematical sublime and infinite power in the dynamical sublime). It is the disharmony between imagination and reason that produces the feeling of displeasure. Yet the fact that imagination fails to satisfy the task given to it by reason, on the other hand, indicates the existence of the supersensible faculty of the mind (i.e. the faculty of reason), which produces in us the feeling of intense pleasure. Accordingly, the faculty of reason is present in the feeling of displeasure. In fact, it is precisely because of reason's presence that imagination reveals itself as inadequate.

On the other hand, laughter depends on the mental state of disharmony

between imagination and understanding. In this relation, there is no failure of the imagination to satisfy the task given to it by the faculty of reason; rather, it is the case that the sensible manifold apprehended by imagination simply conflicts with the understanding's concepts and rules. Laughter consists in the frustration of the faculty of the understanding and thus it is difficult to see how such frustration could reflect or inspire the power of the faculty of reason and the accompanying feeling of pleasure.

In what follows, I offer an alternative interpretation of Kant's theory of laughter that can meet these challenges. In short, I argue that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, which takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Thus, no appeal to the faculty of reason is required. Laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system: namely, that it is insufficient to explain all of our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world. In this respect, laughter stands in a direct opposition to Kant's notion of the sublime.

## 2 Kant on Laughter

In §54 of the Third *Critique*, Kant provides the following definition of laughter:

In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction). Laughter is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing. This very transformation, which is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding, is nevertheless indirectly enjoyable and, for a moment, very lively. (KU 5:332, 209)

According to Kant's formulation, laughter is a response to a representation that involves some sort of nonsense and which evokes in us the experience of displeasure and tension. Laughter is initially a response to something that we find unsatisfying and frustrating. More specifically, Kant explains laughter as an affect that occurs when our expectations are suddenly transformed into nothing. He illustrates his idea by means of the following example:

If the heir of a rich relative wants to arrange a properly solemn funeral for him, but laments that he cannot get it quite right, because (he says), "The more money I give my mourners to look sad, the merrier they look," then we laugh out loud, and the reason is that an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing. (KU 5:333, 209)

This example points out the incongruity between the explanation (i.e. the outcome of the story) that we expect to hear, namely some reasonable explanation as to why the rich relative has troubles arranging for the proper funeral, and the explanation that is actually delivered. Based on the information given in the beginning of the story, we form an expected outcome that is shown to be wrong in the end. In other words, the outcome of the story disrupts or fails to meet our expectations.

Kant explains more clearly his notion of the transformed-into-nothing expectation by contrasting it with a *directly-contradicted* expectation. He writes that the expectation:

must not be transformed into the positive opposite of an expected object – for that is always something, and can often be distressing – but into nothing. For if in telling us a story someone arouses a great expectation and at its conclusion we immediately see its untruth, that is displeasing, like, e.g., the story of people whose hair is supposed to have turned

gray in a single night because of a great grief. By contrast, if in response to such a story another joker tells a very elaborate story about the grief of a merchant who, returning from India to Europe with all his fortune in merchandise, was forced to throw it all overboard in a terrible storm, and was so upset that in the very same night his wig turned gray, then we laugh and it gives us gratification. (KU 5:333, 209)

Our expectations are contradicted when we are presented with an outcome that contradicts our basic beliefs about the world (i.e., hair turning grey overnight) and which we find positively displeasing, rather than comical. On the other hand, a transformed-into-nothing expectation does not violate our basic beliefs about the world. The outcome of the story (i.e., wig turning grey) does not actually contradict our expectations; rather, it appears to be unrelated and detached from our expectations. Accordingly, our expectations are transformed into nothing when the outcome of the story appears to be nonsensical and unintelligible in light of our expectations (i.e., the wig absurdly turns grey).

To illustrate Kant's idea more clearly, let us consider a more contemporary example of a joke:

When the unfaithful artist heard his wife coming up the stairs, he said to his lover, "Quick! Take off your clothes!" (Marmysz 2003, 36)

Here again we are confronted with a situation where our expectations (we expect that the artist will try to hide his affair by telling the lover to put their clothes on) are incongruous with the actual outcome of the joke (the artist tells the lover to take their clothes off). However, the actual outcome does not in fact contradict our basic beliefs about the world. Our expectations are not simply contradicted, since it is clear from the joke that the artist does want to hide the affair and not reveal

it. Rather, the outcome of the joke appears to be nonsensical in relation to our expectations.

