Keywords for Disability Studies
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7

Aesthetics

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Whether addressing ideas of beauty in nature or works of art, aesthetic judgments implicate disability insofar as they presume a normative standard of perception and an ideal of bodily perfection as the object of affective response. Although theories of taste and beauty have been in existence since Plato and Aristotle, the term "aesthetics" emerges centrally in the eighteenth century as a discourse about perception and feeling. For Immanuel Kant, for instance, an aesthetic judgment is distinct from one involving deductive reasoning or conceptual information concerning the object. He distinguishes between teleological and aesthetic judgments, the former of which concern objects, purposes, and intentions; the latter are disinterested, based on subjective apprehension. Kant implies that disinterested pleasure is distinct from the self-interested pleasure we obtain from satisfying a drive or solving a problem. In a paradoxical move, however, he also claims that my feeling of pleasure is validated by my presumption that others would feel the same way ("when [a man] puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful he demands the same delight from others" [Kant 1952], 50). This conflation of noncontingent personal pleasure with collective assent is the cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics, from Karl Marx to Herbert Marcuse. It is also the source of ableism as the ideology of bodily normalcy.

The claim of disinterestedness presents a conundrum for disability studies. It represents an attempt to legitimate judgments of taste by removing the body that makes such responses possible, or more precisely by diverting bodily responses onto objective forms. But judgments of taste are always framed by social attitudes and cultural contexts. Such values constitute forms of cultural capital in the reinforcement of class privilege, and as such restrict competing views of beauty, sensory satisfaction, and human variety. When the seventeenth-century Spanish artist Diego Velázquez places the Infanta at the center of his painting *Las Meninas*, for instance, he includes a court dwarf at her left, as a grotesque contrast to her youthful perfection. An aesthetic of disinterestedness is never far from a formalist desire to project the work of art as a *cordon sanitaire* against bodily variety and corporeal mutability.

Eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century aesthetic treatises attempt to provide for subjective experience the kind of authority claimed by empirical science. Yet the criteria for judgment often presuppose an ideal of embodiment. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, for instance, sought artistic perfection in classical sculpture based on the perfect Greek body. He argued that "masterpieces [of classical art] show us a skin which is not tightly stretched, but gently drawn over a healthy flesh, which fills it out without distended protuberances and follows all the movements of the flesh parts of the body in a single unified" direction (1985, 37). By contrast, Gottfried Lessing felt that certain emotions—such as pain—can be better expressed in poetry, while bodily infirmity and variety may be the ideal subject for painting, since they create a challenge for the artist's mimetic potentiality. Lessing believed a modern artist would declare, "Be you as misshapen as is possible, I will paint you nevertheless. Though, indeed, no one may wish to see you, people will still wish to see my picture; not in so far as it represents you, but in so far as it is a demonstration of my art, which knows how to make so good a

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likeness of such a monster" (1985, 63). For Lessing, realistic depiction of a "misshapen" man is less important for its verisimilitude than for its demonstration of artisanal superiority.

In both Winckelmann and Lessing, the ability of aesthetics to define affective and sensory response depends on—and, indeed, is constituted by—bodily difference. In Kant, by contrast, the aesthetics of beauty is only one half of a dialectic between bounded and unbounded sensations. The latter, associated with theories of the sublime, is the inevitable site of cognitive and physical difference in their challenge to our reasoning faculty. Theories of the sublime during the eighteenth century were inspired, to some extent, by the eighteenth century's discoveries in medical science or what Michel Foucault (1984) calls the "politics of health." In Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1968), the sublime is defined through the author's medical researches into physical pain. For Burke, the sublime is superior to beauty because it leads to further consciousness and action, whereas beauty recedes into lassitude and passivity. The experience of pain is beyond reason and comprehension, a state that challenges ideas of mortality and finitude. Once released from pain, the individual enjoys the "joys of convalescence" whereby we learn to appreciate a health we had previously taken for granted.

A key theater for theories of the sublime can be found in the Gothic tradition. As an antidote to Enlightenment rationalism, Gothicism engages with various forms of bodily difference and psychological otherness. Where Winckelmann vaunts human perfection in health, smoothness, and unity, the Gothic explores the pathological, uncanny, and monstrous. David Punter observes that "the history of . . . the Gothic [is] a history of invasion and resistance, of the enemy within, of bodies torn and tortured, or else rendered miraculously, or sometimes catastrophically whole" (2000, 40). Gothic fiction offers a catalog of characters who exhibit bodily deformities, mental disability, or psychic distress: from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein to the blind rabbi of Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* to the giant of *The Castle of Otranto*, the *One-Handed Monk* and the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." As a camera obscura on Enlightenment aesthetics, the Gothic displays, according to Ruth Anolik, "human difference as monstrous, and then, paradoxically, [it] subverts the categories of exclusion to argue for the humanity of the monster" (2010, 2).

