
Iconic consciousness: the material feeling of meaning[†]

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“Unfortunately, the healing power of thought seems to be the same faculty that diminishes the personal sense of experience. A casual reference to a hair on a nose weighs more than the most important concept, and acts, feelings, and sensations, when reported in words, can make one feel one has been present at a more or less notable personal event, however ordinary and impersonal the acts, feelings, and sensations may be. ‘It’s idiotic’, Ulrich thought, ‘but that’s how it is.’ It made him think of that dumb but deep, exciting sensation, touching immediately on the self, when one sniffs one’s own skin. He stood up and pulled the curtains back from the window. The bark of the trees was still moist from the morning. On the street outside a violet haze of gasoline fumes hovered. The sun shone through it, and people were moving along briskly. It was an asphalt spring, a seasonless spring day in autumn such as only cities can conjure up.”

Robert Musil *The Man without Qualities*

What is an icon? Icons are symbolic condensations (Freud, 1949, page 51). They root generic, social meanings in a specific and ‘material’ form. They allow the abstraction of morality to be subsumed, to be made invisible, by aesthetic shape. Meaning is made iconically visible as something beautiful, sublime, ugly, even as the banal appearance of mundane ‘material life’.

Iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value. Contact with this aesthetic surface, whether by sight, smell, taste, touch provides a sensual experience that transmits meaning. The iconic is about experience, not communication. To be iconically conscious is to understand without knowing, or at least without knowing that one knows. It is to understand by feeling, by contact, by the ‘evidence of the senses’ rather than the mind.

Iconicity depends on feeling consciousness. George Herbert Mead once wrote that the “content of consciousness is feeling.” He described this as the “fund of unexplored social organization which enables us to act more surely”, pointing to its nondiscursive quality as allowing subjectivity to mediate impersonal modernity. “We go to strange cities and move about unknown men”, he suggested, “without perhaps presenting to ourselves the ideas of one of them, and yet”, he continued, we “successfully recognize and respond to each attitude and gesture which our passing intercourse involves” (Mead, 2001, page 67). Mead protests that such a feeling consciousness “is not sensuous”, but he protests too much, betraying how deeply resistant modern moralists are to the aesthetic moment in modern life. For Mead social feelings can only be located

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in “mind”, not in the feelings of the heart or the sensations of the body. These are best left, not to social theorists and philosophers, but to aesthetes.

The surface, or form, of a material object is a magnet, a vacuum cleaner that sucks the feeling viewer into meaning. For thinkers who do concern themselves with feeling consciousness, these surfaces, in their beauty, sublimity, or ugly banality, are themselves the principal objects of fascination. They resist the interplay between surface and depth, how aesthetic surfaces allow transitions to social meaning.

With icons, the signifier (an idea) is made material (a thing). The signified is no longer only in the mind, something thought of, but something experienced, something felt, in the heart and the body. The idea becomes an object in time and space, a thing. More precisely, it *seems* to be a thing. For, as aesthetic shapes, things are the middles of semiotic process. Insofar as the thing becomes invested with social meaning, it becomes arch-typical. As some-thing, it is transformed into a signifier, setting off a semiosis that subsumes every thing into meaning and every meaning into thing.

The status of the material

The theory of iconic consciousness poses itself resolutely against the materialism that continues to pervade modern thought, in the highest realms and in the everyday. Materialism reduces materiality to things, ignoring the aesthetic construction of material surfaces and their experience via feeling consciousness. This reduction is deeply rooted in the relentless utilitarianism of everyday life, which insists on the concrete, on the practical, efficient, and useful. The counterpart in theoretical reflection to such everyday consciousness are concepts such as realism, practice, information, utility, cost and benefit, cognition and truth. It is not easy to dislodge such deeply misguided yet socially productive beliefs, but the effort must be made.

Even as we are ruthlessly critical of materialism, however, we should learn to be energetically enthusiastic about materiality. For the 20th century, understanding nonmaterial structures of meaning was an extraordinary accomplishment. Resisting the hegemony of modern practical consciousness, Durkheim initiated the project of analytically separating meaning from social structure. To give culture its autonomy is to learn to recognize, with Ricoeur, the yearnings of the soul, and, with Dilthey, the continuing vitality of the spirit (Durkheim, 1911; Ricoeur, 1976; Dilthey, 1976). Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, we must try to understand how meaning, soul, and spirit manifest themselves through materiality.

