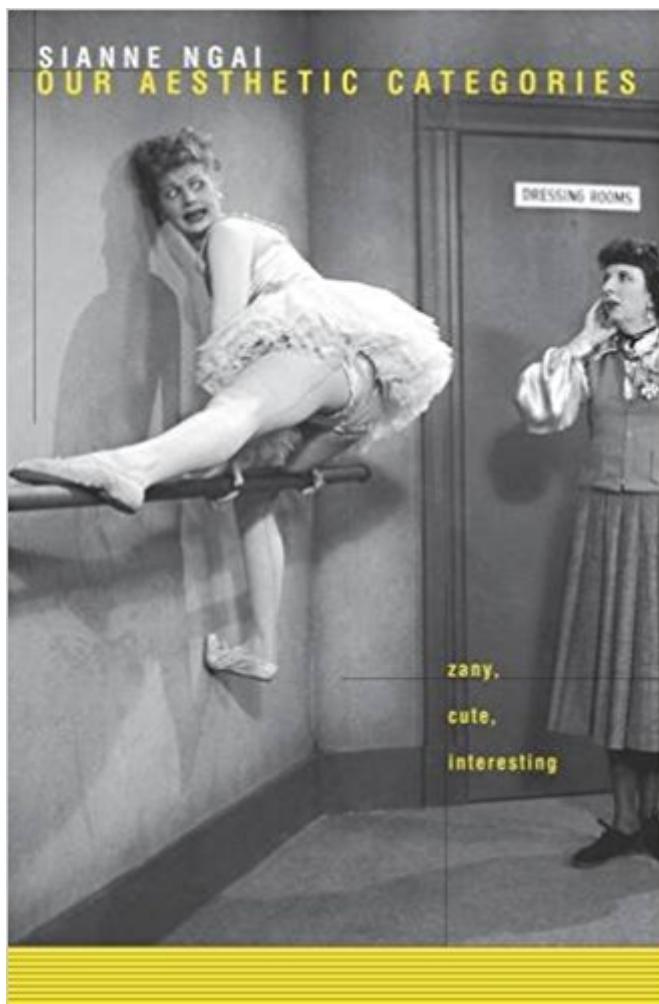


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# Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting



## Synopsis

The zany, the cute, and the interesting saturate postmodern culture, dominating the look of its art and commodities as well as our ways of speaking about the ambivalent feelings these objects often inspire. In this study Ngai offers an aesthetic theory for the hypercommodified, mass-mediated, performance-driven world of late capitalism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

[Ngai's] wide-ranging, synthetic approach is exactly the kind of criticism our ever-accreting culture deserves, and maybe even the criticism we need. By indexing the kinds of feeling-based judgments we make in our daily lives, Ngai opens up questions about how emotions can act in social contexts more generally, how our private experiences might shape our political and economic discourses.--Rebecca Ariel Porte "Los Angeles Review of Books" (10/14/2012)A book of immense interest.--Benjamin Lytal "Daily Beast" (10/24/2012)It's the type of book that contains ideas that are broadly provocative, even for the 'merely interested.' It is one of the most useful guides to the present I've read in a while, almost despite itself. It offers a way of thinking about so many forms of present-day self-expression, from the prevalence of first-person writing on the Internet to the 'Like/Share'-this cheer of social networks. It helps explain a certain style of art (Tao Lin, for example) that advances on muted, subdued, contingent feelings.--Hua Hsu "Slate" (12/01/2012)Ngai argues that traditional aesthetic concepts of the beautiful and the sublime are inadequate in our post modern hyper-commodified culture. She's really on to something.--David Collard "Times Literary Supplement" (06/13/2014)"With unparalleled originality, ambition, and insight, Sianne Ngai

reimagines aesthetic theory for our time. Building on her work in "Ugly Feelings," Ngai insists on the significance of minor, ordinary aesthetic experience. "Our Aesthetic Categories" displaces the centrality of beauty in aesthetics and illuminates the social processes at work in ubiquitous and taken-for-granted acts of judgment. This book will make you feel the present differently.--Heather Love, University of Pennsylvania

Sianne Ngai's new book is a major work of aesthetic theory: challenging a beauty-based aesthetics, closing the gap between aesthetic theory and artistic practice, and offering irreverent categories that work across disciplines and periods to make better sense of our cultural experience. "Our Aesthetic Categories" takes up the mantle of Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory," and here Ngai becomes the leading cultural critic of our day.--Jonathan Culler, Cornell University

Sianne Ngai has written an important book which harks back to the heyday of the leftist literary theory of the 1980s, and is none the worse for that. Dense and demanding, occasionally meandering, [it is] equally at home with "I Love Lucy" and conceptual art, Theodor Adorno and Jim Carrey

