

BOOK REVIEW

Beauty and Sublimity: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Literature and the Arts
PATRICK C. HOGAN

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2016. PP. 296.
£27.99 (PBK)

In *Beauty and Sublimity*, Patrick C. Hogan makes yet another invaluable contribution to philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of art in the naturalistic tradition.

In chapter 1, Hogan offers an account of the responses had in response to beauty and sublimity. At its core, the response to ‘personal beauty’ (which is roughly what is felt to be beautiful by an individual according to Hogan) is proposed to consist of two affective components—reward and attachment system activation—and two information processing components—‘prototype approximation’ and ‘unanticipated pattern recognition’. The response to sublimity, on the other hand, is a kind of grief or loneliness that arises from the recognition of our ineradicable isolation from others. In chapter 2, Hogan traces how this account can explain the apparent diversity in aesthetic matters. To gloss just one of the mechanisms Hogan proposes: since the aesthetic response to beauty tends to be had in response to objects that match people’s prototype for the kind of object in question, and prototypes are formed from people’s experiences of exemplars in systematic ways (emphasizing, for example, the exemplars that are most emotionally salient and those that are experienced most frequently), we should expect systematic diversity in what people find beautiful just where their experiences have differed in these ways. In chapter 3, Hogan takes up how his account of the aesthetic responses explains how artists can, somewhat paradoxically, utilize underdetermination to ensure that an aesthetic response is had

towards the same targets by different people in spite of the diversity outlined in the previous chapter. His principle answer, in short, is that artists underdetermine artworks so that their audiences can imaginatively complete them in accordance with their particular prototypes, objects of attachment, and the patterns that they are unexpectedly able to recognize. In chapter 4, Hogan attempts to resolve some of the tensions in his account and extend it by answering questions such as, how do ‘public’ and ‘personal’ beauty interact? He suggests, for example, that ‘public beauty’ may affect ‘personal beauty’ by influencing the kinds of exemplars our prototypes are formed from. In chapter 5, Hogan illustrates how prestige biases such as what he calls ‘bardolotry’ can both distort our aesthetic judgements and enhance our aesthetic appreciation through a close reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. In chapter 6, Hogan suggests that aesthetic disagreement should be considered an activity that aims at aesthetic reconsideration of a given artwork rather than truth, and outlines some of the ways in which this can be done given his account of the aesthetic responses. He notes, for example, that since the aesthetic response to beauty involves information-processing related to categorization, exchanges surrounding the relevant categorization of an artwork may result in changes in the experience of it. Finally, chapter 7 is best considered an attempt to elucidate the structure of the folk concept of art: he notes, for example, that works that endure ‘are more central to the category than those that do not’ (221).

Hogan’s book is crammed-full of insights and arguments. In just two pages, which are representative of the richness of the whole, he runs a Mackian argument from diversity to argue against aesthetic realism and an argument in favour of distinguishing between personal and public beauty based on the

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objectionability of assertions of beauty (49–50). It is a regret, therefore, that I only have space to focus on Hogan's central account of beauty and sublimity here, beginning with his account of beauty.

In characterizing the two information-processing subcomponents of the aesthetic mental architecture, Hogan brings research in core areas of cognitive science to bear on findings in empirical aesthetics to great effect. In his discussion of the 'prototype approximation' subcomponent, for example, Hogan outlines the following dilemma: empirical research suggests that what is prototypical is beautiful, but prototypes are thought to be averages, and empirical research also suggests that averages are not always the most beautiful.¹ Hogan not only helpfully bring tensions such as these into focus, but also indicates how they can be overcome by integrating findings from core debates in cognitive science. In this case, he notes that the conception of prototypes as averages is too crude: prototypes are *weighted* averages—emphasizing, for example, features that maximally distinguish a category from nearby categories and those that best satisfy a given category's function. The prototype of diet food is lettuce not only because salads are commonly eaten by those on a diet, but because lettuce perfectly exhibits the norm for diet food of being low in calories. Although not discussed in the book, in laying out a sophisticated account of prototypes Hogan helps to highlight the most pressing problems that supporters of prototype-based accounts of beauty will need to resolve in the future. For instance, research shows that amplifying the beauty-making features of beautiful women's faces makes them more beautiful to a point, after which they begin to look ugly.² That is to say, beautiful women's faces become more beautiful

the more they conform to the prototype for beautiful women, until they do not.³

A similarly splendid use of research from across the cognitive sciences appears in Hogan's explanation of how it is the case that there is only one kind of what he terms 'personal beauty' and one aesthetic response to beauty in spite of the fact that the two information processing subcomponents are 'apparently completely different and largely mutually exclusive' (130–131). Hogan springboards from his answer—which seems to be that the aesthetic response to beauty is *functionally* unified as both 'prototype approximation' and 'unanticipated pattern recognition' involving categorization—to the prediction that there might be a third information-processing subcomponent of his aesthetic mental architecture on the grounds that there is a third kind of information-processing based on categorization that is not deployed in either 'prototype approximation' or 'unanticipated pattern recognition'. This fascinating suggestion is worth pursuing in itself, as indeed Hogan begins to do in this book, but it threatens to cause extensional problems for his account as it stands. If category-based information-processing resulting in pleasure is sufficient for a response to be one of personal beauty, as Hogan implies, then all kinds of things are going to come out as responses to beauty, including mere recognitional pleasures: when I am pleased to find my lost house keys, it is a pleasure resulting from category-based information-processing (and indeed may even involve attachment and unexpected pattern recognition), but it certainly need not be a response to beauty.