Saussure rightly insisted that the sound of language, in itself, carries no meaning. How sound connects with concepts is arbitrary. Pure sound is only a signified; its meaning is determined by internally organized signifiers, self-regulating relations of concepts. But this insight should not obscure the significance of sound. Words, after all, are sounds of meaning. Phonetics matters. It also has autonomy. The science that Jacobson called poetics concerns the internal sounds and rhythms of speaking and hearing, and how they affect the construal of meaning. We must be able not only to think but to hear and feel speech—to make music.⁽¹⁾ Otherwise, we would not have these rather ugly sense organs sticking out on either side of our head!

There is more than mind. The meanings of the things we see are invisible to the naked eye, but the visual is not unimportant for that. Can we ignore the sensuousness of sight, the patterns of line, curve, and symmetry, the shadings of light and dark, the vividness of color? The textures of touch, the odors of smell, the compulsions of taste?

⁽¹⁾ Thus the first paragraph of Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing* (2003): “In some empty hall, my brother is still singing. His voice hasn’t dampened yet. Not altogether. The rooms where he sang still hold an impression, their walls dimpled with his sound, awaiting some future phonograph capable of replacing them.”

The evolution of the humanoid brain's neocortex enabled extended memory and reflexive thought, the ability to think and interpret that set off the human race. But the other mid- and hind-brains remain, and so does the autonomic system. We retain our more primitive capacities, though these five senses may, in some part, be less developed in human beings. We are human, but, as Nietzsche suggests, we are also "all too human".

After inventing the realist philosophy of science, Rom Harré has turned his back upon it, condemning its materialism as a reduction that overlooks the invisible strands of meaning that mark not only science but even the supposed materialism of economic life (Harré, 2002).⁽²⁾ Harré calls "stuff" the objects that occupy space and time, denying, now, that such merely material things can act in an independent way. Every piece of stuff belongs to a category, "an ephemeral attribute of a flow of symbolic interactions among active people competent in the conventions of a certain cultural milieu." A material object "is transformed from a piece of stuff into a social object", Harré asserts, only "by its embedment in a narrative." It is by such "narrative binding" that "bits of coloured cloth become flags [and] clothes become uniforms."

All this is deeply true, providing new and powerful ammunition against the obsessively practical, realist consciousness of modern thought and times. Still, I wonder whether these materialities are, in fact, merely what Rom Harré calls "affordances" that "constrain the uses to which such things can be put in the local narratives"? The sensuous surface of things seems more important than simply a means to the end of meaning. Is it not the sensuous surface of stuff that allows us to see, hear, and touch their narrative bindings? For Harré the geography of the Nile valley was merely an "indirect source" of Pharonic social order. It could not be the direct source, he insists, because cultural structures have autonomy. I would suggest, to the contrary, that it was the overflowing physicality of the Nile that allowed the complex metaphysics of Pharonic Egypt to be sensuously experienced. Culture gives material things "magic powers", Harré believes, which are "not an effect" of the physical properties of the thing." Yet is not materiality at the center of enchantment? Is it not the 'illusion' that physical things do, in fact, have character and agency that makes their symbolic power seem magical and extraordinary rather than real and mundane? Stuff matters. What would Mozart's opera have been without its magic flute? Without seeing it, hearing it, knowing it was always there?

To recover the material is not to recover the thing-in-itself, but, rather, the texture of a thing's aesthetic surface, for it is through aesthetic surface that things are experienced. The philosophical case against idealism has it that there is a something implacable about a chair. We cannot wish the chair away or walk through it. It exists in time and space. But it is not this particular chair we see, touch, and feel, and that remains in our minds as a materiality. The chair is not a chair as such. It is a particularly formed chair.

The status of the aesthetic

The theory of iconic consciousness recovers the aesthetic within everyday life, against the notion that art either is, or must be, radically separated for rationality or morality to be sustained. That it must be separated is famously taken to have been Kant's argument about the normative structure of modernity: When we are in the world of the beautiful or the sublime, we can sustain neither the distance nor the disinterest

⁽²⁾ All the following quotations from Harré are from this article. Harré's extraordinary about-face has rarely been remarked upon, despite the gauntlet it throws down to the runaway train of realism in which the philosophies of both natural and social science are currently misprisoned. For a critical challenge to realism, and the first cultural-sociological approach to an interpretivist philosophy of science see Reed (2008).

demanded by objectivity.⁽³⁾ Universalism, whether in scientific or moral criticism, depends on the view from nowhere (Nagel, 1986). The empirical possibility for sustaining such distanciation is undermined if actors ‘fall’ into the objects they observe (because they feel them), if, when they face putatively separated objects, actors feel as if they are not separated from them, but that the objects are becoming subjectified themselves.