Laudable and ambitious In order for art to fulfill its role and for criticism to survive, aesthetic theory needs to develop new and powerful concepts which reflect both art s changing nature and its ubiquity. This challenging and important book takes the first steps in this task.--Robert Eaglestone "Times Literary Supplement" (04/12/2013)"It s the type of book that contains ideas that are broadly provocative, even for the merely interested. It is one of the most useful guides to the present I ve read in a while, almost despite itself. It offers a way of thinking about so many forms of present-day self-expression, from the prevalence of first-person writing on the Internet to the Like/Share -this cheer of social networks. It helps explain a certain style of art (Tao Lin, for example) that advances on muted, subdued, contingent feelings.--Hua Hsu "Slate" (12/01/2012)"Ngai argues that three aesthetic categories usually considered of minor importance are crucial to understanding contemporary culture. The categories in question, the zany, the cute, and the interesting, are best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. In defense of this thesis, Ngai deploys a formidable grasp of the aesthetic theories of Schlegel, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Cavell, among many others. Her knowledge of more recent pop culture is equally wide ranging: readers will especially find illuminating her discussion of the zany Lucille Ball. Ngai aims to show how production, circulation, and consumption in contemporary capitalism are mirrored in the cultural world. She argues that the importance of the three marginal categories requires a revision of classical aesthetics. We need not abandon the beautiful and the sublime, but we need to give attention as well to what best enables us to understand today s culture, thus lessening the gap between aesthetic theory and practice Highly recommended for an academic

audience interested in cultural and aesthetic theory.--David Gordon "Library Journal"  
(09/01/2012)"Sianne Ngai gives us once again a radiantly idiosyncratic study of that which we never thought to examine and that which we now understand to be crucial to our daily experience as social beings. Under Ngai's quick eye and deft hand, the zany, the cute, and the merely interesting reveal their pertinence for the history and historicity of aesthetic development, the intimacy between quotidian materiality and philosophic inquiry, and the collisions among modernity, art, labor, and performing bodies.--Anne A. Cheng, author of "Second Skin""Sianne Ngai's new book is a major work of aesthetic theory: challenging a beauty-based aesthetics, closing the gap between aesthetic theory and artistic practice, and offering irreverent categories that work across disciplines and periods to make better sense of our cultural experience. "Our Aesthetic Categories" takes up the mantle of Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory," and here Ngai becomes the leading cultural critic of our day.--Jonathan Culler, Cornell University"This wonderfully original book (I hesitate to call it cute, zany, and interesting, but that wouldn't be wrong) invents fresh and incisive new categories for that tired old study called aesthetics. Maybe such categories could even transform the field itself, but they certainly transform the way we look at contemporary literature and culture (which Sianne Ngai knows with startling extensiveness), and maybe they will also end up transforming our outlook on the art of the past as well. "Our Aesthetic Categories" is in any case one of the most exciting new theoretical books to come along in some time.--Fredric Jameson, Duke University"

Sianne Ngai is Professor of English at Stanford University.

Perceptive and original thinking.

Great!

Ngai reinterprets the present through the lens of the zany, the cute, and the interesting. I feel like I've seen anew the TV, jokes, art, books, clothes, technology, etc. that I've been living with. Read this book.

I was really looking forward to this book after reading Ngai's previous book, *Ugly Feelings*. On the whole, I found this an interesting book but not as fresh and acute as the previous one. The first chapter of this book is a real tour de force, it's simply brilliant. However, I wasn't so convinced by the following three chapters on the cute, the interesting and the zany which Ngai argues are "our

aesthetic categories." The attempt to link these categories to a kind of diagnosis of contemporary capitalism is the weakest and least convincing part of the book. It sort of works for the zany but the other two are much less convincing. In *Ugly Feelings* there was also a somewhat forced attempt to use the case studies to make some larger political point but this was largely confined to the introduction. This diagnostic approach to culture really isn't Ngai's strong suit, her close readings of a range of cultural objects and a very impressive range of cultural theory is where she excels.

Together with *Ugly Feelings* (2005), this book demonstrates that Sianne Ngai is the most relevant, best read/viewed critic working in contemporary aesthetics. A feminist and Western Marxist, Ngai focuses on the downsides of the post-theological culture celebrated in Manhattan and the Left Bank in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily that it gave rise to contemporary consumerism, which weakens first-world people's aesthetic experience by promoting tepid forms of ambivalence and disavowal of social hierarchies. Zaniness blurs the line between work and play and invites contempt tinged by anxious pity rather than empathy with scatter-brained contingent workers; cuteness is weak care and magnanimity; interest is weak wonder alternating with near-boredom, like spending too much time on Facebook's news feed rather than reading a book, watching a film, listening to an album, having a conversation, or working on a project. After reading this book, I do not envy experimental artists working today if these aesthetic states are what they have to work with. Everyone writing about and teaching avant-garde art should read *Our Aesthetic Categories*, especially since it relates trends in the arts to pop culture and thus implies helpful ways to teach experimental art by bridging it with the pop culture undergrads are more familiar with. YES, the prose is dense, but so is everyday aesthetic experience in our media-saturated culture, we realize if we slow down enough to think about it. This book plus Liah Greenfeld's *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (2013), Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (2012), Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), and Nicholas Frankel's annotated, uncensored edition of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (2011) shows Harvard University Press emerging as one of the top publishers of ambitious historical scholarship about modernity.

Not a quick read, Ngai's thoughts are dense and historically framed. Very enjoyable.

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