Ted Cohen’s work on metaphor is well known in the profession, so it comes as no surprise to us that he has now written a splendid book on the subject. It is a very short book. But as was famously said by someone who did not practice what he preached, “Brevity is the soul of wit,” a metaphor, for sure, and one indeed admirably suited to describe Ted Cohen himself, who, without preaching, practices the virtue in question.

Having said that Cohen’s book is on metaphor, however, and that is certainly how it will be “shelved,” it is a book on why metaphor is so important to us, what its significance is, and, as the subtitle of the book tells us, it is on the talent for metaphor too, as well as on our ability to identify with and understand others. That being said, now on to business.

I first give the reader a general survey of Cohen’s book, and then, in the end, try to raise two issues for the future discussion which, I am certain, Thinking of Others will inevitably motivate.

Cohen begins by narrowing his topic down to metaphors of the form “A is B,” perhaps the most frequently adduced example being “Juliet is the sun.” “It seems obviously true,” he avers, “that a metaphor ‘A is B’ induces one to think of A as B. How this happens,” Cohen goes on to say, “is a wonderful mystery, and the ability to do it, to ‘see’ A as B is an indispensable human ability I am calling the talent for metaphor” (p. 3). Furthermore, Cohen suggests that “a leading aim of many metaphor-makers is the communication of some feelings they have about the subject of their metaphors, and the often hoped-for inducement of similar feelings in those who grasp their metaphors” (p. 6).

Cohen further narrows his subject down to what he calls the “metaphor of personal identification,” in which “a person is said to be either another person or a person of a different kind.” “I will be concentrating on cases,” he says, “in which the person is oneself, paying most attention to the identification of oneself to another person” (p. 8).

But why concentrate on such cases? Because, as the title of Cohen’s book makes clear, his “topic is the phenomenon of understanding another,” and, Cohen explains, “I am persuaded that understanding one another involves thinking of oneself as another, and thus the talent for doing this must be related to the talent for thinking one thing as another; and it may be the same talent differently employed” (p. 9).

“Thinking of one person as another,” Cohen tells us, “is a bemusing and mystifying enterprise, but if I am right, the ability to do this is a fundamental human capacity without which our moral and aesthetic lives would scarcely be possible” (p. 13). And it is his claim “that some times, for some people, in some circumstances, it is incumbent upon one to attempt metaphorical identification.” But, as he wisely concludes, no rule can be given for “[w]hich are those times, those people, those circumstances” (p. 17).

Two incidents from the Old Testament provide crucial examples of personal identification for Cohen. They are the stories of David and Bathsheba and Abraham and Isaac. I can safely assume my reader knows both.

In the former, when Nathan recounts the parable of the rich man and the poor man, what happens is that “David’s anger and moral outrage at the rich man have been transferred to himself.” In other words, “What matters is that some specific feeling attached to David’s sense of the rich man is provoked in David’s sense of himself, to whom it had not previously attached.” Furthermore, and this is a crucial point, “the efficacy of the story does not depend upon the story’s being true” (p. 21). But if the story, the parable Nathan tells David, is not true, is, in other words, a fiction, then how can David be aroused to anger at the rich man? There was no rich man to be angry at, nor an immoral act of the rich man to make him the reasonable object of David’s anger. Yet for all of that, “stories move us, excite us, instruct us, and in the first instance, in the dynamics of this effect, it
I think it fruitless to try to will to live with both mysteries,” Cohen says, “and forthcoming, although it is not clear to me. Cohen seems to think no solution can be explained, by the other as well” (p. 38). But if one expects now to try to grasp the story, or at least to try, to try to begin grasping it, it seems to me necessary to try to appreciate Abraham, and that means asking what it would be like to be Abraham” (p. 53). But imagining what it would be to be Abraham is “predicated upon a prior act of imagination, namely, imagining yourself in conversation with God. I do not think I can do that. Can you?” (p. 54).

Would it not, however, be equally difficult imagining oneself Hamlet, who, after all, holds converse with a ghost, on the strength of which he sets out to assassinate his uncle, the king? (Such questions do not go unnoticed by Cohen, and I will return to them anon.)

Not unexpectedly, for anyone who knows Ted Cohen, sport in general, baseball in particular, becomes a topic for discussion. Two questions arise. “One is the question of how virtuosity is appreciated, and the other is the question of that sense of personal involvement known to the ardent fan” (p. 57).

“Virtuosity,” Cohen suggests, not implausibly, “might be thought to be the exhibition of something difficult done without apparent effort” (p. 58), and it is an object of appreciation, of course, not just in sport but in the performing arts as well. “The question, in both sports and art, is, when is a difficult thing worth doing?” (p. 59).

The question of the “fan” is, believe it or not, a complex one, as Cohen spins it out. And there is no time to go into the complexities here. Suffice it to say: “a fan hopes his team will win, but not all who hope for a win are fans. And there are some who are fans but are not complete fans, not purely fans” (p. 60). Read the book for more details!

Some further topics touched upon by Cohen are “the effort to appreciate how one may be appreciated by others” (p. 65) and “a special example of metaphorical personal identification . . . in which the person one identifies with is oneself,” as “when one tries to gain a sense of oneself at a future time” (p. 67). But, again, the limits placed upon me do not allow further elucidation here of what Cohen has to say on these intriguing topics.

Of particular interest to my readers will be Cohen’s discussion of narrative art as an instrument for “mutual human understanding,” which, Cohen quite rightly points out, “is itself frequently a theme with narrative art” (p. 69). Narrative literature requires,
Why declare them, as Cohen apparently does, has argued at length that the so-called “hard problems” of consciousness is an insoluble one for us, because we just do not have the requisite mental equipment to find the solution.

But aside from the controversial nature of all three of these kinds of “problem put-downs,” I see no reason to believe that the problems in question should be candidates for any of the three, or are in any other obvious way intractable. There are explanations on offer for both, from philosophy, cognitive science, and even, perhaps, evolutionary biology. Granted there is presently no consensus. But declaring the case hopeless is a thought stopper. Why not keep trying? Well, it might be responded, these problems go back to Plato, and remain unsolved. Is not that argument enough for our declaring their continued consideration “fruitless”? However, if that is our criterion for fruitlessness, will not philosophy tout court have to close up shop? (I will not stay for an answer.)

The second point that I want to raise concerns our ability or at times lack thereof of imagining ourselves as the characters in fictional works. One of Cohen’s telling examples involves the character Rosedale in Wharton’s House of Mirth. Rosedale is depicted by the narrator of the story as a typically distasteful Jewish stereotype, with strong emphasis, one hardly needs add, on the money thing: “the business astuteness which characterizes his race” (p. 75). Cohen writes: “[T]he text is not entirely clear as to exactly whose views [of Rosedale] these are, Lily’s or the author’s.” Furthermore, “I read the book as if the opinion were held by both Lily and the author, but this makes no difference because I wish only to ask the question, how am I to identify, either with the author or with Lily Bart, or, for that matter, with Simon Rosedale, when that identification seems to require assuming a certain opinion of Rosedale specifically and of Jews in general” (p. 75), an opinion which neither Cohen, nor I, nor any “right-thinking” person does (or should, anyway) hold.

Now Cohen says that it “makes no difference” to his question whether or not the author acquiesces in the stereotype of Jews that Rosedale embodies. But I think it does make a difference, and is also importantly related to Cohen’s, so it seems to me, overly tolerant conclusion, quoted previously, that “it is then an open question whether the deficiency is mine or Edith Wharton’s” (p. 76). Here is why.

It is my view, argued for elsewhere, but which I cannot argue for here, that some literary fiction some of the time projects propositions or views of the world for our thoughtful consideration. These propositions and views may be for the reader what William James called “live hypotheses” or what he called “dead” ones. A live hypothesis is one that, even if you do not presently believe it, is a hypothesis not completely closed to you but one that you might, on further reflection, come to believe, for example, that there is a...
God or that there is no free will. A dead hypothesis is one that is, in a word, a dead issue for you, such as, for example, Aristotle’s theory of motion or creationism.

Furthermore, it is my view that projecting live hypotheses is a good-making feature of some literary works. And since, on my view, the Jewish stereotype that Rosedale embodies is a dead hypothesis, or should be, for any “right-thinking” reader, it is a defect in the novel, as well as a deficiency of Wharton’s, if she indeed embraces it, and not Cohen’s, that he cannot identify with the characters in the novel who subscribe to it or with Rosedale or Wharton herself.

I realize, of course, that what I am saying here is highly contentious and requires far more elaboration than I can possibly give to make it plausible, let alone convincing. But all I can fairly do at this point is to put the proposal on the table here for future discussion.

Cohen concludes his elegant little book in this wise: “[S]o there they are—the metaphors and the art, including the metaphors that connect you with others. The metaphors, the art, and the people demand that you grasp them. And you can do this only by investing yourself” (p. 86). So why not invest in Cohen’s book? I assure you it will return handsome dividends, even in the present economy.

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As will probably be known to all who read these reviews, Roger Scruton is an English aesthetician and conservative cultural commentator. This book hovers somewhere between these foci of Scruton’s output. It is itself a beautiful object, produced as a small format hardback, with a detail from a Botticelli on the front (oddly credited as being c. 1840). Scruton takes what might now be considered an old-fashioned view, dividing philosophical questions from what might broadly be called causal questions: the former attempting to throw light on beauty as an experienced phenomenon, the latter looking at the roots of beauty in sociology, empirical psychology, or evolutionary biology (to name but three). Scruton’s investigation is explicitly the former; the latter questions, when they are considered at all, get short shrift.

Early in the book, Scruton commits himself to a broadly Kantian position: that the judgment of beauty arises from, and expresses, a disinterested interest in an object. The first chapter gives us some “platitudes” about beauty “against which our theories can be tested” (p. 5). The second chapter is on human beauty and the third on natural beauty. It is after these, when Scruton moves on to consider “Everyday Beauty” and then on to art and taste, that things get more interesting, at least for this reviewer. One argument that runs through the book, on which I will focus, is that beauty is not the expression of subjective preference, but is rationally founded. This claim to objectivity (if we can put it like that) begins in the chapter on everyday beauty and continues to the end of the book. Scruton gives us a number of examples of everyday beauty, from the shape of a front door to the laying of a table. There are a number of grounds for choice in such matters. One is through matching of (say) the door with the visual vocabulary of the rest of the house, the street, and through to even larger social units. There is a welcome stress throughout on the public nature of beauty and its constitutive relation with notions of community. A second is through allusion to a certain form of life; the earthenware jug in the middle of the table alludes to the Mediterranean life and the forms of hospitality that implies. These are ways of doing things that secure our part in everyday social existence. However, everyday beauty is more than this. When choosing between appearances, people are disposed to interpret those appearances as being intrinsically meaningful and attempt, through dialogue, to come to some agreement in judgment. This judgment is expressed in terms of what is fitting, a kind of minimal sense of beauty.

The notion of fittingness is picked up in the next chapter on “Artistic Beauty” to underpin a succession of standard views in neo-Kantian aesthetics: that, in art, the vehicle of the message cannot be separated from the message and that expression cannot be separated from representation. A good work (whether visual arts, music, or architecture) is experienced as fitting other elements of human life. Scruton puts this forward as a rival theory of expression (broadly construed so as to include meaning) in art: the artist fits things together to create links that resonate in the audience’s feelings. The fundamental distinction that runs through this chapter (and, as we will see, the whole book) is between, on the one hand, the imagination (which is the domain of a somewhat Kantian freedom) and ourselves as contingent beings, with interests and desires. Art and the meaning of art belong to the former; fantasy belongs to the latter.