Weber made Kant historical with his argument for disenchantment. Under the conditions of moral, religious, and technological rationalization, every value sphere, including the aesthetic, is sliced and diced, cast out on its own. Magic has forsaken the modern world. But if there is iconic consciousness, then, while totemism may have been transformed and radically pluralized, it has hardly been effaced. Bits of stuff still seem magical, and not only because they are placed inside of stories. The material surfaces of things are experienced aesthetically. It is materiality that allows feeling consciousness to be connected to things.

The argument for feeling consciousness, for a cultural materiality, creates middle ground between Derrida and the romantic early Marx, who wistfully spoke of the “sensuous object” overcoming the materialism that marked alienation in capitalist society. Attacking the philosophy of presence, Derrida pointed to absence, demoting the visible and material to the status of signifieds linked to invisible signifiers. But if presence can indeed be known only in relation to absence, how else can absence be known except by experiencing presence? In Bill Brown’s thing philosophy, he protests Derrida’s absence, arguing on behalf of a “sensuous or metaphysical presence”. Martin Seel likewise insists on the importance of “appearing”. If poststructuralism demands contextualization, Seel writes, then the aesthetic creates decontextualization, an effect of appearance (Brown, 2001; Seel, 2005).

These briefs for an aesthetics of things are powerful, but they are also one sided. They develop, not just an argument for aesthetic recovery, but for aesthetic redemption, not just for the aesthetic but for aestheticism. They demand, not just for the aesthetic surface to be given full citizenship alongside the moral depth, but for the aesthetic as an alternative vision. In doing so, they paradoxically reinstate the separate spheres argument they are so fervently fighting against. Standing firmly on the ground of this division, Martin Jay (2003) warns against bringing the aesthetic back into everyday life. Haunted, like every Habermasian exponent of critical theory, by the specters of Heidegger and Nazism, Jay associates aesthetic consciousness with reaction and irrationality.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is Jay’s perfect foil. Severely rejecting Kant and joyfully embracing Heidegger, Gumbrecht condemns “meaning effects” as ratiocinative and conceptual. He champions “presence effects”, not only because they reveal the granular texture of materiality, but because they provoke a “crisis” vis-à-vis the ugly and routine banality of the modern world. To experience the aesthetic corporeality of things allows “intimate” feelings that are normally “inaccessible to us”. Reconnected to the “ground” of earth, we experience the “unconcealment of Being”, beyond doing and having. For Gumbrecht, the aesthetic is a defamiliarization process. It is Proust’s hypnotically arresting Madeline, the awesome gates to Shinto temples, the shockingly “beautiful run, pitch, throw, or jump” that creates the “moment of intensity” in the midst of a game, the “special feeling’ that allows us to step outside a merely instrumental or “interested” position (Gumbrecht, 2006a; 2006b).

These contemporary longings are, contra Jay, not dangerous. Gumbrecht and his fellow postmodern aesthetes carefully acknowledge the competing worlds of democracy, law, and the morally abstract. The problem is empirical, not moral. Even as

⁽³⁾ But see below for a revision of this received opinion.

surface and depth must be analytically separated, they need also to be empirically intertwined. Presence and absence may inform antagonistic philosophical perspectives, but they are not antithetical in the empirical sense. The thrills and fears experienced by feeling consciousness are not the product of aesthetic surface alone; they are informed by the meaning structures that lie beneath. Gumbrecht asks whether the aesthetic is “a switch between different actual frames” or “a switch towards the awareness of a pre-existing frame’s character.” We would answer that it is the latter: it is conscious awareness that changes, not the actual frame. Aesthetic experience is always there, even when we don’t focus upon it. So is the moral experience that it conceals and makes visible at the same time, even if we are not morally self-conscious in any way.

It is the purpose of art to make the aesthetic dimension explicit, to bring it into our conscious minds so that we experience it knowingly and reflect upon it. The availability of such specifically ‘aesthetic’ experience is limited. Not everybody can stand before Giacometti’s *Standing Woman* and know what they are seeing. It takes an artistic education. But if the experience of art is limited, the surface experience of aesthetic things is not. Men, or boys for that matter, don’t need an artistic education to skillfully rank passing women on the proverbial ten-point scale. Nor do modern women have any problem evaluating the hotness of some guy.