A directly-contradicted expectation and a transformed-into-nothing expectation depend on a different mental state, i.e. different relationship between our faculties of imagination and understanding. When our expectations are directly contradicted, the imagination (what we perceive) disagrees with understanding (what we expect); that is, with our basic beliefs about the world. On the other hand, a transformed-into-nothing expectation involves a disconnected or detached relationship between imagination and understanding. That is to say, the imagination neither agrees nor disagrees with the understanding. As evident in the unfaithful-artist joke, our basic beliefs and expectations do remain intact (the artist wants to hide the affair). Thus, the imagination is not in disagreement with the understanding (with our expectations). Yet, it is also not in agreement, since we normally associate the act of taking clothes off with an attempt of revealing the infidelity, rather than hiding it. The artist's demand turns upside down our conceptual expectations concerning hiding the infidelity.

Laughter accordingly originates in a representation that involves disconnection, i.e. neither harmony nor disharmony between imagination and understanding. While harmonious (or disharmonious) relation between imagination and understanding results in the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful (or displeasure in the ugly), a disconnected relation between the two cognitive faculties results in neither pleasure nor displeasure. For example, Kant is very careful in describing the effect that a transformed-into-nothing expectation has on the faculty of understanding. He writes that such expectation "is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding" or "the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction" (KU 5:332, 209) implying thereby that there is no actual experience of displeasure. While failure to agree or disagree with our expectations is certainly not satisfying for the understanding, it is also not positively

dissatisfying. Rather, the experience is one of puzzlement, uneasiness and tension. When confronted with transformed-into-nothing expectation, understanding is simply lost.

### 3 The Paradoxical Pleasure of Laughter

Kant's formulation of laughter as it stands cannot account for the amusing aspects of laughter. If laughter is an affect resulting from the transformation of our expectations into nothing, i.e. into nonsense, but nonsense is unsatisfying for the understanding, then how can we enjoy laughter after all?

Kant does not give an explicit answer to this question, yet the few remarks he offers allow us to construe a plausible explanation. First, he writes that laughable objects "always contain something that can deceive for a moment" and it is only when the "illusion disappears" that we laugh (KU 5:334, 210). This suggests that nonsense in laughter is merely apparent and it is only when the illusion of nonsense disappears that we experience enjoyment. Secondly, laughter is produced by the "sudden shift of the mind, first to one and then to another point of view for considering its object, there can correspond a reciprocal tensing and relaxing" (KU 5:332, 209), which means that affective movement from tension to a pleasurable relief is necessitated by the movement of the mind. Thus, laughter involves an alternation between two different mental states. Thirdly, Kant appears to attribute the reciprocal tensing and relaxing to the faculty of understanding. For example, he writes that a joke

begins with thoughts which, as a whole, insofar as they are to be expressed sensibly, also occupy the body; and since the understanding, in this presentation in which it does not find what was expected, suddenly relaxes. (KU 5:332, 209)

This suggests that it is not the faculty of reason that takes control of the

nonsensical situation; rather, it is understanding itself that finds its way out of nonsense. Fourth, Kant states that:

we laugh and it gives us gratification, because for a while we toss back and forth like a ball our own misconception about an object that is otherwise indifferent to us, or rather our own idea that we've been chasing, while we were merely trying to grasp and hold it firm. (KU 5:333, 210)

Here the implication is that we laugh not at a nonsensical representation, but rather at realizing our own misconceptions about the given representation.

Taking all these points into consideration, the suggestion seems to be that laughter is a reaction to the dissolution of nonsense, rather than nonsense itself, whereby the dissolution of nonsense takes the form of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Pleasure in laughter lies in detecting our mistaken assumptions about the object and thereby reliving us from the nonsense provoking tension. Thus, no appeal to the faculty of reason is required.

Kant's theory of laughter accordingly appears to be consistent with the leading contemporary theory of humor in philosophy and psychology, namely the incongruity theory. Although an earlier version of this theory considers the perception of incongruity as sufficient condition for laughter, most recent accounts argue that an additional element is required in order to explain the amusing aspects of laughter. According to some theorists this additional element consists in the resolution of incongruity. It is not the incongruity itself that is pleasurable, but rather the relief that occurs when resolving the incongruity. We laugh only when we grasp our mistaken assumptions about the object as we thereby automatically resolve nonsense. Without realizing our misconceptions about the object, the experience would be one of confusion and puzzlement rather than laughter, which often occurs when we fail

to understand the joke.