The next chapter, “Taste and Order,” attempts to ground these claims in something more concrete. The overall view, with which I have a great deal of sympathy, is that a story (which may have many and varied elements) can be told to justify our judgments on a work of art, and the test is whether the story will be convincing. This is obviously not a reductive account of aesthetic objectivity, and there is still a question as to what governs the normativity of any aesthetic reason-giving in the story. Scruton struggles with this; how can we present reasons why an experience should be accepted as appropriate or
right? He wisely attempts to illuminate the notion of objectivity, although further exploration of this point might have made it easier for him to present the argument. The two analogies he presents I found unhelpful. First, the attempt to get someone to experience a work of art as fitting seems to me to have nothing in common with the attempt to get someone to experience an aspect of the duck-rabbit figure (p. 139). The latter is merely a case of pictorial representation. Second, the notion of objectivity we require is not that of agreement about colors (pp. 142–143); what we would say to someone who did not (say) perceive a fire engine as red is clearly not the issue that interests us.

The following chapter, “Art and Eros,” is both a testing ground for the key themes of the book and a consideration of “one of the most important questions confronting art and the criticism of art in our time: that of the difference, if there is one, between erotic art and pornography” (pp. 158–159). Without wishing to denigrate the subtlety of Scruton’s position, one can anticipate his view. There is a dichotomy between interest in the embodied person (the Kantian individual, who operates in the realm of moral freedom) and the body (a fantasy interest, designed to provoke desire). The former is the realm of art and the imagination, the latter the realm of pornography. Titian belongs to the former and Boucher the latter (among the odder ironies of the book are the strong echoes here of the left-leaning and rather un-Scrutonian John Berger). The final chapter, in which Scruton’s conservatism is given full rein, concerns modern (and modernist) attitudes to beauty. It begins by pointing out some of the more egregious flaws in Greenbergian Modernism and moves on to two ways in which modern culture is in a headlong “flight from beauty.” The first is in the rejection of beauty in large parts of contemporary artistic production, which Scruton traces to a failure of nerve in the face of the transcendent: an attempt to remake the world as though love were not a part of it (p. 178). The second is in the ascendance of kitsch—the result of people preferring the sensuous trappings of belief to the thing truly believed in. It is tempting to dismiss this as simply Scrutonian cultural pessimism (it is rather Levaviste in its denunciations of the modern world); however, some sentences undeniably hit their mark: “it is no accident that the arrival of kitsch on the stage of history coincided with the hitherto unimaginable horrors of trench warfare, of the holocaust and the Gulag—all of them fulfilling the prophecy that kitsch proclaims, which is the transformation of the human being into a doll, which in one moment we cover with kisses, and in the next moment tear to shreds” (p. 191).

The book aims at two constituencies and is in danger of pleasing neither. The common reader will find the debates rather esoteric; the professional philosopher will be unsatisfied by the number of uncashed intellectual checks and promissory notes. Among the latter is an aside on originality (p. 108) and a few pages on the explicit link between art and morality (pp. 130–132), both of which promise something more interesting than can be found in the current literature on the topic. Scruton also has some trouble shoehorning everything into his dichotomy between the intentional and the causal. Oddly, for me, this came out most in the chapter on Eros. It seems to me obvious that one can have a fantasy interest for a particular embodied person—it is difficult to account for the success of the *grandes horizontales* if not. Nonetheless, we are not exactly overrun with decent, humanistic essays on this difficult and important topic, and for that reason if no other (and there are others) we should be grateful to Scruton for having produced it.

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David Carrier is that rare creature, a philosopher who writes art history. Most philosophers who have written on art have been content to remain philosophers, among them Richard Wollheim and Arthur Danto, whose work Carrier uses heavily in this book. Most art historians of a philosophical bent, such as Michael Baxandall (also a museum scholar) and Ernst Gombrich, both of whom Carrier cites, consistently maintained their identities as art historians, purposefully avoiding identification with philosophy as a discipline and a profession. In pursuing his ambition, Carrier has, in a sense, leapt over the Warburg Institute generations represented by Gombrich and Baxandall to connect with an earlier time when scholars such as Erwin Panofsky, Edgar Wind, and Ernst Cassirer could move freely among wissenschaftlich disciplines, including philosophy and history of art. But Carrier’s publisher, Pennsylvania State University Press, firmly classifies his new book as philosophy, not as art history. It does not even appear in both lists. Is this fair?

Carrier is at his greatest ease and is most authoritative when he turns to decidedly philosophical matters—although he is in no sense at a loss when discussing art and its histories. In this book, he sets out to define conditions for a certain kind of art history that scarcely exists—a world art history—so his text is about conditions, premises, and, in the end, predictions for the practice of a range of art-historical methods. To this extent his text is appropriately
philosophical, and Carrier’s analytical skills carry him a great deal further than many art historians who have explored the puzzles arising from ambitions to address art worldwide.

The title of the book might lead some readers to be disappointed by its contents; yet this would be unfair, for from the outset Carrier makes it clear that he is writing no more than a prolegomenon in which he seeks to describe the conditions in which the future writing of a world art history might be feasible. Further, some readers may be disappointed that by “world art history” Carrier does not mean the world in its human entirety, but only parts of it: Europe, China, India, and the Islamic world alone. He is clear, though, about his reasons for omitting great tracts of the globe. It would be impractical, he contends, to extend the examination to each and every human society at present. While admiring his ambition, and respecting his prudence, one can question his choices.

Discussions of art are exercises of power. Carrier sees world art history as part of the process of globalization, though more in sorrow than in approbation. Placing the discipline in the context of European travel, trade, and conquest, he contends that “the expansion of art history from [Giorgio] Vasari’s story focused on Tuscan art to our multicultural narrative is inseparable from that history. As capitalism seeks new markets, leaving no part of the world unexplored, so Western art history now looks to all cultures, interpreting exotic art in ways guided by its own precepts” (p. 120). This may be so, but are the philosopher and the art historian compelled to acquiesce? Why not place art (to call it such while acknowledging the extent of the definitional puzzles that the term presents) from societies at the greatest disadvantage in the picture from the very beginning? Why exclude the subaltern, to use Antonio Gramsci’s term to encompass groups including, but not confined to, indigenous peoples who are at a disadvantage to those exercising power?

Carrier is far from alone in describing the consequences of globalization for historical study. The anthropologist Jack Goody makes a similar case in respect of the character of an entirely Eurocentric history in The Theft of History (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He contends that Asia—China, India, and the Islamic world—has been traduced owing to perceived Eastern sloth and tyranny, a myth effectively exposed by Edward Said in Orientalism (Vintage, 1978). Goody unmasking three great twentieth-century scholars—Joseph Needham, Norbert Elias, and Fernand Braudel—as “thieves” from Asia of science, civilization, and capitalism, respectively, by their concealed application of Eurocentric assumptions. As Carrier acknowledges, and Goody argues, European particularism has been enormously damaging. As a corrective to the view of Europe as a special, inevitably privileged case, there is much to be said for regarding the Eurasian landmass plus the entire Mediterranean and east African littoral functioning as one cultural unit between about 500 and 1500, with only a few pockets of peripheral eccentricity, such as much of Western Europe (excluding the Iberian peninsula before the so-called Reconquista, or al-‘Istaridād). In When Asia Was the World (Da Capo, 2008), Stewart Gordon has argued that the widely shared cultural norms of this huge area allowed the mid-fourteenth-century Moroccan Ibn Battuta and his like to find patronage and employment from Timbuktu to Beijing. Gordon holds that only the arrival of the Portuguese compromised widely shared conventions, which until then had promoted a degree of social cohesion. The Portuguese, who journeyed into the Indian Ocean from 1498 onwards with consequences that were catastrophically disruptive to the societies they encountered, were ignorant of conventions such as the giving and receiving of robes of honor. They compromised a system of which they knew nothing by ignoring or controverting its conventions through the exercise of raw power. While acknowledging his own European identity and ineradicable Eurocentrism (as shared by the European diaspora in North America and elsewhere), Carrier implicitly subscribes to this Eurasian worldview by giving privilege to China, India, and the Islamic world.

Carrier’s vision is not the result of any want of consideration, but is, in part, a consequence of his conception of both philosophy and art history. “The philosophers and the art historians have different goals,” he writes. “The philosophers seek a completely general definition, while the historians [properly, art historians] want to explain the relationship of successive works of art on the various time lines” (p. 109). Philosophers ask, “What is art?” whereas art historians pose what Carrier characterizes as “more parochial questions”: What is Indian art? What is Islamic art? That is, insofar as artists make art by responding to other art, notably that of their predecessors in an at least partially self-contained system of imitation, emulation, and innovation, each such system within any given society should be comprehensible by means of a timeline: one for European art, another for Chinese art, yet another for Indian art, and yet another for Islamic art. These timelines are reductions of, or can be elaborated to produce, necessarily Western-style causal narratives.

On this account, need art history be anything more than what Arnold Toynbee feared some thought history to be, “just one damn thing after another”? Carrier’s analysis is certainly reductive, but, as far
as the Western practice of art history goes, largely justifiable. If we adhere to a recent, modern Western notion of a hierarchy of media (in play since the later seventeenth century, subsequently coalesced by Immanuel Kant) that places fine art before decorative art, with painting at the top, it would be difficult to refute the claim that until the recent past art practice proceeded on a series of such timelines (a far larger number than Carrier discusses, of course), each in isolation or near isolation from the other. In this case, Carrier’s claim that “[t]here is a difference in kind between occasional exchanges between traditions, which occur throughout history, and what happens when previously parallel time lines intersect” (p. 41) is plausible; but, if we do not subscribe to such a hierarchy, and in consequence adduce numerous exceptions, the condition of isolation applied to societies in contact with one another, pursuing tradition under blinders, begins to look distinctly suspect.

By relying on an outmoded notion of artistic hierarchy, Carrier neglects to give enough weight to a broad range of visual cultural exchange. For instance, the spread of blue-and-white ceramics from China to Persia, and eventually to Western Europe, and the attendant search for the secret of porcelain, entail the intersection of the art history timelines of all four of Carrier’s societies—Europe, China, India, and the Islamic world—in a hugely consequential way. Carrier consistently underestimates contacts and responses among these societies, I suspect largely because they occur in visual rather than textual terms: that is, members of these societies may have known a wide range of each other’s visual products, but not each other’s writings about them.

The worlds of artworks and other artifacts in these societies were far more intertwined than Carrier allows. He makes much of the exoticism in Europe of carpets from the Islamic world, and their depiction in European paintings, but does not fully take into account their actual use, and even their commission. In 1634, Robert Bell gave the Girdlers’ Company (one of London’s guilds and livery companies), of which he had been master, a monumental floral and armorial carpet that he had commissioned from weavers in Lahore, then in the Mughal Empire. It remains in the possession of the company. Such an object was and remains inherently cross-cultural, conceived, designed, and used differently from contemporary Islamic prayer carpets, but sharing in the conventions of Mughal floral carpets no less than in those of Western European armorial representations. In the very same year, in Rome, Gian Maria Roscioli acquired a new painting by Nicolas Poussin, The Saving of the Infant Pyrrhus (Musée du Louvre, Paris). As an artwork, the Bell Carpet is neither more nor less significant, interesting, arresting, or aesthetically valuable than the painting by Poussin (an artist on whose work Carrier has written illuminatingly).

The relative oversignificance that Carrier attaches to the works of so-called canonical Western painters such as Poussin emerges fully in the thought experiment that constitutes the finale of the book. Here Carrier notes that, thanks to a Chinese scholar, Ding Yuchang (Carrier’s invention), “we finally have a satisfactory account of Nicolas Poussin’s landscape paintings. What had puzzled the earlier European commentators, the relationship of these pictures to his scenes of pagan mythology and classical history, now becomes clear thanks to Yuchang’s inspired recognition of their affinity with Chinese landscapes” (pp. 147–148). Carrier is perceptively making the serious point that we shall not be able to speak properly of a world art history until European discourse on European and non-European art is fully and equitably complemented by non-European discourse on not only non-European art but on European art, too. Attractive as this notion may be, postulated as it is on a mutual cultural respect that Carrier advocates, it fails to take into account both the fatal power disparities among artmaking societies and social groups (that is, all human societies and social groups) and the sheer longevity of human existence. Humans and other hominids have made aesthetically charged artifacts for an almost unimaginably long time. Consider, for example, the symmetrical, likely nonfunctional hand axes produced by Homo erectus, Homo heidelbergensis, and Homo sapiens australiensis up to 1.4 million years ago, discussed by Marek Kohn and Steven Mithen.