In both everyday aesthetics and high art there is the same interplay of the unique and the general, the contingent and the a priori. Surfaces are specific and idiosyncratic in their object reference. We see this fashion model, not some other one. That we see this ‘hotty’ and that ‘babe’, and not any others, is, of course, the very point of such designations. At the same time, such aesthetic representations are generic, connecting us to shared meanings, to culture structures. This model is a specific type of model, a version, a specification of the more general form; so are the sexy man and woman particular examples of their species.

An object’s aesthetic power inserts the general into the specific, making the abstract concrete in a compelling and original way. In high culture, this is the challenge for the artist. In the world of the everyday, it is the challenge for the designer, and also for the lay person, the bricoleur who assembles his or her objects, laying them out or putting them on, as in DIY, or ‘do it yourself’.

Consider the following conversation between two women who encounter each other on the street outside the salon:

“I love the way you’ve done your hair.”

“I like this new style, don’t you?”

“You’ve done a great job with it.”

“I found a new product.”

“Where did you find it?”

“In *Elle*, and there it was, in the front window of the salon.”

“Well, your hair looks good. That product’s special. I’ve never seen that color in your hair. You look amazing!”

If the artist gets the combination right, his object becomes great art. It can be hung in any home or museum, anywhere, at any time. It has achieved a “surplus of meaning”; uniquely compelling in the here and now, it can also be compelling in the later and faraway.⁽⁴⁾ When the designer and lay person get it right, their surface assemblages draw us into the discourse of society. It is not just the form that excites, but the experiences of meaning that forms carry.⁽⁵⁾

⁽⁴⁾ For the idea of a ‘surplus of meaning’, see Ricoeur (1977).

⁽⁵⁾ For bricoleur, see Lévi-Strauss (1967); for assemblage, see Latour (2005).

The status of the moral

It is difficult to get surface and depth right, to embrace aesthetic sensation without antagonism to structured meaning, to give culture its autonomy without sloughing off material form. If aestheticism exhibits the first fallacy, moralism manifests the second.

Emile Durkheim was the founding father, with Marx Weber, of cultural social science, though, as we have seen, he sharply disagreed with the German thinker's idea that a radical epistemological break marked the transition from tradition to modernity. Durkheim devoted his major cultural work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1911) to examining the symbolic classifications and rituals of ancient totemic religion, but he avowed this research offered profound insights into the secular symbolic forces of the present day. Symbols of the sacred-good and profane-evil, he asserted, continue to structure modern life, providing the moral glue that informs collective rituals and sustains social solidarity.

As I have mentioned earlier in this lecture, these late-Durkheimian ideas inspired the outpouring of social semiotic and cultural–sociological research that increasingly marked 20th-century intellectual life. Only rarely, however, has this line of thinking reached into the realm of material things. The reasons have been, in some part, the topic of this lecture. They have to do with the empirical and philosophical ambiguities of materialism and ideality, and, indeed, of the very notion of modernity itself. These ambiguities and limitations were manifest in Durkheim's own writings. He generally resisted exploring the relation between 'religion' and 'material' life. He tended to write off primitive economic activity as nonsocial and modern as egotistical. Almost always, he wanted to get beyond what he regarded as the merely visible, material shell of things to the invisible, the spiritual and moral kernel underneath.

This makes it all the more important to recover a brief moment in Durkheim's later writing that can be read in a strikingly different way. At one of the axial points in *Elementary Forms*, while addressing the origins of mana—the spiritual force manifested in sacred totems—Durkheim becomes remarkably interested in the totem as material form. He takes notice of how the wooden surfaces of totems are formed and shaped, observing that “totemism places figurative representations in the first rank of the things it considers sacred” (1911, page 190). When he describes “what the totem amounts to”, he emphasizes “the tangible form in which that intangible substance [mana] is represented” (page 201). Throughout this discussion, Durkheim writes of “material substances” (page 204) and “tangible intermediaries” (page 232). Because morality is abstract, and can be “imagined only with difficulty”, we can “comprehend” spiritual feelings “only in connection with a concrete object” (page 232). Material culture is particularly marked in totemism. When the Crow people affirm that they “are crows”, it is because they believe that mana has the “outward form of the crow” (page 201). It is only this outward form of the totem that “is available to the senses” (page 222). They “attach themselves” to this “concrete object”, and display it everywhere, “engraved on the cult implements, on the sides of the rocks, on shields” (page 222).