#### 4 Laughter and the Sublime

As argued thus far, laughter is occasioned by a representation that appears nonsensical in light of our expectations and thus provokes the feeling of tension and frustration, but which in the end results in the feeling of pleasure due to the resolution of nonsense. We feel pleasurable relief in recognizing that it is not the representation itself that fails to agree with our cognitive abilities, but rather the opposite is the case; it is our own cognitive abilities that misguide us and lead us into a wrong direction (into forming false expectations). This implies that what is laughable is not the object itself, but rather the subject in recognizing the rigidity of its own mind.

Laughter accordingly shares a similarity with Kant's notion of the sublime in that they are both attributed not to the object (as is the case in the beautiful and ugly), but to our mind. Both involve some sort of incongruity, which is caused not by the object, but by the failure of our cognitive system. In the sublime, this incongruity is caused by the perception of objects of great size and powers that occasion the idea of limitlessness in us (i.e. limitlessness of size and the destructive and devastating power of nature) and which is evoked in us due to our limited capacity of imagination. Kant explains that imagination's ability to comprehend the sensible manifold is limited, thus it happens in the direct perception of a vast and powerful object that imagination fails to successfully comprehend the sensible manifold and present it as a unified whole. This failure of our imagination produces the feeling of displeasure.

In laughter, however, the incongruity is caused by representation that appears to be disconnected from the understanding and which we experience as nonsensical or purposeless. What we perceive (the outcome of the story) is not merely in opposition to what we are expecting; rather it is completely unrelated to our expectations. That is, it lies out-

side of our ordinary way of seeing and thinking about the world.

Furthermore, the feeling of displeasure or frustration in both sublime and laughter is merely of a transitory nature. Namely, they both result in a paradoxical feeling of pleasure. Pleasure in the sublime arises by means of a displeasing disharmony between imagination and reason (it is the failure of our imagination that reveals the presence of the faculty of reason), while in laughter it occurs by means of realizing our own misconceptions about the object. Thus, the source of both sublime and laughter is not actually the object, but the subject himself. The sublime is a feeling of inadequacy of our psychical and sensible nature, yet at the same time recognition of the supremacy of our reason over our sensible nature. Thus, it is a feeling of respect for ourselves as rational and moral beings. Laughter, on the other hand, is a feeling of inadequacy of our cognitive system, of our ordinary enforced rules of order that govern our perception of the world. Thus, it is a feeling of disrespect and self-mockery for our own cognitive abilities. Yet, similar to how we attribute sublimity “to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)” (KU 5:257, 141), we also attribute laughable deficiencies to the object rather than to ourselves. In contrast to the sublime, laughter reveals something about our cognitive and rational system; namely, that it is insufficient to explain all our experiences and perceptions of the world and that we often need to revise our expectations in order to make sense of the world.

We can see that laughter stands at an opposite pole from the sublime (just as ugliness stands at an opposite, negative pole of the beautiful). The experience of both laughter and sublime resides in the subject's recognition of its own division between two extremes: that is, between the phenomenal and sensuous side, and the noumenal and rational side of our being. The difference is that in the sublime it is the rational side that dominates, the recognition of which is experienced through a feel-

ing of respect and awe. In laughter, on the other hand, it is the sensible side of human nature that dominates and which results in the underwhelming feeling of nonsense and insignificance. While sublime brings to mind the ideas of human greatness, decency, immortality, hope, and love, laughter brings to mind ideas of mortality, moral weakness, foolishness, ignorance, and irrationality. In the sublime, our expectations are overwhelmed as we come to realize the presence of the faculty of reason. In laughter, our expectations are underwhelmed as the illusion vanishes and we come to realize the triviality of the situation and degradation of values. The sublime celebrates the victory of our rational faculties, while laughter belittles them and mourns their fall.

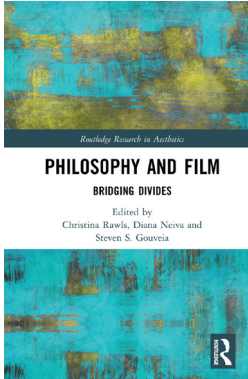
## References

- Carroll, Noël, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Gelven, Michael, *Truth and the Comedic Art* (New York: SUNY, 2000).
- Giamario, Patrick T., 'Making Reason Think More', *Angelaki* (2017) 22: 4, 161-176.
- Godfrey, F. LA T., 'The Aesthetics of Laughter', *Hermathena* (1937) 25: 50, 126-138.
- Hartmann, Nicolai, *Aesthetics* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014).
- Hounsokou, Annie, 'Exposing the Rogue in Us: An Exploration of Laughter in the Critique of Judgment', *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2012) 16: 2, 317-336.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, transl. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- , *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, transl. by Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- Kulka, Tomáš, 'The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humor', *Organon F* (2007) 14: 3, 320-333.