The mere thousand years of pan-Eurasian mutual cultural intelligibility between 500 and 1500 looks very “parochial” (to use one of Carrier’s terms) in this context. The challenge of conceiving, let alone producing, a world art history is on a far larger scale than Carrier perhaps dares to acknowledge, even despite his sincere disclaimers regarding the limitations of his preliminary case studies, for such an art history must not only address all humans ever, but also take us beyond what we comfortably recognize as human.

Philosophers are trapped by reliance on the written word; so are most art historians. It is no coincidence that Carrier concentrates on societies with written commentaries on visual art, whether by Giorgio Vasari in sixteenth-century Tuscany, or Tsung Ping in fifth-century China. In doing so, Carrier adheres to a questionable view of “civilizations,” seeing them in essentialist terms, as when he claims “Chinese culture has a certain distinctive essence” (p. 37) or, when quoting Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, The Art and Architecture of China (Yale University Press, 1971), he claims that “the Chinese possess the longest continuous cultural history of any of the peoples of the world” (p. 43). This would come as news to many other peoples, the Pintupi
of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, for instance, or the Hupa of northern California, to pick two (almost) at random (see Byron Nelson Jr., Our Home Forever: The Hupa Indians of Northern California [Howe Brothers, 1994]). As Western art historians such as Richard Farris Thompson in the case of the Yoruba in Nigeria, Howard Morphy in that of the Yolngu in Australia, and Sally Price for the Suriname Maroons have demonstrated (among many others), peoples long without writing can have a complex aesthetics regarding the things they make, often not for purely functional purposes, articulated both visually and verbally: art. Rather than leave definitions to Western scholars alone, various subaltern groups have taken charge of their own cultural interpretation in institutions that deal with visual arts. Prominent examples are the national museums Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Aotearoa (New Zealand), with a prominent Māori presence, and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and New York City. A tribal example is the Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llnagaay, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada.

If we would make philosophical claims about visual art, those claims must not only be generally true, true in all possible worlds, but also true in real societies, such as those of the Yolngu in Arnhem Land, and the Haida in Haida Gwaii, no less than in Ming China, Mughal India, and Renaissance Florence. They must be true not only today, but also yesterday, and each yesterday before that as far as 1.4 million years ago. No wonder we blench. As well as taking many of the steps Carrier eloquently and rightly proposes, we can take others yet more radical. We need not acquiesce in globalization, but can resist its power inequalities by rejecting notions of centers and peripheries, no less than oppositions between sophisticated civilizations and primitive cultures. We can question the ascription of superiority to urban over agrarian peoples, agrarian over hunter-gatherer peoples, even settled over nomadic peoples. Europeans can make imaginative attempts to see themselves at an unfamiliar cultural disadvantage to indigenous peoples, for instance in situations of dependence such as Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his surviving companions experienced between Florida and northwest Mexico between 1528 and 1536 (see Andrés Reséndez, A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca [Basic Books, 2007]). Such exercises are salutary and might remind not only Europeans, but also Chinese, Indians, and inhabitants of the Islamic world that their ways of doing things—including artmaking and artwriting—are not the only ways, nor invariably the best.

David Carrier has characteristically and admirably set himself a heroic task, like Raven stealing the sun, moon, and stars, or Herakles fulfilling the tasks set by Eurystheus. As one of our most deft philosophers of art, he sorts out various puzzles arising from an ambition to create conditions in which a world art history might be possible, including distinguishing between relativism and pluralism, for instance, propounding the appreciation of “exotic” art without necessarily accepting the worldview of its creators (though the same should hold for the appreciation of European art in relation to the worldview of its creators). This book is a necessary preface to the project he, and many others, have in mind: a world art history, but, finally, we must realize that he, like others who seek to combine philosophy with art history, is obliged to work under difficulties that might confound any thinker. As a philosopher, Carrier tests his claims against particular instances, so he cannot be wholly comfortable in that role; as an art historian, Carrier tests his claims against would-be universals, so neither can he be comfortable in that role. Yet such discomfort is only a mild foretaste of the challenges to cherished fundamental assumptions—in art history, philosophy, and worldview generally—that those who would join David Carrier in his great venture must inevitably face.

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Peter Lamarque knows a lot, and he has managed to put a great deal of what he knows into this excellent book. The Philosophy of Literature is a survey text, and it offers an engaging and strikingly original exploration of the preoccupations and prospects of the field. What makes this book so successful is the vision of the philosophy of literature Lamarque offers the reader. In Lamarque’s hands, the philosophy of literature is much more than just the philosophy of fiction; it has as much to say about poetry and drama as it does the novel; and it is confidently analytic yet informed by literary criticism and unafraid of Continental philosophy. The philosophy of literature suddenly feels richer, more inclusive, and more adventurous. Readers will naturally take issue with this or that claim, but they will also find Lamarque’s book to be among the most sophisticated and intelligent contributions to contemporary philosophical aesthetics.

The first thing one notices when opening the book is that the chapter titles are not what one would expect. This is not a book that introduces one to the subject just by offering overviews of its most popular puzzles and debates. There is no chapter on the paradox of fiction, interpretation and intention, literature and morality, or whatever other debates we tend to
write on when trying to publish an article. Even the chapter entitled “Truth” is on much more than the debate on literary cognitivism. Lamarque discusses all of these debates, of course. What is inspired about his approach is that he situates his discussion of the problems that occupy contemporary literary aesthetics in an investigation into the institution and practice of literature: of the norms, expectations, and habits that have guided the production and reception of literary works. This acts as a very fine response to the charge that analytic aesthetics is uninterested in cultural issues and ignorant of actual literary history (this is what is meant when people complain that it is ahistorical or, even less elegantly, “unhistoricized”). Lamarque has a nuanced understanding of the history of literary criticism and literary theory, and he does much to put analytic philosophy of literature in touch with it. This can only be for the good, and the reader is struck by how much smarter this makes literary aesthetics seem.

Let me give a few examples of what I mean by this. Lamarque places his discussion of interpretation in the third chapter, entitled “Authors,” and before he reviews the debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, he explores at length the history of the concept of an author: that what we tend to mean by it more or less takes shape during the Enlightenment, is elevated to near godly status during the heyday of romanticism, and is called into question in the twentieth century with the rise of “impersonal” theories of writing and the general turn toward anti-humanist conceptions of literature. This story is old hat in literature departments, but very few people coming out of philosophy programs know it, and it can show in the kind of research we produce. It is very helpful to have an introductory text that corrects this, and nearly all of Lamarque’s discussions of contemporary debates offer the same level of historical and literary detail.

I was also impressed by the insightful discussions of the difference between the philosophy of literature and literary theory, dealt with head-on very early in the book but returned to on occasion throughout. I imagine that many readers will, like myself, have students from English departments in their philosophy of literature classes, and Lamarque’s discussion answers nicely all of those annoying but reasonable questions about why one should study literature in a philosophy department. Lamarque is skeptical about the change that swept through literature departments in the late 1960s, when “Theory” was born and post-structuralism stepped onto the scene, but he is gentle, as are his expressions of worry, and so will not put off students and scholars who are more sympathetic to this than analytically inclined philosophers tend to be. It might be worth pointing out to one’s students that Lamarque has a tendency to run together the story of the rise of Theory with that of the rise of Cultural Studies, which makes things look rather worse for Theory. He is right that the dismantling of the idea of “literature” that Theory reveled in paved the way for Cultural Studies. But when Theory was attacking this notion, it was doing so from on high: these were respected scholars of Shakespeare, Milton, and especially of poetic romanticism (think of the members of the Yale School). In fact, the great irony is that the revolt against the idea of literature was carried out largely by scholars of very high and prickly taste. It is true that they likely had a colleague down the hall writing an essay on the commodification of male desire in Rawhide (1959–1966), but, on the whole, Theory prefers to keep Cultural Studies at arm’s length.

Space will not permit me to discuss all that one will find in this rich book, but perhaps listing the chapter titles will give one a sense of what to expect: (1) Art, (2) Literature, (3) Authors, (4) Practice, (5) Fiction, (6) Truth, and (7) Value. Very little is omitted from Lamarque’s survey (of the various topics that one could discuss in detail in a survey book, narrative, which is again a very fashionable topic, is the only one that one might have liked to hear more about). The chapters unfold logically and the writing is always clear and lively.

One thing a survey as comprehensive as Lamarque’s inevitably does is give the reader a sense of what issues a field of study overlooks and hence a sense of the work that still needs to be done. Something analytic literary aesthetics has yet to do is to reckon in a serious way with what happened to the institution of literature “on or about December, 1910," as Virginia Woolf put it. In other words, it needs to take a serious look at literary modernism and what this implies for many of the things we like to say about literature. One has a sense of the price we pay for largely ignoring modernism when reading Lamarque’s surveys of what literary aesthetics has to say about the role of appreciation, theme, and value in literature. Since Lamarque’s book is a survey, it would be silly to criticize it for not discussing something that is absent from the field. The point is rather that there should be something on this for a survey work to report on. That the philosophy of visual art has taken modernism seriously is one of the reasons we have Arthur Danto. But there has been no serious attempt to deal with literary modernism on its own terms, as posing distinct and crucial questions for the philosopher of literature. When we mention modernist literature in literary aesthetics, it often does not go beyond pointing out that Ulysses, Waiting for Godot, or The Pisan Cantos pose problems for traditional theories of the nature of novels, plays, or poems. I am not sure that a serious reckoning with literary modernism would undermine the ways we talk about
literature in analytic aesthetics. But it would make our work seem much less dated, and it would likely force us to refine and add to the vocabulary we use to explain how literary works speak to us, bear meaning, offer a specific brand of pleasure, and proffer certain kinds of value. It is perhaps true that there is not much love for modernist literature in analytic aesthetics. But the point is not, or not just, to write about literature we happen to like but to make philosophical sense of our literary practices. That we largely ignore the most radical (and relevant to the contemporary scene) literary movement is something we need to correct.

As I hope this review makes clear, The Philosophy of Literature is a considerable achievement. As a state-of-the-art survey, it covers much more territory than any other book of its kind, the level of argumentation is uniformly high, and the sane and sensible treatment of its topics add light to the murkier regions of the field. Unless one has very good students, I would be hesitant to use this text for lower-level undergraduate courses: all but the best students will get lost in the wealth of detail (for courses of this sort I’d likely opt for David Davies’s fine Aesthetics and Literature [Continuum, 2007]). The Philosophy of Literature does a superb job (indeed, the best available) of showing how the various debates that make up the philosophy of literature all hang together, and for this reason it would work wonderfully for graduate courses, where students often learn the key debates but have little sense of their place in the larger scheme of things. The real value of the book is, again, the vision of the field it offers. We labor under a certain image of our discipline: of its interests, goals, and significance. The image Lamarque offers is an extremely attractive one, and it reminds us of why this is such an exciting and important field. The Philosophy of Literature is a smart, original, and erudite book, and it deserves to be widely read. Philosophers of literature will not be able to live without it.

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PLANTINGA, CARL. Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience. University of California Press, 2009, xii + 280 pp., 14 b&w illus., $60.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.

Carl Plantinga’s impressive new book, Moving Viewers, is an important contribution to cognitive film theory. This approach to film, whose arrival was explicitly celebrated by the 1996 anthology, Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, was developed as an alternative to the once-reigning form of film theory dominated by psychoanalytically influenced conceptions of film spectatorship. The basic assumption of the cognitivists was that cognitive psychology provided a more adequate model of human psychology on which to base an analysis of film viewing than Freudian psychoanalysis.