In these passages on totemism, Durkheim opens the door to culture in its material form. “Emblematizing” is easier, he writes, when symbols are “inscribed on things that are durable” (page 232). The transfer between moral depth and material surface “is much more complete and more pronounced”, he suggests, “whenever the symbol is something simple [and] well-defined” (page 222). Durable, simple, and well defined—this is as close as Durkheim gets to exploring the aesthetic construction of surface, the material texture of feeling that allows deep meaning structures to be experienced in a sensuous way. While Durkheim is clearly aware of feeling consciousness and aesthetic surface, it is also clear that he has little understanding of how they actually work. He has opened the door, but he barely stepped inside.

If Durkheim had stepped inside, he would have discovered that philosophers of aesthetics had already decorated the room. In 1835, when Alexander Baumgarten created this new branch of philosophy, he defined it as “a science of how things are to be known by the senses” (cited in Guyer, 2005, page 3). In the preceding decades there had been increasing excitement about the artistic, as not only the realm of the beautiful, but the sublime. The notion of the sublime had been around since the Roman Longinus, and in the 17th century Boileau applied it to the lofty style of rhetoric and poetry. British thinkers, however, took the idea in a new direction, emphasizing the wild, the emotive, and the darkly transcendental as an antidote to the suffocating restrictions of French neoclassicism.⁽⁶⁾ This expansion triggered a new interest in the sensuous pleasures provided by contact with forms. For Shaftesbury, “the beautiful, the fair, the comely, were never in the matter but in the art and design, never in the body itself but in the form of forming power” (Cooper, 1999, cited in Guyer, 2005, page 11) For Hutcheson the experience of form is “justly called a *Sense*” because “pleasure is different from any *Knowledge* of Principles, Proportions, Causes, or the Usefulness of the Object” (1973, cited in Guyer, 2005, page 23).

It was vital for these new aesthetic philosophers to connect sensible form to moral depth. They argued that aesthetic feeling is binary and that beautiful and sublime provide sensual homologues with moral ideas. In fact, these aesthetic sensibilities are often presented as moral expressions themselves. Forms are beautiful when lines, shapes, colors, and light are pleasing and attractive, the “qualities in bodies”, as Burke writes, that “cause love, or some passion similar to it” (1990, page 83). The aesthetic sense of the beautiful, in other words, calls out moral feelings for the sacred-good. Its moral antithesis, the evil-profane, is animated by the aesthetic sublime, which Burke describes as “whatever [is] fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger [or] is in any sort terrible” (page 36). The beautiful is about romance and sympathy, the sublime about tragedy and deceit. The beautiful is small, quiet, soft, round, and proportionate; the sublime is vast, loud, hard, angular, and unbalanced.⁽⁷⁾ Every moral binary is attached to a pairing in aesthetic life.

With his critical investigations at the end of the 18th century, Kant is supposed to have straightened all this aesthetic sentimentality out, to have separated sharply, and once and for all, the sense of form from the substantive commitments of reason and morality, finally giving to each independent sphere what it is due. What Kant actually seems to have done, however, is quite different. He defined the aesthetic in such a distinctive and particular manner that it could be closely rewound with the rational and moral again.⁽⁸⁾

Kant does, of course, emphasize that what pleases the senses is pure form, that shapes signify nothing by themselves, that the “determining ground is the feeling of the subject and not a concept of an object” (2000, section 17, page 116). If this were not the case, if forms were actually dependent on a determinate concept, then the significance of the aesthetic, its independent function, would be greatly reduced. Then, the meaning of the artistic object could be known before it was experienced, and the very point of experiencing would be lost. It is precisely because it is not, in fact, regulated by a determinate concept that the aesthetic imagination involves free play. But to freely

⁽⁶⁾ For this historical and philosophical background, see Goldthwait (1960, especially pages 23–25) and Guyer (2005).

⁽⁷⁾ Burke (1990, part I: sections XII, XIII, XV; part II: sections II, VII, VIII, XIII, XVII; part III: sections XIII–XVI, XXVII).

⁽⁸⁾ Guyer has recently made a strong case for this reading of Kantian aesthetics; see his series of interpretive works stretching from *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (1979) and *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (1993) to his 2005 collection, *Values of Beauty*.

experience forms as pleasurable, Kant is at pains also to suggest, is to recall the self-determining autonomy that distinguishes judgments of a different, more rational and moral kind. For this reason, aesthetic judgment actually allows us to experience core features of these other domains, and in a powerful manner that they could never have articulated themselves. It is the quality of avoiding *determination* by rational thought or moral understanding, not absolute dissociation from them, that makes an experience aesthetic, the very freedom from a priori determination that, subsequent to the aesthetic experience, allows greater conceptual and moral development in turn. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant puts the connection very simply: “The entire use of the beautiful arts is that they present moral propositions of reason in their full glory and powerfully support them” (cited in Guyer, 2005, page 181).