- Marmysz, John, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (Albany: SUNY, 2003).
- Martin, Rod A., *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007).
- Morreall, John, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).
- Schaeffer, Neil, *The Art of Laughter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea, Vol. I*, trans. by R.B.Haldane and J.Kemp (London: Routledge, 1883).
- Shultz, Thomas R., 'A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humour', in Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds.), *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Application* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publisher, 2007), 11-36.
- Suls, Jerry M., 'A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis', in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 81-100.
- Weems, Scott, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).







## Philosophy and Film *Bridging Divides*

Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva, Steven S. Gouveia (eds)  
Routledge  
2019, 400pp  
£96.00 (hb) £29 (ebook)

Britt Harrison

Autonomous and occasionally antagonistic methodological traditions are constitutive of the history and contemporary practice of those working at the intersection of philosophy and film. In David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's 1996 collected volume, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, the editors simultaneously championed the burgeoning philosophical field of cognitive film theory whilst enjoining the more continentally orientated film 'Theorists' to a showdown; all in the name of progress. Carroll proposed what he called 'methodologically robust pluralism' (1996, 63): a shared enterprise in which theories about film would be compared, evaluated, where possible consolidated, and where necessary eliminated. In motivating this engagement, Carroll criticised Theorists whose work owed much to the substance and preoccupations of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and others, dismissing their prose stylings as 'arcane peregrinations', condemning their suspicions of science as 'feckless', and evaluating their interpretations of films as the products of a 'standard-issue sausage machine churning out readings that look and smell the same' (Bordwell & Carroll 1996, 37, 43, 59). Unsurprisingly, the theoretical battle was unjoined.

More than twenty-years later, cognitive film theorists carry on apace, eagerly engaging with analytic philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists and psychologists. Those working in the more continental tradition continue their own allegiances to some, though not necessarily all, of Theory's Marxist, psychoanalytic, semiotic, feminist, and cultural studies' touchstones and tropes. Future historians will, perhaps, recognise the creation and consolidation of so-called 'film-philosophy' as an exercise in re-booting and re-branding the continental/Theoretical tradition in the wake of the cognitivist challenge. Now, with Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva, and Steve S. Gouveia's collected volume, we have a fresh attempt to bridge the methodological divide. This time the impetus comes from the film-philosophical side of the continental divide and most of the current methodological modes are on display. The material explored with is no less diverse, and includes *The Sopranos*, *Superman*, *David Holzman's Diary*, *Detention*, *Irreversible*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Third Man*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *Under the Skin*, *8 ½*, *Ulysses Gaze*, *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Memento*, *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, *Forgiveness*, *Local Angel*, *The Game of Thrones*, *Somewhere in Time*, and more.

Of all the twenty chapters in Rawls et al, only Robert Sinnerbrink's 'Film and Ethics' might reasonably be described as acknowledging, and seeking to bridge, the methodological gap between film-philosophy and analytic philosophy of film, pace Sinnerbrink's own taxonomy of contemporary approaches. Sinnerbrink's contribution continues his own ongoing methodological trajectory out from film-philosophy in search of a more analytic-orientated academic audience, as evidenced in his 2015 monograph *Cinematic Ethics*. In 'Film and Ethics' here, Sinnerbrink rehearses some of his familiar observations about the disenfranchisement of film and philosophy, seeing in a revitalised moral engagement with film the opportunity for the desired re-enfranchisement. He also offers a number of fresh historical and methodological insights, not least the bold acknowledgement, perhaps even confession, that, "[f]ilm theory was politics pursued by other means" (2019, 188). None of the other authors, however, reflect on the nature, history, or values involved in the different approaches, assumptions, and ambitions at work in the various traditions. The authors simply manifest their own preferred default methodology and no attempt is made to synthesise approaches or debate

their relative merits. Uniquely, Malcolm Turvey's contribution questions the value of his own apparent methodological *modus operandi*. After a paradigmatic display of how-to-do contemporary analytic philosophy – dissecting the pros and cons of Robert Hopkins' and Murray Smith's mutually exclusive uses of Wollheim's notion of twofoldness – Turvey reflects on what is actually achieved through this testing, winnowing, and 'improving' of seemingly relevant theories. Rather than embrace the kind of quasi-scientific theoretical processes championed by the analytic tradition (and Carroll in 1996), Turvey arrives at an aporetic view of the progress achieved in understanding the question: what do we see in a film? Instead of attempting to build bridges between distinct methodological traditions, Turvey digs into the bedrock of his own. His example works as an agent provocateur, daring readers to do the same.