Turning to the affective portion of Hogan's proposed aesthetic mental architecture, Hogan champions the idea that attachment security is central to the experience of beauty. He points out, for example, that it can naturally explain the particularizing nature of beauty—we find individuals beautiful just as we are

2.40 1 Hogan no doubt has in mind here findings such as those of David Perrett, Keith May and Sakiko Yoshikawa, 'Facial Shape and Judgements of Female Attractiveness', *Nature* 368 (1994), 239–242.

2.44 2 Lisa LeBruine, et al., 'Dissociating Averageness and Attractiveness: Attractive Faces are not always Average', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 33 (2007), 1420–1430.

3 In relation to this, see John Hyman's caricature objection to some work in empirical aesthetics in his 'Art and Neuroscience', in Roman Frigg and Matthew Hunter (eds), *Beyond Mimesis and Convention* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 245–261.

attached to individuals—and helps to overcome the objection that the attachment system cannot accommodate the range of objects that are commonly found to be beautiful. In so doing, he makes an important contribution to the philosophical literature that has attempted to challenge the hegemony of pleasure in the philosophy of beauty, and in particular, the literature that attempts to characterize beauty as the target of love in some sense.⁴ Here again, though, extensional worries threaten to hamper Hogan's otherwise valuable offering. Hogan characterizes the 'aesthetic response' as 'the valenced (positive or negative) aesthetic experience of a target (e.g. a work of art) by some recipient (reader, viewer, listener)', and throughout the book seems to come precipitously close to intending beauty in the broad sense of any feature that warrants a positive aesthetic response (107). This leaves Hogan's account (unnecessarily) vulnerable to charges of cherry-picking and to the prospect of empirical falsification. In supporting the idea that even the appreciation of the beauty of targets that are not people involves attachment security, for example, Hogan cites evidence that *soothing* music gives rise to one of the endocrinal components related to relationships of attachment. But this is hardly likely to generalize to all artworks that people find aesthetically pleasing. To follow Hogan's lead in shirking prestige-grubbing examples (which is another wonderful aspect of the book), I find Daft Punk's *Technologic* (2005) and Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) aesthetically pleasing—the former, for example, is comically banal and yet hypnotizing—but they hardly seem apt to give rise to the components that underlie attachment relations to this extent.

⁴ See, for example, Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of the Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: OUP, 2008 [1756]). Indeed, in characterizing the response to beauty as something like love on the basis of a close reading of *Mrs Dalloway* (among other sources), Hogan's project is germane to both the method and content of Richard Moran's project in 'Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty', *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012), 298–329.

Fortunately, the problem here could be solved quite simply by supplementing the conceptual resources that Hogan develops with an additional distinction between beauty in the broad and narrow senses.⁵ Guillaume Nery's *One Breath Around the World* (2019) and Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill* (1985) are beautiful in the narrow sense and the appreciation of these works to this extent quite plausibly involves some of the components involved in attachment security, while Daft Punk's *Technologic* (2005) and Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) are not beautiful in the narrow sense (though no less aesthetically good) and the appreciation of these works does not plausibly involve these components.

Hogan's brief and heterodox account of the sublime is one of the few parts of his rich book that I suspect readers will find it more difficult to agree with. Hogan takes a cue from Woolf's description of Septimus' 'isolation full of sublimity' in *Mrs Dalloway* to characterize the experience of the sublime as one that takes the inescapable inaccessibility of the minds of others as its object.⁶ One puzzling thing about this account is how radically it departs from the prevalent conception of the sublime in terms of objects that possess magnitudes of some kind, and which engender a hedonically ambivalent experience, often involving fear and diminution of the self. Hogan's response to this—which seems to be that he is only attempting to characterize one important sense, and one which forms a natural kind—would be perfectly good if he did indeed do this, and if there was not good evidence that an existing account already succeeds in doing this.

With regard to the former worry: there is a puzzling heterogeneity at the level of phenomenology (and perhaps at other levels too), with Hogan variously characterizing the experience of the sublime as one of grief, fear and loneliness, some of which

⁵ See, for example, Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981).

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1925), at 92.

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he notes are accompanied by fretfulness, depression and lethargy. Moreover, few of the aspects of the sublime (as it has traditionally been understood) which might be foregrounded in a given account are clearly present here: while there may be some kind of recognition of a magnitude here insofar as our isolation is a permanent feature of our lives, it is one which does not so much diminish the self as augment it, and it is far from clear where the pleasure in such solipsistic thoughts could lie. With regard to the latter: there is a growing body of empirical research that seeks to characterize the sublime in terms of awe, an emotion that responds to objects that seem to outstrip our cognitive resources, and which results in diminution of the self, among other things.⁷ Given the clear affinity between ‘unanticipated pattern recognition’ and the object of awe,

the relationship between the two is something that readers will surely hope is taken up in future work on Hogan’s account.

Hogan’s project in this book generally is to outline an ongoing programme of research that ‘(tentatively) settle[s] some questions, [and] point[s] us towards others that are no less interesting, complex and consequential’ (256). As I hope to have suggested here, Hogan follows through on this aim admirably, and his bountiful book should stimulate further work on the central concepts of philosophical aesthetics by those working in the naturalistic tradition.

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 doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayz057

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⁷ See, for example, Michelle Shiota, Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman, ‘The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effect on Self-concept’, *Cognition & Emotion* 21 (2007), 944–963.

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