The aesthetic-cum-moral binary of beautiful and sublime has continued to inform the philosophy of the aesthetics pretty much up to the present day.⁽⁹⁾ True, as Arthur Danto emphatically suggests, the emergence of such 20th century practices as abstract, surreal, pop, banal, conceptual, and performative art has demonstrated that beautiful and sublime do not capture the extraordinary range of possible aesthetic products.⁽¹⁰⁾ Yet, contra Danto, these binary categories continue to provide the fundamental categories of sensuous experience, as either homologues or antinomies of moral evaluation, even as the referents of that experience radically change.⁽¹¹⁾

⁽⁹⁾ Ever since Aristotle challenged Plato’s claim that the aesthetic threatened the moral, these questions—“what is the connection between art and knowledge? What is the connection between aesthetics and morality?” Indeed, “after several decades in which ‘analytic’ philosophers set these substantive issues aside in favor of supposedly more respectable as well as more tractable questions about the structure and logic of aesthetic language and discourse ... precisely these ancient questions have recently returned to the forefront of debate in Anglo-American aesthetics” (Guyer, 2005, page x).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Arthur C Danto challenges the continuing relevance of beautiful and sublime for postrepresentational art in, for example, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*: “What the disgusting and the abject—and for that matter the silly—help us understand is what a heavy shadow the concept of beauty cast over the philosophy of art. And because beauty became, in the eighteenth century especially, so bound up with the concept of taste, it obscured how wide and diverse the range of aesthetic qualities is” (2003, page 59).

⁽¹¹⁾ See, for example, the professor of modern literature Patricia Hampl’s description of her unintended encounter with Matisse’s late painting *Femme et poisons rouges*. She first saw it in passing while hurrying to an appointment at the Art Institute of Chicago. In this recount of her response, we find an unmistakable intertwining of surface aesthetic and moral depth, of the sacrality of the beautiful and the profane power of the sublime: “I didn’t halt, didn’t stop. I was stopped. Apprehended, even. That’s how it felt. I stood before the painting a long minute. I couldn’t move away. I couldn’t have said why. I was simply fastened there. I wasn’t in the habit of being moved by art. I wasn’t much of a museum goer. I’d never taken an art history class, and I thought of myself as a person almost uniquely ungifted in the visual arts.... [But] maybe only someone so innocent of art history could be riveted by a picture as I was that day by Matisse’s gazing woman... with her no-sense post-Great War bob, chin resting on crossed hands, elbows propped on the peachy table where, slightly to the left, a pedestal fishbowl stands.... The woman’s head is about the size of the fishbowl and is on its level. Her eyes, though dark, are also fish, a sly parallelism Matisse has imposed.... What *is* the nature of her fishy gaze that holds in exquisite balance the paradox of passion and detachment, of intimacy and distance?... I absorbed the painting as something religious, but the fascination was entirely secular. Here was body-and-soul revealed in an undivided paradise of being... A Madonna, but a modern one, ‘liberated,’ as we were saying without irony in 1972. [But] I wasn’t thinking in words; I was hammered by the image. I couldn’t explain what the picture expressed, what I intuited from it. But that it spoke, I had no doubt.... I suppose it was the first time I saw the *elements* of a painting, took in, without knowing it, the composition, in other words, the thought, of a painting. Not simply the thought of some object, but the thinking of the painter, the galvanizing sense of an act of cognition occurring, unfinished by decisive, right there on the canvas.... This created, not rendered, world follows (or helps) to establish the tendency of modern art to be about the mind of the practitioner, about perception and consciousness, and not about... stuff” (2006, pages 2–5, 15, 25, original italics).

What is more challenging to this understanding of high art is the status of the aesthetic everyday. How can morality and rationality be connected with the aesthetic amidst the conventions and typifications that mark mundane experience, where there is neither the free play of sensuous interpretation nor the ascetic autonomy of self-determination?