Although Plantinga shares this conviction and explicitly targets psychoanalytically based film theory, he also attempts to distance himself from an assumption that may have affected some early work in cognitive film theory, namely, that film viewing is a conscious rather than unconscious process. The reason that he characterizes his own theory of the affective impact of films on viewers as a “cognitive-perceptual” account is to indicate that, although his account will emphasize the cognitive aspect of film viewing, it will also take account of other, more perceptual features of the film-viewing experience that take place below the threshold of consciousness.

Plantinga’s cognitive-affective account of film affect differs from the once-dominant psychoanalytically influenced theories in other ways as well. A subsidiary aim of Plantinga’s book is to save the experience of film viewing and the pleasures it provides from the critique made by those theorists. In so doing, Plantinga attempts to do justice to the non-conscious aspect of film viewing without accepting a Freudian account of the unconscious. He thus distinguishes emotions proper from other, less cognitive aspects of human affective life, for which, like many philosophers, he uses the term ‘affect.’ So ‘affect’ refers to any felt bodily state, but the term ‘emotion’ is reserved for those affects with cognitive content.

But what exactly is an emotion? Following the claims of Robert C. Roberts, Plantinga analyzes emotions as “concern-based construals” (p. 56). He uses this terminology in order to allow for a range of different types of emotional states, not just the highly conscious ones that other theorists have identified, in which an emotion requires a conscious awareness of the object “of” the emotion. For Plantinga, there can be unconscious concern-based construals, that is, emotions that do not involve full-fledged conscious judgments about the world.

The first few chapters of Moving Viewers develop the basic structure of this theory of affect and show how it can be used to explain some of the basic features of viewers’ affective reactions to mainstream films, what are known as “movies” or Hollywood films, the primary object of Plantinga’s analysis. In these chapters, Plantinga addresses such important topics within film theory as that of how film narratives elicit emotional responses and our relationship as viewers to characters within the fictional world of a film.
Plantinga’s presentation of his own theory is cogent, although readers will find plenty with which to disagree. For example, Plantinga’s brief discussion of the paradox of fiction (why should we care about the fate of characters we know to be fictional?) does not do justice to the pull of the paradox. Even if, as Plantinga claims, some of our attachment to fictional characters takes place below the level of consciousness, that does not mean, as Plantinga asserts, that there is no real issue about whether such caring is rational or not. In addition, although he uses the notion of the modularity of the mind in his solution to this paradox, Plantinga never explicitly explains what this theory maintains, an omission that will make the book harder for those not expert in cognitive psychology to understand.

But it is the remainder of the book, in which Plantinga applies the theoretical perspective he has developed to a range of important topics in film theory, that shows Plantinga at his best as a film theorist. Plantinga’s discussion of those issues shows the real import of his theory of film affect, for he is able to throw new light on many questions that film theorists have discussed for years.

One of the most interesting discussions in the book, from my point of view, arises when Plantinga asks whether films can evoke the emotions of guilt or shame in viewers. He begins by denying that both guilt or shame can be either what he calls a direct emotion or a sympathetic emotion. That is, he denies that viewers can experience guilt or shame in the same way they might experience fear when seeing a film monster or joy from seeing that a screen couple has surmounted obstacles to their romance. Plantinga does acknowledge that, in some cultures, people can feel embarrassed simply from the fact that they are watching a movie with, say, sexual content, but he wants to rule out of court such situations as irrelevant to the question of whether a specific film narrative can produce these emotions.

So Plantinga needs to find another way to account for the shame and guilt that viewers may experience while watching films. First of all, relying on claims made by Robin Wood, Plantinga argues that film viewers may experience guilt and shame as meta-emotions. The idea is that viewers may find themselves having desires in regard to a film that they do not themselves approve of. One example Plantinga discusses is the desire to see Guy’s wife killed that many viewers of Strangers on a Train (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951) may experience. When viewers realize that they have had a desire that they disapprove of, they may experience shame or guilt for having that desire.

But Plantinga uses Hitchcock’s film to make another, more innovative point. He claims that the film can produce guilt- or shame-like feelings in the viewer, what he dubs “synesthetic affects.” Roughly, the claim is this: after the revelation that Bruno has killed Guy’s wife, Hitchcock films Guy in ways that suggest that he is feeling guilty, indeed, that he is, in a sense, guilty of the murder. When viewers watch the scenes, although they do not actually feel guilty themselves, they may experience “affect congruent with or expressive of the experience of guilt and shame” (p. 164). Plantinga points out that Hitchcock uses music, lighting, the position of the actors, indeed, a large array of cinematic features, to convey aspects of the experience of guilt without actually making the spectator feel guilty. As a result, although viewers do not actually experience shame or guilt in the precise way they would in the real world, according to this aspect of Plantinga’s account, they do experience a range of features of those emotions in the film-viewing situation.

Another example of the usefulness of Plantinga’s cognitive-perceptual account of film affect is exhibited in his discussion of what he calls “the paradox of negative emotion.” This paradox is Plantinga’s generalization of a set of more specific paradoxes having to do with negative emotions in fictions of different sorts. The basic problem is why viewers would endure watching a fiction film (or any other form of narrative work) in which they experienced intense negative emotions. If looking at a monster makes me afraid and if watching a tragedy makes me sad, why would I voluntarily submit myself to such experiences?

Plantinga’s solution to this problem is a version of what he calls Hume’s “two-stage” one, and he expounds it through a close analysis of the scene of Jack Dawson’s death from the blockbuster Titanic (James Cameron, 1997) that gives viewers plenty of negative emotions to deal with. I cannot reproduce the insightfulness of Plantinga’s analysis here. Suffice it to say that he shows how the film both mitigates and transforms the negative emotions that viewers experience into a positive whole through a wide range of cinematic techniques that ultimately provide viewers with an experience of awe that transmutes or incorporates the previously negative emotions viewers experienced.

In developing his powerful analysis of Titanic, Plantinga begins a confrontation with the question of the ideological function of film, a theme that he continues to deal with in a fascinating discussion of disgust and its role in film. One criticism often made of cognitive theory of film is that it neglects the social and political dimensions of films in favor of individual psychological response. Plantinga aims to show that this criticism is unfairly lodged, that a cognitive theory like his own can explain the ideological function of film.
So consider disgust. What exactly is its social function? Plantinga distinguishes between physical disgust, which he takes to be originally associated with foods that should not be placed in one’s mouth, and sociomoral disgust, which applies the same emotion to a range of social phenomena. He points out that films, because of their visual and auditory nature, are able to elicit disgust and that they can use it in socially regressive ways by associating, for example, minority groups with the experience of disgust. Dirty Harry (Don Siegel, 1971) is the film that Plantinga uses to secure his point, although he also shows how disgust can be used in ironic ways, as it is by John Waters in Polyester (1981).

One of the virtues of Plantinga’s account of ideology is that it does not involve a wholesale defense or criticism of film’s social impact. His account is nuanced and shows us that films can have both good and bad effects, from a social point of view. Nonetheless, it is, as Plantinga himself acknowledges, only a beginning to a cognitive account of the ideological effects of film.

One concern that I have is that, in his attempt to rectify what he takes to be an underappreciation of the role of affect in film, Plantinga neglects other, more fully cognitive aspects of the film-viewing experience. This comes out most clearly in his handling of ideology. An adequate account of ideology cannot focus completely on issues of affect. To see this, consider one element of a short scene from Stanley Kramer’s 1967 film, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. Ideologically, the film attempts to present integration in a positive light and opposition to it as misguided. At one point, the Spencer Tracy character, the father of the bride who stands in the way of her marriage to a black man, goes to have an ice cream at a drive-in with his wife. As he enters the drive-in, we see it populated with a young and hip crowd. The film registers the hipness of the young people by means of their dress, style of speech, and the music they are listening to. The group is also pointedly integrated. What viewers are to take from this is that integration is just a fact about the future and basically no different than the new taste in dress, language, and music that characterizes the next generation, a point underscored by Tracy’s difficulty with the new flavors of ice cream he finds himself confronted with at the drive-in.

My point is that ideology works here in a more or less conceptual manner, by getting viewers to form the judgment, or, at least, register it subliminally, that integration is the wave of the future. Of course, the film also presents this idea positively so that viewers will have a positive affective response to it, but the primary aspect of the intended response here is conceptual. Plantinga often writes as if Hollywood films do not require any thought on the part of viewers, as if all that they produce are affective viewers’ responses. While this underplays what films require of their viewers simply to understand their narratives, it is in regard to ideology that its shortcomings are most evident.

My concerns notwithstanding, Moving Viewers is an important new work in cognitive film theory that should be read by everyone interested in film and cognitive aesthetics. The book is well written and deals effectively with a wide range of issues about the affective nature of film. It raises the discussion of film affect to a new level and will be widely discussed, I expect, in the years to come.

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SHAPIRO, MICHAEL J. Cinematic Geopolitics. New York: Routledge, 2009, xi + 192 pp., 37 b&w illus., $135.00 cloth, $34.95 paper.

Much scholarly and critical work has been dedicated to the politics of film: patriarchy and the male gaze, Western hegemony and film connotation, capitalism and the collective unconscious. Soviet montage, French structuralists, and Anglo-American post-structuralists have, as part of the broad tradition of twentieth-century critical theory and cultural studies, dedicated themselves to the analysis of how film aesthetics, texts, and the cinema industry operate in political ways. But must we always look under the surface for such implications? The analytic obsession with ideology and the unconscious has plunged us to the depths of the abyss, perhaps to the point that we have lost sight of what dances on the waves; or, to put it more clearly, what of the explicitly political in cinema? What of political cinema, the cinema of war and struggle, international and domestic, violent and passive, oppressive and resistant?

While the overtly political films of directors such as Michael Camino, Oliver Stone, and a recent wave of American documentarists (heeding Michael Moore’s call to arms for cinema to assume its uniquely influential role at the forefront of cultural resistance and political deconstruction) have enjoyed a high degree of commercial success and critical aplomb, it would appear that we have still yet to figure out the right language in which to pose the aforementioned questions. Indeed, this inadequacy may fall to an important Wittgensteinian insight that our knowledge of the world is limited to our way of articulating it, our language, the words we have for interrogating its mysteries, and, perhaps, it is time that we dig in our heels and demand just what exactly it means to be “political” or where the intersection of “politics” and “cinema” may fall. 
Fortunately, the critical genealogy of Adorno and Jameson has been bolstered by the recent movement in what I have elsewhere called the French Philosophy of Cinema, beginning with the works of Jean-Louis Schefer and finding their pinnacle in the Cinéma project of Gilles Deleuze and the ongoing recent work of Jacques Ranciere. Ranciere in particular, a prodigy of Althusser who has written extensively on the philosophy of history and art, has entered film aesthetics and cultural essayism into direct debate with the question of ethics and political theory, and, as such, it is understandable that his work should form a primary reference point for any contemporary inquiries into the question of cinema, politics, and criticism.

And such it serves for Michael J. Shapiro’s Cinematic Geopolitics, an attempt to cultivate a politics of film aesthetics that is written with the urgency and intrigue of a political theorist aiming to set a mark on film studies’ current obsession, often oblique and even misled, with neo-formalism, that is, the rejection of content-based analysis in pursuit of a Deleuzean methodology based on the aspects of film form (in denial of the fact that Deleuze himself self-contradictorily utilized allegorical modes of content analysis). Unfortunately, such studies categorically fall into self-contradiction and almost immediately equate allegorical readings of story, syntax, and dialogue with “form”; Shapiro’s study, while not managing to avoid this methodological problem, offers a refreshingly original framework for looking at the ideological aspect of film language in the context of a real political praxis.