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) refer to such images or metaphors as "narrative prostheses," since their appearance in literary works provides a figurative (and, often, a literal) crutch to a redemptive story of bodily renewal. Oedipus's self-blinding is an inaugural moment in Western art's linkage between moral life and bodily deformity. Similarly, Shakespeare's Richard III's hunchback is a physical embodiment of his corrupted sense of power, while Dickens's Tiny Tim's limp facilitates Scrooge's redemptive vision of charity. The function of such narrative prostheses is to provide readers with a model of bodily difference from which they may distance themselves. What the disabled body disturbs in the moral universe, the redeemed, healthy body recuperates, just as the death of the monster or the villain restores the health of court and state. As Mitchell and Snyder summarize, "While an actual prosthesis is always somewhat discomforting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view" (2000, 8). The rhetorical trope of pathos, the appeal to an audience's emotions, is often purchased by an identificatory logic that turns aesthetics into pedagogy. Pity and fear, those qualities Aristotle ascribed to tragedy, may be aesthetic criteria for mimesis, but they are embodied in a blind and crippled Oedipus.

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Since the late nineteenth century, modernist art has had recourse to deformed or grotesque bodies to metaphorize the condition of what Matthew Arnold called "this strange disease of modern life" (2004, 1093). The canon of high modernism is replete with representations of physical and mental disability—from aestheticism's convalescents to Expressionist portraits of demented urban denizens, to the blind and neurasthenic figures in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, to Andre Breton's cognitively disabled heroine in *Nadja*, to Henry James's invalids Ralph Touchett and Milly Theale, to William Faulkner's cognitively disabled Benjy Compson, to the consumptive heroines of opera, to the incarcerated narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Nazi *Entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art") exhibitions of the late 1930s used modernism's depiction of "defective" or dysgenic persons in Expressionism or Surrealism as a sign of Western culture's decline, in contrast to the idealized Aryan bodies in rural settings depicted in the "Great German Art Exhibitions" endorsed by Hitler. If the salient feature of modernist art and literature was its emphasis on the materiality of the medium and the defamiliarization of everyday life, its thematic focus was embodied in a blind soothsayer, a child with Down syndrome, a tubercular artist, and a hysteric woman (Davidson 2008).

The turn in modern aesthetics' dependence on a discourse of disability is powerfully evident in art's reliance on a disabled person to symbolize moral flaws or frame the able-bodied hero's moral recovery. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, convalescence became a key trope for philosophical acuity and aestheticism. Literary figures such as Edgar Allan Poe's narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysman's *Au Rebors*, or the title character in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* are only three of many convalescents whose return to avidity from illness inaugurates a new intense, passionate interest in the world. Modern aesthetic theories also have a taxonomic function insofar as they attempt to organize and rationalize sensory experience. For Jacques Rancière, "the practices and forms of visibility of art . . . intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration" (2009, 29). This distributive or categorical function parallels in many ways the biopolitical rationalizing of bodies and cognitive registers that emerged in medical science during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but was refined and perfected in the twentieth.

Modernist aesthetics is also dominated by the idea that literature "lays bare the device" of language through formal rupture and non sequitur (Shlovsky 1965). Twentieth-century Russian formalists such as Viktor Shlovsky, Boris Eichenbaumm, and Roman Jakobson have theorized that literary devices such as metaphor, patterned rhyme, and narrative frames "make strange" the everyday and quotidian so that it can be experienced anew. Disability theorists have come to similar conclusions about the ways that disability unseats ideas of bodily normalcy and averageness. Ato Quayson (2007) calls the discomfort that disability occasions among able-bodied persons "aesthetic nervousness," a recognition of bodily contingency that arises in the presence of the nontraditional body. Lennard Davis (2002) argues that disability, because it crosses all identity categories, "dis-modernizes" biopolitical regimes that attempt to fix and categorize bodies through medical technologies and population control. Aesthetic defamiliarization and disability deconstruction are joined by their critique of mimesis—the idea that there is a putatively "real," "given" world that must be represented and cited. When art foregrounds its own operations, when disability unsettles the normative body, mimetic criteria are shattered and the means of aesthetic and social reproduction exposed.