I have addressed this question in earlier sections of this essay, and other writings as well (see Alexander, 2008). The challenge I would like to address here, however, is whether an answer can be provided in the context of aesthetic philosophy itself. One might, for example, have recourse to Schopenhauer's anti-Kantian brief for contemplation over reason, his stoic suggestion that only a "will-less knowing" can slough off the burdens of reason and individuality that distort and alienate the modern world (1966). Yet, while Schopenhauer is certainly right to suggest that an aesthetic attitude can permeate modern life, his world-rejecting aestheticism misses how central aesthetic experience is to everyday moral and cognitive modes. We do not need to give up on self, reason, morality, or society to gain access to mundane sensuous experience. It is already there. Everyday experience is iconic, which means that self, reason, morality, and society are continuously defined in aesthetic, deeply experiential ways.⁽¹²⁾

For a powerful example of just how this trick is turned, we can, in fact, return to Kant, not to his systematic late treatise but to *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, the precritical work he published twenty-five years before. Kant here confronts the aesthetic as, in his words, an "observer" rather than a "philosopher". In a casual and lively style that addresses aesthetic representations of such everyday matters as sex, gender, nation, civilization, and race, the essay reveals how conventional morality is enabled by aesthetic experience and legitimated by the binary discourse of the beautiful and the sublime. Rather than *analyzing* how the sensual surface elides moral depth, this early Kantian discourse *exemplifies* it, and sometimes in altogether disturbing ways. As in the later work, in this youthful writing Kant also pays homage to sense experience as independent and significant, asserting "it does not matter so much what the understanding *comprehends*, but what the feeling *senses*" (1960, page 72, italics added). Confronting Edmund Burke, whose *Philosophical Enquiry* had appeared only a few years before, Kant declares his ambition, in the very first sentence of *Observations*, to relate the binaries of aesthetic experience to actors' subjective "dispositions to be moved" rather than to "the nature of external things" (page 45). His topic is to be "the *feeling* of the sublime and that of the beautiful" (page 46, italics added), not the nature of beautiful or sublime objects themselves.

At first, Kant seems faithful to this promise: "The *sight* of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises about the clouds, the *description* of a raging storm, or Milton's *portrayal* of the infernal kingdom", he writes, "arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the *sight* of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the *description* of Elysium, or Homer's *portrayal* of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling" (page 47, italics added). In this passage, active constructions of everyday sense perception trigger artistic portrayals of that experience, which make use of the categories of beautiful and sublime. Immediately after this, however, Kant loses his way, presenting beautiful and sublime as actual characteristics of objects themselves. He discovers the structural qualities of the aesthetic and connects them to moral forms, but he does so in an essentializing way.

⁽¹²⁾ Here I am reiterating in a slightly different manner points made earlier in this lecture. It may have been Schopenhauer, and such of his followers as Nietzsche, whom Weber had in mind in his attack on the amoral world-rejecting quality of modern aestheticism.

“Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove *are* sublime; flower beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in figures *are* beautiful. Night *is* sublime, day *is* beautiful [and] the shining day stimulates busy fervor and a feeling of gaiety. The sublime moves, the beautiful charms. The mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished. On the other hand the lively sensation of the beautiful proclaims itself through shining cheerfulness in the eyes, through smiling features, and often through audible mirth” (page 47, my italics).

The moral connection is maintained, but the autonomy of its aesthetic construction has disappeared. Aesthetic form is reduced to a reflection of moral quality. “Sublime attributes stimulate esteem”, Kant writes, “but beautiful ones, love” (page 51). “Friendship has mainly the character of the sublime”, he maintains, while “love between the sexes, that of the beautiful” (page 52). The aesthetic surface now has the effect simply of naturalizing moral qualities. It allows them to be experienced sensuously, to be felt as if they were physical, real, and true: “Dark coloring and black eyes are more closely related to the sublime, blue eyes and blonde coloring to the beautiful” (page 54).

What’s so interesting about this reduction of the aesthetic to the moral is that it provides a classical demonstration of essentialism, of how surface and depth are intertwined in everyday social life, not only in Kant’s times but in our own today. The ideal-typical representation of this everyday essentialism—and from our contemporary point of view, its moral and political nadir—is the confident manner in which Kant employs surface/depth to reproduce the gender and racial stereotypes of his day. He waxes eloquently about how the moral qualities of women allow them to be “known by the mark of the beautiful”—“her figure in general *is* finer, her features more delicate and gentler, and her mien more engaging and more expressive” (page 76, italics added). The binary qualities of the aesthetic, in other words, are here discovered as ingrained moral qualities. Women, Kant writes, naturally “prefer the beautiful to the useful”, a “strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful.” From “very early they have a modest manner about themselves [and] know how to give themselves a fine demeanor ... at an age when our well-bred male youth is still unruly, clumsy, and confused” (page 77). Affirming that “the moral composition makes itself discernible in the mien or facial features”, Kant declares “she whose features show qualities of beauty is *agreeable*” and “in her face she portrays a tender feeling and a benevolent heart” (page 87, original italics). That women are thought beautiful is not due to aesthetic and moral convention. They are beautiful, because they are, well, women! Kant jokes that if a woman goes against her nature, trying to appropriate the “diligent, fundamental, and deep understanding” of men, then she “might as well even have a beard” (page 78).