Shapiro sets the scene by establishing a politics of film viewing, opening this inquiry with an autobiographical anecdote about his own experience as a film festival juror in Norway, which concludes with an open appeal for, and earnest ambiguity concerning the status of, what he calls a “peace film.” This anecdote, which serves as a stepping stone for Shapiro’s introductory reflections “on the relationship of film to the international geo- and bio-politics of war and peace” (p. 1), places the film festival atmosphere as being particularly on the side of a critical, counter-mainstream capacity of film. Citing as well the U.S. government’s ironic use of Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers (1966) as a textbook in torture and antiterrorism, Shapiro begs the paradoxical question of what political cinema is used for and how its viewing conditions alter the intent of its makers. Later, discussing the important role of The Road to Guantanamo (Matt Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom, 2006) in documenting the U.S. abuse of power during the war on terror, Shapiro even uses the film’s festival success (awards, kudos, and so forth) as validation of its “truth-effect,” perhaps overstepping the ontological implications of a festival’s evaluative process.

The festival, traditionally a bastion for underground and independent cinema, thus provides us with a “counter-space” to more mainstream and corruptive manifestations of the relationship between cinema, ethics, and government. The insights Shapiro sheds in particular on the “militarization-complicit university-Hollywood-military connection” (p. 37) as manifest in the University of Southern California’s Institute for Creative Technology (ICT) prove disturbingly enlightening. The ICT, Shapiro reveals, provides an oppressive synergy between government and cinema in which aspiring cineastes merge their audiovisual skills and technologies with the oppressive law enforcement goals of the Patriot Act, thus exploiting Hollywood’s most prolific factory of tools and talent to enable the violation of civil rights and the invasion of individual privacy. Shapiro refers to such practices as the “tertiary spatialization of terrorism” (p. 30), in which a devilish conspiracy extends throughout the institutional web of social, cultural, and political bodies, and this characterizes the writer’s complex but well-formed understanding of the dynamics of micro- and macropolitics.

Such fascinating insights into the strange bedfellows of the war on terror make the opening chapter of Shapiro’s book both intriguing and revelatory, and give credence to his ongoing theorization of a “pax Americana” that has included the underhanded machinations of the U.S. government since the Second World War, and has especially come under suspicion with the overtly illegal and grotesquely evil practices of the Bush administration. And, as is apparent in the last decade of Hollywood and independent production, American cinema has entered into an accusation of the U.S. government’s complicity in unethical and illegal practices, a theme that has elsewhere drawn heavy comparison to the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate skepticism of 1970s American cinema (see Atlantic Monthly).

Shapiro embraces this cinema of doubt and deconstruction as evidence of Ranciere’s claim that “cinema achieves what vision obscures by undoing the ‘ordinary work of the human brain’” and restoring the acentered state of things to the natural world (p. 5). Tying this to Deleuze’s Bergsonian understanding of cinema as being a site of indeterminacy and a departure from the Cartesian tradition of individual embodiment and monolithic subjectivity, Shapiro suggests that cinema is innately and ontologically capable of restoring to our understanding of the world the meanings and experiences that are funneled out through our perception, which is by nature selective and therefore limited. Connecting such an aesthetic virtue to the history of skeptical philosophy and ethics, Shapiro refers to Deleuze’s take
on David Hume’s ethics as an entreaty and inquiry into how we might “pass from a ‘limited sympathy’ to an ‘extended generosity’” (p. 4). A most noble ambition.

Shapiro makes a valiant effort to apply these popular foundations of Deleuze’s and Ranciere’s philosophy of cinema to the geopolitics of war. From here Shapiro begins his actual series of film analyses, which he prefaces with the neo-formalist, one may well say “Deleuzean” now, claim that mise-en-scene tells us more than storyline and a subsequent pledge to a criticism that places its emphasis on images rather than film narrative, and “turns the analysis of a film away from personal drama and toward the changing historico-political frame within which the drama takes place” (p. 11). Moreover, and on a meta-theoretical level, Shapiro claims that the value of his own analysis lies in its being “designed to oppose a politics of aesthetics to the dominant geo-strategic modes of analysis” (p. 15), dominant modes which are never quite clearly revealed. (Indeed, it is important to note that Shapiro struggles with a limited demonstration of film scholarship and even makes quite glaring errors and omissions, though his evocations of Jameson, Deleuze, Virilio, and Ranciere are often interesting and relevant.)

As is the case with many such methodological pledges, the integrity of Shapiro’s claim is suspect and, ultimately, falls apart. Nonetheless, this study offers a needed look not only at the critical reading of films, but also the actual language of what Shapiro calls the critical film.

The impact of a critical film is a matter of its ability to disturb that already initiated interpretative work rather than reinforce it, so that viewers can apprehend the extent to which they have labored within an anachronistic imaginary, an officially promoted illusion, or a merely partial mapping of a sinister world (p. 47).

Looking at a well-balanced sample group of film texts (the international films No Man’s Land [Danis Tanovic, 2001], Dirty Pretty Things [Stephen Frears, 2002], and A Matter of Life and Death [Marianne Ahrne, 1986]; American films Salvador [Oliver Stone, 1986], The Deer Hunter [Michael Cimino, 1978], and The Thin Red Line [Terrence Malick, 1998]; and the documentaries The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara [Errol Morris, 2003] and The Road to Guantanamo [Matt Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom, 2006]), Shapiro works to reveal the “geopolitical conscience” (Jameson) of each text. While Shapiro’s constant insistence that he is concerned not with the what but with the how is just as constantly contradicted by a recurring reliance on such denotative staples of narrative analysis as the interpretation of object symbolism and allegorical readings of spoken dialogue, this work does succeed at illustrating the critical and anti-subjective potential held by the film image’s constant state of flux and transformation. And, looking, for example, at Errol Morris’s engaging revision of Robert McNamara and the Vietnam War, Shapiro helps to substantiate the cultural and political necessity of films that, in the tradition of one of film history’s greatest propagandists—the Soviet agit-proper Dziga Vertov—“influence the mind in a certain direction” as opposed to merely informing dispassionately (p. 77). Yet, while most academics and critics may agree with the political stance of Morris, Michael Moore, and Oliver Stone, we must not let such appeal keep us from holding these same films up to the standard of criticism to which we hold our ideological opponents.

Liss introduces Feminist Art and the Maternal as an “in-depth investigation of contemporary feminist art that is not afraid to confront the dilemmas and the joyous possibilities of feminist motherhood in contemporary Western culture” (p. xiv). The sentence is vague. Is Liss calling the art, or her study of it, brave? No matter, for both are unafraid in their confrontations and explorations of the myths, the challenges, the choices (or lack thereof), the passions, and the pleasures of contemporary feminist motherhood. In her critical engagement with conceptions of motherhood and the work of feminist artists from the 1960s through today, Liss articulates the general struggles that confront many mothers, those related to the psychic and physical weight of creating and caring for children in a patriarchal society. Some of the art wonderfully captures the physical grind of domestic life. For example, Mother Art’s Laundry Works (1977) is a series of performances timed to fit within one wash and dry cycle, in which the artists hung art on clotheslines in Laundromats while engaging the women there in conversations about the domestic duties they attend to on a daily basis. In Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s brilliant Maintenance Art projects and earlier works on domestic labor, she makes visible the public maintenance work of trash collectors and makes public the private work women are constantly doing in the home, taking, in both cases, the first step toward appreciation and respect, the step of raising awareness. The major theme in Feminist Art and the Maternal concerns the tensions that exist between the artistic and the maternal, tensions that create the challenges of creating
art about the maternal or those of simply trying to thrive as both a mother and an artist. Maternal subject matter is not always welcome in art and neither, as many of the artists in this collection attest, are maternal artists. Liss artfully explains the layers of meaning in works that bring the maternal artist and maternity into the artworld, such as Susan Hiller’s *Ten Months* (1979), an installation comprised of a series of close-up photographs of Hiller’s stomach as her pregnancy progressed, coupled with text from a diary she kept during the pregnancy. Liss maintains that “Hiller’s project was and is so provocative not only because it addressed pregnancy, the metaphorical bastard of the already taboo subject of motherhood, but also because it addressed pregnancy from the artist-mother’s intellect and sexed subjectivity” (p. 16). The psychic weight of motherhood is brought home to the readers in the final chapter of the book, in which Liss discusses the friendship and collaborative art of May Stevens and Civia Rosenberg, two artist-mothers who met “by providence.” Both artist-mothers had suffered through the death of a son and out of their bond grew *Crossings: A Collaboration between Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens* (1990), a show of collaborative work that incorporated their sons’ photography. The unique and moving works are about “the mothers’ mutually discovering intersubjective and deeply reflective spaces for mourning and healing” (p. 144).

Liss considers a broad range of examples of artists attempting to make art that makes real, makes understood, makes visible, makes appreciable the realities of motherhood. And the difficulties are explored extensively. At the same time, Liss bravely seeks to do justice to the joy and the passion some women, some feminist women, find in their maternal experiences as well. She recognizes another point of tension, the one between feminists and mothers. As Liss realizes, any discussion of the maternal in a feminist context risks being dismissed as essentializing, as recommending the highest end of all women’s lives is found in motherhood, but also because it addressed pregnancy from the maternal as essentializing is tantamount to subjugating a lived and living subjectivity; it is, once again, as has been done throughout history, to speak for women as opposed to listening to them articulate their “multiple feminist maternal voices” for themselves (p. xx). This is not to say that motherhood should be the goal of all women, nor that it is necessarily a pivotal experience for women who do become mothers. Indeed, the art in this volume questions these very assumptions and others, along with celebrating much.

The book is comprised of seven chapters, each studying different dimensions of a varied selection of feminist art that bridges the unfortunate and some-times uncomfortable gaps between feminism and maternal practice and between art and motherhood, a moving interlude that invites us into a tender and trying moment between a mother and a son during a fight against breast cancer, and, “in lieu of a conclusion,” thoughts, including some insightful prose by Liss’s students, on maternal passions. Many important topics recur throughout the text, such as taboos, care, work, visibility, difference, love, and loss. Liss is skilled at weaving different aspects of these topics together and comparing and contrasting how they are taken up by different artists. *Feminist Art and the Maternal* covers a broad spectrum of maternal experiences in its exploration of artists who deal with everything from pregnancy to death and who attend to the many intersections between the maternal and gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and class; Liss also considers art in a vast array of media, including performance art, film, photography, installation, and sculpture. Throughout, Liss knits together personal anecdotes, from artist-mothers, from her and her child’s lives, about her mother, from her students, to compliment her probing descriptions of the feminist artists who grapple, professionally and personally, with the many challenges, victories, struggles, and pleasures to be found in the real lives of feminist mothers. These personal narratives give the book an inviting flow, almost as if one were visiting a gallery with a friend and engaging in conversation not only about the art, but also in conversation prompted by the art.

The personal nature of the subject matter here is underscored by Liss’s own memories, and her willingness to share her personal maternal experiences adds significance to the artistic and theoretical means of representation. In her treatment of Sherry Millner’s video *Room with a View* (1983), a video that Liss describes as a “riotously humorous, ironic, and ultimately serious take on the cultural politics of pregnancy” (p. 5), Liss recalls her own reaction to a sonogram during which she was able to “see the wondrous image of her child forming within [her],” and she recounts feeling “enveloped in a dreamy yet lucid skin in which my sensual and perceptual awareness were heightened,” while also feeling “oddly estranged from and in awe of the phenomenal physical changes going on inside me” (pp. 11–12). In addition to being thankful for her willingness to share her personal experiences and perspectives, readers will appreciate Liss’s impressive ability to speak plainly about the realities expressed in the art she considers that are hidden by the many taboos surrounding motherhood. For example, Liss’s analysis of Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, a Lacanian documentation of Kelly and her son’s life together from the time of his birth to the time of his language acquisition. Kelly painstakingly saves, preserves, and documents
mementos, including soiled diapers, feeding charts, and early drawings, and couples these with reflections on herself, her child, their relationship, her worries, and her pleasures during the time. At one point, Kelly reflects on being presently pleased with her relationship with her son and enjoying their time “going out to lunch, to the park, shopping together”—intimate date-like excursions, yet innocent moments together. Kelly continues, “[H]e’s fulfilling my fantasy image of a son as a little companion-lover” (p. 30). Liss notes that in our culture, “the mother as a sexual being is perversely out of place,” and even more so is any discussion of the “luscious moments of the everyday erotic between mother and son,” by which she means moments of “insular joy,” a feeling that “mimics but is altogether more innocent and dreamlike than a relationship with a real lover” (p. 30). Kelly’s work, Liss explains, gives voice to “the depth and locus of the terrain” in which “the articulation of maternal desires can reign” without also punishing women who know such desire and intimacy by casting the maternal figure as insane (p. 30).

