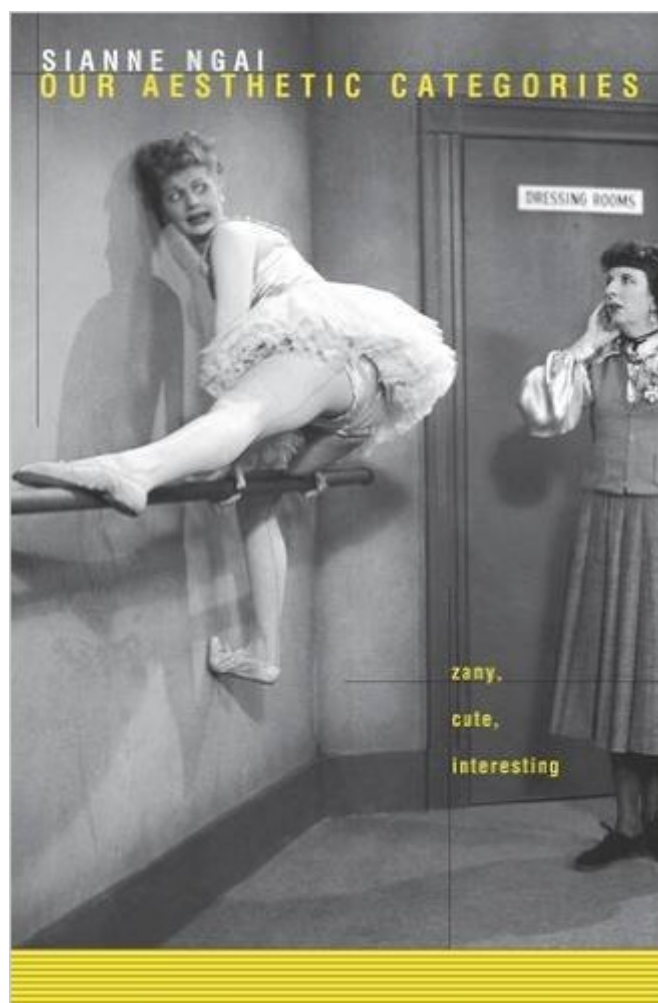


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Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting



Synopsis

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

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Customer Reviews

I was really looking forward to this book after reading Ngai's previous book, *Ugly Feelings*. On the whole, I found this an interesting book but not as fresh and acute as the previous one. The first chapter of this book is a real tour de force, it's simply brilliant. However, I wasn't so convinced by the following three chapters on the cute, the interesting and the zany which Ngai argues are "our aesthetic categories." The attempt to link these categories to a kind of diagnosis of contemporary capitalism is the weakest and least convincing part of the book. It sort of works for the zany but the other two are much less convincing. In *Ugly Feelings* there was also a somewhat forced attempt to use the case studies to make some larger political point but this was largely confined to the introduction. This diagnostic approach to culture really isn't Ngai's strong suit, her close readings of a range of cultural objects and a very impressive range of cultural theory is where she excels.

Together with *Ugly Feelings* (2005), this book demonstrates that Sianne Ngai is the most relevant, best read/viewed critic working in contemporary aesthetics. A feminist and Western Marxist, Ngai focuses on the downsides of the post-theological culture celebrated in Manhattan and the Left Bank

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

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

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