But there is something serious at stake. If the physical is a sure sign of the moral underneath, the not only gender but racial profiling is naturally the order of the day. Kant makes the extraordinary claim that, outside of Europe, the ability to identify the beautiful with the feminine does get lost. “If we examine the relations of the sexes in [other] parts of the world”, he declares, “we find that the European alone has found the secret of decorating with so many flowers the sensual charm.” In contrast with the European man’s “very decorous” construction of women, “the inhabitant of the Orient is of a very false taste.” Because he has “no sense of the morally beautiful”, the Oriental “thrives on all sorts of amorous grotesqueries.” Kant asks, “the land of the black, what better can one expect?” (pages 112–113).

This simple question reveals the normative risk in the interpenetration of aesthetic surface and moral depth. On the one hand, as critical thinkers we must beware of assuming that a 'look' naturally express anything. On the other hand, even if we now clearly understood that it does not, iconic consciousness inevitably makes it seem that way.

The status of the real

It has been in order to confront this moral and political ambiguity that modern critical thinkers have asserted the primacy of the real. One way of combating the moralistic fallacy, on the one hand, and the aesthetic fallacy, on the other, has been to declare that icons are neither. It is to say that they are real. This is not Kant's modernity but an empiricist one, a prototypically modern alternative to moralism and aestheticism that begins with Locke and reaches its take-off point in the 19th century, with the birth of photography and the emergence and simultaneous self-critique of capitalism in its industrial form. The dialectical relationship between surface and depth is here supplanted not by disbalance but by displacement. Scientific truth can be substituted for moral and aesthetic claims. Neither is now necessary, for we now have access to the thing in itself. It is this realist claim that lurks beneath Peirce's theory of iconic as compared with symbolic meaning and, in the 20th century, the persistent claim for the denotative rather than connotative status, not only of photography but film, as in André Bazin's argument that the "ontology" of cinema is film (Peirce, 1931–58).⁽¹³⁾

It was in much the same spirit that Marx argued for the fetishistic character of commodities in capitalist societies. The product is not valued for its use but for the possessive desire it stimulates, a desire fed by wish-fulfilling fantasy and hope. Fetishism camouflages the 'real' meaning of commodities, Marx insisted, a meaning which is actually exchange value and, more deeply, the exploitative relations of production. Only after critical social science discovers this reality can a new economy be established that will produce goods only according to their use value. In the last two decades these claims have been empirically confronted by powerful investigations demonstrating how capitalism actually sustains 'decommodification', for example, Kopytoff's (1986) demonstration of singularization; Miller's (1987; 1998) research on shopping as gift-giving; Campbell's (1987) historical archeology linking consumerism to romanticism and hedonism; and the ethnographies of Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, pages 55–89), and Woodward (2003) documenting the noninstrumental meanings that attaches to things in the home.

The status of the spiritual

This realist critique of surface/depth has the unintended effect of seeming to give credence to materialism as an anti-aesthetic and antimoral form, whether through social realism, social engineering, or socialism. A more far-reaching strain of this critical tradition attacks the very orientation to the material object itself. The repulsion for 'indulgent' materialism, for putting faith in external objects, for 'mindless' consumption or, indeed, for consumption tout court has permeated the Axial Age civilizations, motivating a demand for world-withdrawal whether in an ascetic or a mystical form. The claim is that man loses himself when he makes idols, that humans must seek the divine not in material forms but in the abstract spirit, the only pathway by which they will find the divine, not outside, but within themselves.

⁽¹³⁾ Umberto Eco (1985) makes a parallel critique of Peirce's claims for the icon. For ontological realism in film, see Bazin (1967).

To make the iconic the enemy of the spirit is to engage, not in iconicism, but in iconoclasm, the breaking of idols, a practice that extends from the ancient Jews to the Puritans who made the modern world. William Mitchell has suggested that it was Charles de Brosses's *Du Culte des dieux fetiches* that introduced the horror of the fetish into Western accounts of primitive totem religion. Totemism was "more ancient than idolatry properly so called", de Brosses asserted, because it was the most "savage and coarse, worshipping stones, vegetables, and animals." Fetish-worshippers were people in whom "the memory of Divine Revelations" had been "entirely extinguished." (Mitchell, 1986, pages 190, 193).

How far is this from the anticonsumption movement today?

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