The result is an effective and intimate perspective on “the difficulties in the contemporary representation of feminist motherhood” (p. xv). Of course, it is not motherhood as defined by patriarchy that is difficult to represent; such representations are everywhere and the ideals behind them are fairly simple to capture (although probably impossible to live). The realities of feminist mothers trying to be and to mother as they deem best, while steeped in a patriarchal tradition that defines for them, sometimes against them, what maternal success looks like, are extremely challenging to capture and express. Artists imagining in and through their work what feminist motherhood might accomplish confront the “cultural taboo against picturing motherhood in its lived realities” (p. 103).

A selection of some of the compelling aspects of feminist mothering Liss exposes includes the following: maternal love, maternal ambivalence, maternal anxiety, maternal labor, maternal maintenance, conflicted maternal identities, maternal gaze, maternal observations, maternal responses, maternal acts, maternal erotics, maternal desire, and maternal power. In addition to these realities that are so difficult to give voice to, one finds a slew of mutual exclusivities in the lives of contemporary mothers: motherhood and sexuality (after all, the most respected mother of them all is said to be a virgin), motherhood and personhood, motherhood and professionalism, motherhood and self-knowledge. The artists explored in this book confront these alleged exclusivities. For example, the mother being excluded from sexuality is questioned by Renee Cox in “Yo Mama,” a photograph in which Cox, standing strong, tall, naked, and powerfully beautiful, holds her baby horizontally in front of her abdomen. Liss notices the baby is “pictured as emerging from the mother’s sexuality, at once a part of her and distinct, almost distant” (p. 102). Liss presents Cox’s work as a response to the primary mutual exclusivity addressed in the book, that of mother and artist. While a student at the Whitney Museum of American Art Graduate Studies Program, Cox was met with confusion and shock—“You’re what?”—when she announced her pregnancy. Cox’s is not the only story like this; many others share similar tales of exclusion and antagonism. For example, when it became obvious she was pregnant, Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s mentor said to her, “Well, Mierle, I guess you know that you can’t be an artist now” (p. 51). Liss postulates, “It was as if pregnancy were a disease in the art world, a disease that rots our all-too-female bodies and extracts energy from our wannabe male creative minds” (p. 99).

I just cannot end this review without remarking on the book’s cover. Can one judge a book by its cover? Well, maybe so, if the book is Andrea Liss’s Feminist Art and the Maternal, adorned as it is by a befitting image of Catherine Opie’s “Self Portrait / Nursing, 2004,” a stunning photograph of Opie nursing her son, mother and child gazing deeply at one another. The photograph features a richly colored tapestry draped in the background and Opie and her son very much in the foreground. Opie, a formidable presence, confidently cradles her child in a loving and solid embrace as his sucking mouth tugs at her ample breast. In many ways it is a familiar image, as mother and child portraits are ubiquitous in our culture, but Opie’s self-portrait does not participate in our culture’s threadbare stereotypes surrounding motherhood. Opie’s photograph is so potent: it is shocking and soothing, provocative and commonplace, taboo and tender, gender-full and gender-free. The felicitous image functions well to set the stage for Liss’s study of feminist art and the maternal in which she dexterously leads readers on an engaging and edifying tour of feminist art that contemplates, criticizes, and celebrates the maternal, in perception and in practice.

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Western works explicating the concept and experience of beauty move generally within two currents. First, beauty is objective, a characteristic inherent in the object deemed beautiful. The headwater of this current is Plato, who argues that beauty is a Form, an
immaterial, universal, unchanging quality in which objects participate, making them beautiful. Second, beauty is subjective, a pleasure elicited by the object but experienced in the mind of the perceiver. In the eighteenth century in Europe, numerous thinkers contributed to this current on beauty, but perhaps the most oft-quoted presentation of it comes from David Hume in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757): “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (p. 230). But the experience of beauty often demands that these two currents flow together. Is not beauty a pleasure triggered by qualities in the object? Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Judgment (1790) articulates the confluence of objective and subjective currents on beauty.

The object, argues Kant, seems to be structured (purposiveness of form) for minds such as those possessed by human beings. This structure or form of the object identifies the objective dimension of the beauty experience. But what exactly does the mind apprehend when it perceives the form of an object in the beauty experience? It cannot grasp a determinate concept, because then proofs would decide whether an object was beautiful or not. However, without a concept, the beauty experience would be arbitrary, incapable of claiming assent by others. This antinomy of taste turns on the meaning of the word ‘concept,’ determinate in the former case but indeterminate in the latter one. Thus, the beauty experience engages the mind’s faculty of understanding to place an indeterminate concept on the imagination’s representation of the form. The interplay (free play) between the mind’s faculties of understanding and imagination results in pleasure. These mental activities name the subjective dimension of the beauty experience. However, Kant’s objective and subjective articulation of beauty is swimming in a current of Enlightenment idealism, which flows far away from the pragmatic interests of today’s analytic thinkers. Simply put, Kant on beauty strikes some analytic ears as a distant foreign language.

Enter Jennifer McMahon and Aesthetics and Material Beauty. McMahon may speak a more contemporary language than Kant does, but it is the language of the professional philosopher, as suggested by inclusion of the book in Routledge’s Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, and the interdisciplinary thinker, as evidenced by the argument’s sources originating from philosophy, psychology, biology, cognitive science, evolutionary studies, and neuroscience. A complex read, the book nonetheless rewards the effort in multifold ways. It is a virtuoso performance.

The goal of McMahon’s book is straightforward: to demonstrate the “cohesive and coherent” view of Kant’s explanation of beauty “when understood in terms of a naturalized theory of the mind” (p. 15). Kant’s aesthetic theory roots the project in the sense that McMahon adopts the veracity of Kant’s initial insights concerning the purposiveness of form, the simulative role of the imagination in representing the object, the indeterminate concept employed by the understanding, the pleasure of the experience, the bringing together of objective and subjective dimensions of beauty, and so on. In these and other ways, the view of beauty presented by McMahon “is beholden to Kant’s aesthetic theory” (p. 15). But this book is no apologia for Kant’s aesthetics, no commentary on his third Critique, and not even a new interpretation of beauty utilizing Kant’s intellectual toolbox. McMahon touts her naturalized theory as a “new paradigm for aesthetic theory” (p. 112), which she calls “critical aesthetic realism” (p. 16), a theory originating in the biology of aesthetics and developed on the model of computational processes made famous by the scholars in artificial intelligence. Perhaps an example of how her theory works would be helpful.

Two or three people are looking at Picasso’s Guernica. How are their brains processing the experience? The word ‘brain’ closes the door on any mind–body dualism theory of human nature. Indeed, McMahon names physicalism as the metaphysical foundation supporting her work on beauty. The brain, then, receives input related to vision (light intensities) and outputs concepts. One viewer might say, “The object is a painting, Picasso’s Guernica.” A two-tier system defines perception, hard data organized by concepts. The beauty experience belongs in the concept tier of perception. “Guernica is beautiful.” With this statement, the viewer is articulating a special relation with the painting, one in which an aesthetic feature like expression may unify the data of Guernica in a way that makes the experience pleasing. This brief example reveals three inflection points in McMahon’s theory of beauty: data input, conceptual organization, and the special conceptual organization experienced as beauty. These three points require some development to appreciate the genius of McMahon’s theory.

First, data input. Every beauty experience begins as a sensory experience. Looking at Guernica, a five-year-old child, a teenager, and a Picasso art expert, given full functioning visual systems, would admit about the same data or light intensities into their respective perceptual systems. To explain the first inflection point in her theory, McMahon relies on the discoveries made in cognitive science over the past fifty years. For example, she identifies as significant the result of experiments reported in Fred Dretske’s 1981 book Knowledge and the Flow of Information (MIT Press). (For more information about the original experiments, see G. Sperling, “The Information Available in Brief Visual Presentations,” in
Psychological Monographs, 74/11 [1960]). Subjects view simultaneously nine or more letters in a super-quick fifty-millisecond flash. When queried about what they saw, they can recall three or four letters only. Interestingly, if the subjects are shown a stimulus at the 150-millisecond mark, that is, after the showing of the letters—they will recall letters influenced by the stimulus. McMahon concludes from this experiment that the perceptual system “retains the sensory data but the cognitive system can only utilize a small portion of what is retained. . . . What can be called to consciousness is determined by which structure is brought to bear upon the sensory information” (p. 132). In other words, the five-year-old, the teenager, and the art expert could experience Guernica similarly or differently; it depends on what they possess in their heads to structure or make sense of the data they all perceived in the same way.

Second, conceptual organization. Before the Guernica viewers articulate differing experiences, they will report seeing the same object, a painting. Arbitrariness does not characterize the perception of human beings. McMahon explains: “[I]n making sense of perceptual stimuli, the system imposes perceptual structures that are compatible with our concepts . . . a necessary prerequisite of object recognition, which involves matching structured perceptual data with labels and their associated meanings” (p. 132). For the Guernica viewers, light intensities are streaming into the visual systems of their brains, and then perceptual structures matching meaningful linguistic labels like “object,” “rectangle,” “painting,” and so on impose themselves on the data stream. The brain simultaneously forms the object and recognizes the object, a painting. This type of binary thinking that appears contradictory on the surface but complementary deep down forms the core of much of McMahon’s theory. For example, beauty will turn out to be subjective and objective, a feeling and an idea, individual and universal, and so on. To return to conceptual organization, a pivotal question arises: what is the genesis of the brain’s perceptual structures? McMahon’s answer moves away from cognitive science and engages conjecture.

McMahon names her theory “critical aesthetic realism.” At some point, then, the theory must encompass reality, the Guernica painting in front of the three viewers. Indeed, the perceptual structures, she says, “reflect something objectively true about the world” (p. 105). They do so because the incessant stress of adaptive pressures in evolution hardwired modules in the brain to recognize objects “in the most effective way possible regarding our survival needs, and as economically as possible in respect of use of neurons” (p. 104). In a sense, the brain modules or perceptual structures evolved so the species could survive; they made themselves hospitable to a useful and beneficial reality. At this level, the modules in the viewers’ brains are transforming the data stream “into lines or edges, color, texture, or at an intermediate technical level, surfaces and shapes, or at a higher technical level, forms” (p. 104). This portion of the discussion accounts for the viewers’ perceiving a similar object. (It also explains in contemporary terms what Kant may have meant with the phrase “purposiveness of form.”)