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The attempt to differentiate the "normal body" in modernity was aided by a number of developments in visual culture that made the nontraditional body more visible. Photography was enlisted by eugenics and race theorists to catalog aberrant or dysgenic "types," while films such as *The Black Stork* (1917) provided documentary evidence justifying fetal euthanasia, sterilization, and incarceration. Antivagrant laws or "ugly laws" were instituted in a variety of U.S. cities to prevent "unsightly" or disabled persons from appearing on the street (Schweik 2009). As Martin Pernick (1996) observes of such developments, aesthetic values were often used to define those "lives not worth living" and remove them from public view. Modern reform movements in favor of suffragism, birth control, women's health, workplace improvements, and settlement houses were often fueled by eugenicist ideas about health, genetic purity, and ability. In Lennard Davis's terms, "enforcing normalcy" becomes a preoccupation of modern social and medical sciences for which both high art and mass culture provide prosthetic reinforcement.

The twin legacies of an aesthetics of disinterestedness and a biopolitics of health and genetic improvement have helped to shape what Tobin Siebers calls "an aesthetics of human disqualification," a "symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (2010, 23). Fitter family contests, "ugly laws," and freak shows of the modernist era provided individuals with an opportunity, during a period of social fluidity and change, to imagine themselves as not "ethnic," not "feebleminded," and not disabled. Mass cultural spectacles and modernist art both contributed to such an aesthetics by making visible bodies with which one would not want to be associated while validating sensory responses to bodies that confirmed one's own integrity and vitality.

Siebers (2010) uses the phrase "disability aesthetics" to draw attention both to the formative role of disability *in* aesthetics and the aesthetic practices of disabled artists whose work engages in a critique of ableist attitudes. In 1990, for instance, when disability activists from American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) left their wheelchairs to crawl up the steps of the U.S. Capitol building in support of the Americans with Disabilities Act, it was an act of civil disobedience. But it was also—vividly—a form of disability performance art. Such theatrical gestures blur the boundary between art and activism that has characterized much disability aesthetics in the recent period. The performance artist Mary Duffy, born without arms, poses nude while adopting the position of classical sculpture. She uses her posture as a nude Venus de Milo (who also lacks arms) to address her audience and rearticulate feminine beauty from a disabled and gendered perspective. The deaf artist Joseph Grigley makes installations out of the "conversation slips" (matchbooks, bar napkins, Post-its) he exchanges with his hearing interlocutors. The neurodiversity activist and autistic artist Amanda Baggs uses a software interface to transcribe her written text into an electronic voice that urges her audience to learn "her" language of repetitions, scratchings, and monotone humming. The blind photographer Evgen Bavcar photographs classical sculpture and archaeological sites, often intruding his hand into the image to instantiate his reliance on a tactile rather than retinal relationship to objects.

The situation of deaf poets and performers presents a specific challenge to traditional aesthetic ideals based on printed or verbal representation. Many deaf persons think of themselves not as disabled but as a linguistic minority who compose their poems and performances through sign language. Many of the themes of d/Deaf performances involve the history of oralist pedagogy that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and that

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dominated attitudes toward the assimilation of deaf people into hearing culture (Baynton 1996). Poets such as Clayton Valli, Debbie Rennie, Patrick Graybill, and Ella Mae Lentz create works in American Sign Language (ASL), most often repudiating voice-over translation in order to "speak" directly to a nonhearing audience (Brueggemann 1999). Deaf artists' interest in differentiating themselves from disability illustrates the difficulty of defining disability aesthetics within a single category with a common history. Furthermore, it forces us to rethink the largely ocularcentric character of aesthetic discourse and configure it around other sensory avenues and cognitive registers.

"There is no exquisite beauty, without some strangeness in the proportion." Edgar Allan Poe's quotation of Francis Bacon in "The Philosophy of Composition," summarizes the crucial link between art and otherness, between the aesthetic and the different bodies that constitute it. In an essay that advocates the most extreme example of artisanal control, Poe's belief in poetry's need for "strangeness" exemplifies the aesthetic's uncanny dependence on difference. What Terry Eagleton calls "that humble prosthesis to reason," the aesthetic depends on a body that reason refuses to recognize. One must remember that the ideal forms that the humanities vaunt as epitomes of proportion and grace—the Venus de Milo, *La Victoire de Samothrace*, Leonardo's Vitruvian man—are, respectively, armless, headless, and possessed of multiple arms and legs. The aesthetic discourse that creates disinterested appreciation of the beautiful is also the one that has historically relegated the hunchback to the dungeon, the fat lady to the freak show, and the deaf person to the asylum. The close proximity of aesthetic judgment to carceral isolation and rationalized euthanasia is the darker side of Enlightenment knowledge, even as the increased visibility of the disabled body creates the occasion for its liberation.