Roughly a third of the remaining papers are analytic in approach, another third are examples of film-philosophy borne of the more Theoretical tradition, and the remainder plough less-easily categorised furrows, drawing on the ideas of Husserl, Montaigne, and Stanley Cavell. The result is not so much a display of the authorial bridge-building as the opportunity for readers to island-hop amongst the archipelago of mono-focussed methodologies employed by today's film-philosophers and philosophers in/of/through/with film. Although Thomas E. Wartenberg's 'Preface' acknowledges there has been insufficient cross-fertilisation between the broadly conceived analytic and continental traditions, this volume provides the reader with the opportunity to appreciate why this might be so, and why change is unlikely. The differences between the orientations are laid bare, for example, in the use (or absence) of argument, critical interlocutors, and objections; the commitment (or aversion) to system-building, neologisms, and the strained grammar of Theory-infused prose; and the extent to which the reader is presumed already to be (or helped to become) *au fait* with the terminology, concepts, and films under discussion.

Whilst the search for common ground on which to build the foundations of any putative bridges is shown to be fraught with incompatible priorities, principles, and practices, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo does encourage her readers to engage with the rich resources of film writing available online and outside academia, and there is nothing to stop

philosophers of all stripes converging on this neutral territory. The co-existence pluralism that Carroll sought to move beyond shows no sign of abating. Instead, we are treated to the irony of Carroll's contribution (on the interdependence of erotetic narration and criterial prefocusing) sitting amidst articles that laud, exploit, and extend the work of Deleuze and Foucault. The latter includes Steen Ledet Christiansen's Deleuzian-inspired morph-image as a way of appreciating the four forms of post-cinema; Susana Viegas' exploration of the connection between the arrow of linear time (Chronos) and circular time (Aiôn); Christopher Falzon's re-conception of what an experimental film might be; and Oana Șerban argument for the biopolitical potential of art. The take-home message could not be clearer: the methodology wars are over, and nobody won.

The editors' 'bridging divides' ambition does, however, aim at a second target: the possibility that film might be, or be able to do, philosophy. The second part of the volume, 'The Film as Philosophy Debate', offers articles directly addressing this subject by Paisley Livingston, Tom McClelland, Diana Neiva, and David Davies. Whilst there are direct, and indirect, contributions to this debate scattered throughout the five other parts of the book – 'The Nature of Film', 'The Philosophical Value of Film', 'Cinematic Experience', 'Interpreting Cinematic Works', and 'Further Debates' – it is the quantity and quality of articles on this topic that is the volume's strength. The film-as-philosophy section opens with Livingston's re-examination of the possibility of the so-called 'bold thesis' that film or cinema is philosophy. Still unconvinced that films can philosophize in ways that deliver results of high epistemic value through high or 'strong' cinematic means, Livingston challenges Rafe McGregor's (2014) and Andrew Kania's (2009) claims to the contrary using *Memento*. He finishes with a tantalizing gesture towards the importance of *implicature* as a possible solution to the debate's key dilemma: either you lecture the audience (directly or through a *porte parole* character) in which case, where is the cinematic specificity?; or the very presence of philosophical content becomes suspect. Echoing the metaphilosophical leanings of Turvey, Livingston proposes that "careful attention to specific cases is more likely to be illuminating than theoretical polemics" (2019, 89).

McClelland's paper proposes a 'best tool principle' according to which it is sometimes the case that a filmic rather than a prose-based thought