Finally, beauty. The brain’s modules or perceptual structures sometimes conflict with one another. Should the eye, when viewing Guernica, give priority to edges, color, or shapes, for example? The inability to prioritize correctly can leave viewers alienated from the object, outsiders to the world. Guernica abounds with monochromatic edges. If the viewers were to favor edges and color, they would be imposing unproductive structures on the stream of light intensities; the painting would appear chaotic and strange to them. The recognition of shapes presents a more fruitful structure for Guernica: a woman holding her dead child is screaming in agony, a horse with a spear embedded in its flank neighs from the pain and terror, a person seems trapped in a house in flames, and so on. The proper priority of structures for the object at hand exercises the imagination to create what McMahon calls “aspects, or imaginings . . . constituted by an apprehension of a certain second order arrangement of perceptual and representational properties” (p. 71). The imaginings yield no information about the world (the Guernica house in flames does not indicate that a house in the Spanish city of Guernica is burning); hence, determinate concepts are not in play here. Instead, these imaginings function like unities of a sort, still concepts but indeterminate ones, items like delicacy, expressiveness, elegance, loveliness, exquisitiveness, and so on. For McMahon, these unities represent what viewers call aesthetic features of objects. For Guernica, the dominant aesthetic feature tying the seemingly disjointed shapes together may be expression: the screaming woman, neighing horse, and trapped person may be expressing the horror and destruction of war. Aesthetic form (a painting) leads to an aesthetic feature (expression), which in turn generates an aesthetic idea (horror of war). The correct sequencing of perceptual structures trips like falling dominos the numerous elements of the aesthetic experience.

Beauty always walks with a chip on its shoulder. It demands universal assent. When the art expert experiences unity of form and horror of war in the viewing of Guernica, the expectation is that the other two viewers will share a similar experience. It happens, of course, and McMahon just explained the structure that makes common experience possible. But how does she explain the three viewers’ experiencing Guernica differently? She distinguishes between...
the structure of and capacity for beauty (which are universal) and the ability “to find pleasure in any particular object [which depends] upon acculturation and learning” (p. 31). Since the three viewers possess different background experiences and knowledge, they will most likely perceive Guernica differently, and they will do so with the claim that Guernica itself displays the characteristics they are perceiving. McMahon explains this interesting phenomenon as re-entrant signaling: “higher-level structured knowledge is fed back and incorporated with the raw data, as if it were an external signal” (p. 138). Thus, beauty is a personal and subjective experience with a universal and objective claim.

It may take significant work and an arcane vocabulary to analyze the aesthetic experience, but the living of it is pure pleasure. McMahon says: “[W]e construct aesthetic features because we find the world pleasing by virtue of doing so” (p. 106). Hardly arbitrary or superfluous, beauty presses human beings to calibrate their perceptions to the way the world is. The payoff is enormous: pleasure in the short term, survival of the species in the long term.

The three inflection points, data input, cognitive organization, and beauty, in McMahon’s critical aesthetic realism converge to form the trunk or core of her views. But the understanding of these views does not come easily. Readers must expend some serious energy to wrap their minds around the three points. However, once the structure of the argument sets in, the fruitfulness of the theory goes organic by branching out in multiple directions. For example, McMahon tackles creativity, style, ugliness, and the ontology of art, among other issues. Creativity identifies the process of putting together by trial and error “imaginative fragments” (p. 24) into an emerging form, whereas style surfaces when the perceiver can identify “types rather than individuals” (p. 157) in the data stream. Ugliness appears as the monster with a thousand heads. Beauty unites human beings with the world, but ugliness fosters “alienation and misery” (p. 165) and “resists systematicity” (p. 166) in countless ways. The ontology of art wears similar shoes as beauty: “art is an occasion for the kind of apprehension involved in beauty” (p. 181). This overview of McMahon’s topics in her book hints at the scope and originality her beauty argument contributes to the field of aesthetics.

In March 2006, some of the world’s leading neuroscientists and artists gathered at Columbia University in New York City for the “Art and the New Biology of the Mind” forum. The heavyweights in attendance included scientists Antonio Damasio, Eric R. Kandel, Margaret Livingstone, V. S. Ramachandran, and Semir Zeki; artists Marina Abramovic, Laurie Anderson, Robert Irwin, and Terry Winters; and architect Richard Meier. David Freedberg and Arthur Danto moderated the sessions. McMahon accomplishes in Aesthetics and Material Beauty what it took a score of top-shelf neuroscientists and artists to get done at the conference, and she does it with the serious reader’s most trustworthy allies: thirty-four pages of notes, bibliography, and index. The book is highly recommended, not because its findings on beauty are definitive (the study of the brain and its functions is still an evolving field), but because its reading may spur a novel understanding of one of life’s most fundamental experiences, beauty.

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The work of the Bulgarian-French theorist Julia Kristeva has become steadily more important to Anglo-American audiences and scholars since the English publication, in 1980, of her Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. What is especially noteworthy about Kristeva’s thinking is that its central concepts, the semiotic, abjection, the always-developing subject, and so on, while rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, also challenge that tradition’s dogmas, making Kristeva’s work simultaneously more useful and more accessible to a broad audience. It is disappointing, then, to find that Tina Chanter’s new work, one of the few book-length publications in English in which Kristeva’s thought plays the central role, is styled in such a way as to be of use only to the narrowest of scholarly audiences.

The Picture of Abjection is a needlessly difficult book, the kind that has made “theory” into something of a slur. Its central argument is that “Kristeva’s notion of abjection, and the ways in which it has been extended by other critical analyses, can be taken up as a productive intervention into film theory” (pp. 17–18). Chanter is interested in both the moral and aesthetic usefulness of abjection, but her arguments are screened by needless jargon, obtuse phrasings, confused and confusing terminology, and, most problematically, a lack of argumentative focus. Such characteristics are sometimes taken to be integral parts of “theory,” within whose nebulous boundaries Kristeva’s work certainly falls, but there is ample evidence of the fruitfulness, clarity, rigor, and importance of Kristeva’s thought in the political work of Iris Marion Young and, closer to Chanter’s concerns in this book, Barbara Creed’s work on gender and horror film, as well as Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo’s Noir Anxiety (all of which receive
passing mention in Chanter’s book). The principal difficulty and failing of Chanter’s book is that it offers no point of access to any reader not already committed to the psychoanalytic approach to film. This self-imposed limitation has the unfortunate effect of failing to enrich the discourse of film theory and criticism by never engaging many of its central positions, arguments, and thinkers.

The argument of the book as a whole can be broken into three parts, although these are not clearly delineated in the text itself. First, Chanter argues that Kristeva’s theory of abjection (which, briefly, argues that the “first identification” of the child with the father as an object of the mother’s desire, an identification that is foundational for both the fantasy of castration and the concomitant “logic” of fetishism, is equiprimordial with a “passing away”—abjection—of the body of the mother) can be used as a tool to critique certain assumptions of psychoanalytic film criticism that go unnoticed insofar as they rely upon the founding myths of more orthodox Freudian or Lacanian theory. The second part of the argument is the application of abjection specifically to psychoanalytic film theory and, even more specifically, to the conflict between “spectator studies” (which foregrounds the different sorts of identities that influence a viewer’s perception of film, such as the viewer’s race, class, or gender) and “gaze theory” (which treats the film as a fantasy to be interpreted according to a single, ideal spectator). Finally, Chanter wants to extend her discussion of abjection beyond film theory to include the problems posed by “discourses of sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism” (p. 248) and argue that these discourses often make a tacit appeal to the logic of fetishization (through their incorporation of various Freudian or Lacanian theoretical elements), and this leads them to work unwittingly against their own stated aims.

This summary makes clear that The Picture of Abjection is a contribution to the theoretical or philosophical study of film only in an extremely limited way. Although there are (two) passing references to Arthur Danto’s work, Chanter’s argument never seriously engages with any theory of film that is not predicated upon psychoanalysis, nor is the argument itself accessible to a reader without a substantial degree of fluency in its idiom. This difficulty is further compounded by Chanter’s repeated shifts between film and critical social theory. Throughout the book, confusion over the direction of the argument prevents the reader from determining when film is the focus of concern and when a particular film is being used to illustrate a sociopolitical point. This topical vagueness weakens both arguments and, combined with the jargon-laden prose, gives the impression that what are offered as conclusions are in fact only suggestive evocations. Finally, there is a complete lack of any typographical structures (section breaks, headers, and so on) that might orient the reader or allow her to refer back to a previous definition or clarification. Instead, the reader of, for instance, the third chapter, which bears the weighty title “Abject Art: Destabilizing the Desire for Purification, and Unmasking the Foundational Fantasy of Castration,” is given no guideposts to navigate its near forty-page length. While this may seem to be a minor, even snarky, criticism, the amount of text devoted to laying out, describing, and, ideally, clarifying arguments and terms that provide the basis for later arguments almost demands that the reader be provided with markers to which he or she can refer back.

The first two chapters of the book are primarily concerned with Chanter’s critique of the “logic” (though at times she characterizes it as a “trope” without specifying the importance of this distinction) of fetishism. However, like so many other parts of the argument, various details are repetitively summarized—often with unexplained modification—throughout the remainder of the book. The conflict between abjection and the phallic fetish is elaborated not through an argument that would demonstrate the grounding of the latter in the former, but this grounding is, instead, nebulously “suggested” (p. 61). This conflict is made even murkier by the multiplicity of definitions given to the central concept of abjection, ranging from “something rejected, from which one does not part” (p. 7, quoting Kristeva), to “a state that precedes the emergence of discrete subjects” (p. 61), a “soliciting by the other in such a way that I collapse” (p. 138, again quoting Kristeva), to “what happens when [x] attempt[s] to set [itself] up as pure and good by requiring others to occupy a place of impurity, a place of evil” (p. 270), abjection “marks the birth of thought” (p. 271), and, finally, abjection is “above all, ambiguity” (p. 290, again quoting Kristeva), a statement that, coming just five pages before the end of the book, is sure to frustrate the reader.

Assuming that the reader not only perseveres through this parade of meanings ascribed to the concept of abjection, one that Chanter never pauses to unify in a succinct manner, but is also able to cobble together his or her own working definition of it, the second aim of Chanter’s book is to “use abjection in order to negotiate between spectator studies and gaze theory” (p. 83). This “negotiation” is, however, hampered from the outset by Chanter’s claim that “[c]ertain films both lend themselves to analysis in terms of abjection and help to advance an understanding of abjection” (p. 110). Chanter’s central chapters, which deal with several specific and, presumably, somehow privileged films, wobble indeterminately between using films to explain abjection and using abjection to understand films. However, what is necessary here on Chanter’s own terms is for
abjection to have been suitably fleshed out as a critical concept to provide a tool for psychoanalytic film theory. The fact that the discussion of several films is meant, at least in part, to clarify the concept of abjection is a telling sign that much of the text, concerned with explaining and explicating the concept of abjection, ought to have been preliminary to its deployment in film theory. By blurring this explanatory discussion with its application, Chanter fails to sufficiently develop either. Further compounding the difficulty, Chanter moves too quickly to add yet another concern to her discussion: the priority of abjection in psychoanalytic theories of the human subject and the sociopolitical ramifications of this priority. The potential use of abjection as a concept in film theory is thus consistently buried or brushed off by extended descriptions of films that serve as explanatory devices or illustrations of sociopolitical problems.

Following Kristeva, Chanter describes film as the representation of fantasy produced by the psychic drives (p. 120). The problem with traditional psychoanalytic film theory is that it interprets and critiques the semiotic fantasy in terms of the logic of fetishism, which, in turn, is organized by the castration complex, and therefore remains “patriarchal.” Taking abjection to be more primordial than the identification with the father that yields the structures of Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis allows “difference” to be given priority over identity (p. 274). Readers familiar with post-structuralist debates may wonder to what extent abjection as a concept remains bound to a more primary concept of sameness or identity, since ‘abjection’ implies something from which something is repelled or expelled, but this criticism is not addressed. Chanter moves quickly to argue that the application of abjection to critical social theory is facilitated by the interpretation of films in terms of abjection. Abjection would thus be a conceptual tool capable of diagnosing the “abject” moments of a film, moments in which particular, normative identities are constituted in a shared fantasy, and then using them (as imaginary constructions) to challenge real social and political norms. Chanter provides several examples of such applications using particular films, including Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942), Exotica (Atom Egoyan, 1994), and The Crying Game (Neil Jordan, 1992), but it remains unclear whether any or every film can serve such a “revolutionary” purpose, although Chanter does describe the relatively different potentials of these films for challenging racist and heterosexist norms.