experiment (TE) is the better tool for the job. Examples would be illuminating here. For McClelland, a TE, in either media, earns its philosophical stripes if it helps us “find our way around a philosophical issue” or provides insights into “our own patterns of thought.” (2019, 112) For many this is too low a bar to count as having genuine philosophical value. Indeed, for Nieva, the importance of resolving the ‘what is philosophy?’ question is the crucial step in this debate. She helpfully comes down off the fence with her own normative answers arguing that Bruce Russell and Murray Smith’s rejection of, or at least resistance to, the idea of film as philosophy, turns on conceptions of philosophy that are “too revisionist” and “too narrow” whilst Stephen Mulhall’s is “too inclusive” (2019, 127, 130). Davies helpfully re-presents his reading of the key issues before marrying resources on affect, from cognitivist Amy Coplan, with Merleau-Pontian ideas on embodied agency in support of a Sinner-brink-friendly notion of cinematic thinking. Also of substantial interest is Jônadas Techio’s rescue-reading of Cavellian skepticism, seeing it as a Wittgensteinian device from which to see the world viewed in, and on, film; not as something apart from us, but as helping to return us to the ordinary. And whilst Emersonian perfectionism is not mentioned, its presence hovers over Roberto Mordacci’s fascinating look at Fellini’s 8 ½ in illuminating parallel with Montaigne’s *Essais*.

Despite their distinct and, at times, tension-generating justifications, all the contributors who investigate film-as-philosophy are unanimous: films can and do philosophise, and in non-trivial ways. That said, a number of perennial issues remain unanswered or, at least, in need of further clarification: (i) can Plato’s worries that art corrupts, epistemically and morally, actually be addressed, rather than simply side-stepped? (ii) when are claims that films philosophize, or think, elliptical for the claim that *film-makers* philosophize or think, and when not? and (iii) what films might or should we watch if we are to benefit from the supposed substantive results of cinematic philosophising, and why, exactly? Is there a canon to be had? Finally, there is a noticeable absence of copy-editing, and a disappointingly brief editors’ introduction. It would have been intriguing to see the editors reflect on the very idea of the viability and value of their bridge-building ambitions. To what extent do the silos of academic specialisation entail the mono-methodological limitations exhibited here? Perhaps this question will only be answered when today’s readership

becomes tomorrow's authors, and today's readership has had the benefit of just such a broader diet of philosophical, and film-philosophical orientations. Until then, this is a provocative and diverse collection that has something for everyone, rather like the range of films its authors explore.

#### References

Bordwell, David, and Carroll, Noël (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996)

Kania, Andrew, 'Scene Tables' in his *Memento* (Philosophers on Film) (London: Routledge, 2009), 13-22.

McGregor, Rafe, 'Cinematic Philosophy: Experimental Affirmation in *Memento*', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2014) 72:1, 57-66.



## *Notes on Contributors*

### **CHERYL FRAZIER**

is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma (US), where she works under the supervision of Dr Sherri Irvin. Her research is on the intersections of aesthetics and ethics, especially as it pertains to fatness. In her dissertation, Frazier develops an account of responsible aesthetic agency which can help guide individual and communal aesthetic action, especially in situations where marginalized communities—particularly fat communities—are represented or affected by aesthetic goods and actions.

cherylfrazier@ou.edu

### **ELIZA IVES**

is a PhD candidate at the University of New Brunswick. Her thesis examines the fiction/nonfiction distinction and involves both creative and critical writing. Her broader research interests are in aesthetics, life writing, hybrid forms, and philosophy of literature.

eives1@unb.ca

### **NADIA MEHDI**

is currently a PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis argues that addressing the ethical landscape surrounding cultural appropriation requires us to confront, and ultimately revise, the compromised concept of culture in operation, along with reworking our notions of cultural grouphood and cultural property. Elsewhere she has interests in bodily aesthetics and current debates in philosophy of race.

nmehdi1@sheffield.ac.uk

**MOJCA KUPLEN**

is a visiting professor of philosophy at Alfred University in Alfred, New York. Her research areas include Kant's philosophy, the philosophy of art, and Aesthetics. She is the author of *Beauty, Ugliness and the Free Play of Imagination: An Approach to Kant's Aesthetics* (2015). Her current project aims to understand the social and epistemic value of artworks in light of Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas.

mojcakuplen@hotmail.com

**BRITT HARRISON**

is a PhD candidate at the University of York developing Cinematic Humanism: an appreciation of how fictions films provide us with valuable understanding of ourselves, each other and our human world. With Craig Fox (California University of Pennsylvania) she is editing a forthcoming collected volume entitled *Philosophy of Film Without Theory* for Palgrave Macmillan and is guest co-editor of the current Special Issue of the journal *Aesthetic Investigations* on the same subject. Britt is also a film script consultant and filmmaking tutor with a several-decades-long career in the film and television industry. Her first PhD, *The Epistemology of Know-how*, brought insights from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* to bear on recent intellectualist claims in epistemology and the philosophy of mind.

britt.harrison@york.ac.uk