The claim that this book is a contribution to “film theory” is disingenuous at best. It engages only with a very narrowly circumscribed subfield of film theory rooted in psychoanalysis, and readers who are unfamiliar with or unconvinced by this approach will find no point of access to Chanter’s arguments. Moreover, it is not at all clear what status film has in these arguments. Is it somehow a privileged site for challenging social and political norms? If so, what gives it this privilege? Is it more or less potent than, for instance, literature? Such questions are not addressed and, as a whole, the book gives the impression of simply being less concerned with film than with advocating the “revolutionary” potential of sociopolitical critiques utilizing abjection. This indifference is materially reflected in the slippery definitions given to key terms, the almost complete lack of structure to the arguments, and the relentless jargon of the book’s prose. The latter weakness is perhaps the most serious, since it undermines Chanter’s primary thesis. By relying so heavily upon an almost hermetic language, the book abjacts the common, nonacademic speech of many whose “difference” it allegedly champions. It is difficult to regard such an argument, whose expression needlessly makes it inaccessible to most of the people whom it claims to empower, as anything other than paternal.

For scholars already working in the field of psychoanalytic film criticism, The Picture of Abjection may offer some new ideas, and Kristeva’s work is certainly a valuable resource. Even such theorists will, however, lament that the tools and insights that Chanter’s book does provide are mired within such an opaque text. Film theorists unfamiliar with the discourse and vocabulary of psychoanalytic criticism will, unfortunately, have to continue to wait for a text that will facilitate the introduction of the richness of Kristeva’s thought into contemporary aesthetic research.

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The first stated, and most inclusive, aim that Garry Hagberg gives for his book is “to mine Wittgenstein’s later writings (and then to extend the discussion well beyond those writings but along discernibly Wittgensteinian lines) for an account of the self of a kind that stands in striking, indeed revolutionary, contrast to the initially intuitively plausible alternatives” (p. 2). He lists six additional aims, several of which are closely related to this first one. Hagberg illustrates his progress toward these objectives by reference to autobiographical writings, and he does this in a way that will be of interest to philosophers of art, particularly philosophers of literature. His discussions of interpretation, and its role in self-understanding, should also interest aestheticians.
In working toward his account of the self, Hagberg spends more space explicating Wittgenstein’s views, which he never criticizes, than anything else. From his tone of voice, it seems that he endorses virtually everything that he attributes to Wittgenstein, but it is hard to be sure. To make matters even more uncertain, Hagberg’s method of proceeding, as he notes, is more like “an archeological dig” than a “sequential progression along a single argumentative line” (p. 13). All of this often makes it difficult to determine which views discussed in the book are supposed to be Wittgenstein’s, which Hagberg’s, and which both Wittgenstein’s and Hagberg’s.

Like Wittgenstein, Hagberg aims to clarify retrospective self-understanding (autobiographical consciousness) by investigating the “grammar” of our self-descriptive practices. He says that he hopes thereby to expose previously hidden, pernicious influences on the ways we think about and describe ourselves. These influences, he says, are due largely to “deeply entrenched,” seemingly intuitive, yet grossly misleading Cartesian models of the self according to which the self is “an inner point of consciousness” whose acts and content are available to introspection and expressed in outward behavior. He writes that revealing such influences for what they are will bring about better ways not only of describing, but also of experiencing, ourselves (pp. 13–14).

Hagberg’s apparent goal in giving the revolutionary account of the self to which he aspires is not so much a theory of the self as it is “conceptual perspicuity” about the self. Throughout the book he suggests that what is most helpful in achieving conceptual perspicuity is to shed bad theories, not to enunciate oneself in new ones. So, instead of working toward a new theory, Hagberg embraces Wittgensteinian particularism, which in both of their cases means the pursuit of conceptual perspicuity not by means of a good theory, but “in a case-by-case, piecemeal manner,” mostly by means of sensitive, nuanced understandings of particular examples (pp. 13, 182). The result, Hagberg hopes, will be that those who follow his examples will move toward and through conceptual perspicuity to an undistorted “view” of themselves (p. 118).

Hagberg’s Wittgenstein is neither a Cartesian nor a behaviorist. His view, rather, is that the mental, including the emotive, is neither reducible to behavior nor metaphysically separate from behavior but, rather, “manifest in behavior” (p. 96). He rejects the inner–outer model of mind that was ushered into the tradition importantly in Augustine’s Confessions and then subsequently embraced by Descartes and an army of later philosophers who were Cartesianists at least in their allegiance to this model of the self. In Wittgenstein’s alternative “manifest in behavior” view, we do not introspect upon, or observe, or perceive, or otherwise unveil the hiddenness of our sensations and emotions: “we simply have them” (p. 97). Yet, according to Hagberg, Wittgenstein does not deny that mental processes take place in people’s heads. What he denies is the role that is traditionally assigned to these mental processes, including that of grounding claims about what a person meant, or intended, on some past occasion, or what he or she now remembers about it.

Instead of using past mental events as truth-makers for retrospective self-descriptions, Wittgenstein, and apparently Hagberg as well, would appeal only to language games and “context”: “there is something that is called ‘a description of a state of mind,’ but it will be one of a number of interrelated language games, and the context is essential for knowing to what language-game the words and phrases we are hearing belong. But such descriptions do not in any sense proceed in terms of the philosophical picture of the description of an object in a hidden, inner room. They proceed, rather, by sensitively attending to the precise utterances made within those games. This requires a contextually nuanced awareness of precisely which game is being played, and of the contextually seated usages of the words within those games. . . . [I]t is within such games that the self can indeed experience a distinct kind of discovering-through-describing, where the self is trying various formulations of self description that show their special plausibility or fittingness in, and only in, the self-interpretive contexts where mosaics of particulars are assembled in varying ways. It is precisely such cases that show the real meaning of the phrase ‘self-description,’ i.e., in a manner that is at once nonCartesian and nonbehavioristic” (p. 104).

Fair enough, but what exactly is a “language-game”? What is included in “context” and how does attending to it help us to sort words and phrases into different language games? When the self discovers through describing views of itself that are especially plausible, or fitting, how exactly is that plausibility, or fittingness, assessed? Such questions, the first two of which at least are familiar in the literature on Wittgenstein, are neither answered nor even raised by Hagberg.

A case could be made that Hagberg tries to show, rather than tell, the answers to such questions by his examinations of particular examples of autobiographical writings by Augustine, Goethe, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Iris Murdoch, and others. These examinations are one of the main things that one can be sure that he adds to what otherwise often seems like a strict exposition of Wittgenstein’s views. One of Hagberg’s main objectives in these studies is to show that the past that we try to capture in our retrospective self-descriptions is not “frozen,” but fluid, and that to succeed in capturing it we need to view it
not passively, but actively, “Our relation to our past,” he claims, “is no more passive than is our relation to what we presently visually perceive; we are not the containers of memory images that a true narrative would accurately describe.” Rather, we are in a continual process of “reflective restructuring” of “the actions, events, occurrences, interactions, efforts, aspirations, achievements, intentions . . . and everything in between that, taken together, form the teleological trajectories, the narrative threads, of our selves” and thus are self-constitutive (p. 236).

Surely Hagberg is right that our relations to our pasts are no more passive than are our relations to what we presently visually perceive. But, just as surely, our relations to both are often importantly passive. When, under normal circumstances, I open my eyes and look at a table in front of me, what I visually perceive is the table in front of me, and the reason that I visually perceive it is that there is a table in front of me. I am looking at it, and the bodily mechanisms in me that enable me to have visual perceptions are in good working order. The point is that the world often makes an extraordinarily important contribution to what we visually perceive and in part, but only in part, we are quite passive in receiving that contribution. Similarly, what actually happened in the past often makes an extraordinarily important contribution to what we remember having happened. Right now, as I type these words, I remember having eaten cereal for breakfast a few hours ago and that is because I did eat cereal for breakfast a few hours ago, and whatever it is in my brain that accounts for my remembering is still working well enough to record that event reliably. It would seem that in an important respect my brain is “the container” if not of memory images, then at least of memories “that a true narrative would accurately describe.” Such mundane memories are exceedingly common and important in our lives and there is not too much in them that is creative.

If our contributions to what we perceive and what we remember were too creative, we would lose touch with reality, including with the reality about ourselves. Even so, Hagberg is surely right to stress, as many have, that visual perception and memory are also importantly creative. But where do we go from there? It would seem to me that what is needed after Hagberg correctly points out this creative dimension of our perception and memory is a little sojourn not just, or even primarily, into the intricacies of language games, but also into science. That never happens in this book. Science is not even mentioned. The conceptual perspicuity sought is supposed to issue from linguistic considerations alone.

There is something odd about the suggestion, odd in Wittgenstein’s day but even odder today, that the main way we can come to understand the plausibility, or fittingness, of our retrospective self-descriptions is merely by studying language. After all, a basic feature of all human selves is that they are embodied. Since Wittgenstein’s day, a lot has happened in scientific and technological disciplines, such as psychology, neuroscience, and information technology; that sheds light on our embodiment and hence, on the face of it, is highly relevant to how we should understand human selves. In making the case for a Wittgensteinian approach to the self, Hagberg does not so much as mention any of these developments.

In Hagberg’s view, the past that we try to capture in our retrospective self-descriptions is a past that is constituted at least in part by our interpretations of it in the present. So, in his view, our past selves too are constituted in part by our interpretations of them in the present: “As we have seen, Wittgenstein said at one point that language is itself the vehicle of thought. And it is emerging that language, for parallel reasons, is what one might then call the vehicle of selfhood. The linguistic dimension of the self is, as we are increasingly coming to see, necessary (and not merely an ex post facto contingency) to its constitution” (p. 153). Hagberg does a good job making the point that our retrospective self-descriptions are interpretive. It is plausible, though not obvious, that these interpretations, as opposed to or in addition to, whatever it is that happened that they are interpreting, are constitutive of our selves. Since the word ‘self’ is not itself a clear notion, it is hard to say with much assurance what is constitutive of selves. In any case, Hagberg’s making of his point about self-constitution and the careful expositions of Wittgenstein to which he appeals in making it are strengths of his book. But, even if he is right on this point, the linguistic dimension of the self is still, it would seem, just one dimension of the self. How does it compare with other dimensions of the self, many of which are the subject of scientific and technological research?

Perhaps Hagberg is understanding the expression ‘account of the self’ in a way that makes developments in science and technology beside the point. Fair enough. Perhaps he intends to contribute to just one dimension—the philosophical grammar dimension—of an account of the self. Again, fair enough. But it would have been useful if he had explained how he understands what he is doing and why developments in science and technology are irrelevant to his project. He does not do this. Instead, he tells us that the sort of commitment to linguistic particularism that he endorses and often nicely illustrates yields an account of the self that is not merely prefatory to “the real study of the self” but, rather, the very heart of the matter (pp. 132, 246, 254). But is it really? And, if so, how?

In sum, there is much to like about Hagberg’s book. In it, he does a nice job explicating
Wittgenstein’s views. If he were just explicating Wittgenstein, that might almost be enough. But, well over half a century after Wittgenstein wrote, Hagberg seems also to be endorsing and arguing for many of Wittgenstein’s views and also for his own extensions of those views. In these latter endeavors he is not doing much to bring those of Wittgenstein’s views that he endorses and extends up to date or even to speak to familiar criticisms that have been made of Wittgenstein. Instead, he focuses his attack on a kind of naive Cartesianism and behaviorism that few philosophers subscribe to today (Hagberg does not mention any who do). And he rarely draws out the implications of debates that are going on currently in philosophy of mind and language for the views of Wittgenstein that he endorses and extends, some of which, such as the debate in the philosophy of perception that has been occasioned by the view known as disjunctivism, seem highly relevant. As noted, Hagberg totally ignores developments in science and technology. One cannot do everything. But one can make it clear how what one is doing relates to what one is not doing. It would have been useful if Hagberg had spent more time doing this.

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