



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory by Barbara Herrnstein Smith

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beautiful or something ugly, whether what is depicted is beautiful or ugly must be irrelevant. It is formal configuration alone that counts. And that can be called “beautiful” only, in the specifically Kantian sense, when it pleases because of being the kind of perceptual form that brings the cognitive powers of the experiencer into free and harmonious play. Being beautiful does not *mean* having aesthetic merit—that would indeed make the point vacuously circular—but it is the necessary condition for having aesthetic merit. Examples of the ugly in art to which Goodman alludes thus do not count against Kant. This they could do only if something did please in the required sense and yet be ugly on the level of perceptual form, or not so please but rightly be called beautiful on account of its manifest properties alone. I think McCloskey is reading Kant aright here, though her reasons for dismissing Goodman are far too briefly sketched to convince a reader who does not bring to the book a thorough familiarity with what she only hints at.

One of the last chapters in the book, Chapter 13, “Exemplars of Fine Art and Taste,” positively bristles with arguments that are crucial for McCloskey, many of them harking back to points not yet made in, but left open by, the preliminary chapters. Only if the notion of dependent and not free beauty is made to carry the burden in the case of fine art can the expression of aesthetic ideas be shown to be universally communicable. That this raises difficulties of compatibility with Kant’s account earlier in the *Critique*, where he allowed only the judgment on free beauty to be as a pure judgment of taste, is not lost on McCloskey. She has a number of really ingenious arguments enabling her to recommend Kant’s position as not only consistent, but consistent with how we nowadays think of Art. I suspect that only those readers will be convinced who already agree that “so understood Kant’s account of fine art is a true ancestor of Hegel’s art as the spiritual in sensuous form” (p. 136).

If one takes enough trouble over the condensed argumentation, employed and concealed by the author with equal skill, one will find that this book illuminates Kant’s “integrated theory” in its own terms, and what these terms philosophically commit one to will have to be taken on board. In that respect it is a considerable achievement, and one should not hold it too much against McCloskey that her own aim is not achieved: to show that almost everything Kant argued for can be defended and endorsed by appeal to common sense. It should be clear by now that this is not a book for beginners. I leave it an open question whether there could be such a book on the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.”

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SMITH, BARBARA HERRNSTEIN. *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*. Harvard University Press, 1988, 229 pp., \$22.50 cloth.

In contrast to their almost obsessive concern with questions of interpretation and meaning, recent aesthetics and literary theory have had very little to say about evaluation, and have tended (sometimes explicitly) to minimize its importance. Perhaps part (but only part) of the reason for this neglect is that the range of traditional positions and approaches to this issue seems so tediously familiar and unproductive. This book strives to reverse this trend: not only by a critical genealogy of “the exile of evaluation” and by an energetic argument for the centrality and pervasiveness of evaluative activity which involves a more comprehensive construal of the variety of modes and economies of evaluation than is standardly assumed, but also by waging a vigorous critique of traditional objectivist and absolutist axiological theories and by offering an altogether different account of value.

As her title suggests, Smith argues for the radical contingency, mutability, and variability of all value; and though particularly concerned with literary and other cultural values, she intends her theory to be more comprehensive to include also “truth-value” in general and to cover even classificatory judgments, which (as she rightly remarks) are not free from evaluative aspects and moments. Smith opens her case for the radical contingency and variability of value by an account of the changing evaluations of Shakespeare’s sonnets in the history of criticism and by her own variable and vacillating experiences of their value. Historical and personal experience both suggest to her that these changes cannot simply be the product of changes of knowledge but unavoidably involve the changing (and contingent) circumstances and interests of the evaluators; and that this is not only inevitable but right. We read poetry to serve our needs, not poetry’s. The second chapter convincingly demonstrates Anglo-American criticism’s evasive neglect of the problem of literary value. It is the product of a complicity of silence between humanism’s conservative desire not to question the objective, intrinsic, and enduring status of literary value, and, on the other hand, the scientific quest and legitimizing pressures of academic critics to concentrate on the factual or objectively demonstrable.

To undermine both these attitudes, Smith proposes a theory which denies not only objective aesthetic values but the objectivity of all value, including truth-value in ordinary thinking and scientific inquiry. “All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things, but, rather, ... the product of the dynamics of

a system, specifically an *economic* system” (p. 30). In fact, there are two different but interrelated economies at work in literary evaluation: one of the marketplace and institution of literature, and the other is the personal economy of the individual subject evaluating, who is herself constantly and contingently changing, affected by but also affecting the more public (though one dare not say “objective”) economy. For Smith there is nothing objective; since our very individuation of objects involves “an arbitrary arresting, segmentation, and hypostasization” of the Heraclitean flux of experience which is motivated by our desire as subjects to handle that experience more effectively. The properties we assign to objects and the objects so identified are simply those that are profitable for us to mark out (pp. 31–33); and what we take to be objective is always merely “a co-occurrence of contingencies among individual subjects” (p. 40).

This raises a basic question and one reflected in Smith’s problematic notions of contingency and arbitrariness. If objects themselves are merely arbitrary constructs, then they have no intrinsic properties from which value could be excluded as merely contingent. Hence to argue that value is always contingent and never an intrinsic property of things seems altogether trivial, since by Smith’s definition *all* the object’s properties are contingent and arbitrary. This similarly applies to the notions of subject, context, interest, experience, utility, and community on which Smith bases her own account of value; and if the building blocks of her theory are contingent and arbitrary, how does her theory generate anything but a contingent and arbitrary claim to our acceptance? Smith is shrewdly aware of this reflexive question and the charge of self-refutation that it seems to raise about her theory; and she not only wisely objects to interpreting her relativist theory in the bivalent terms of objectivist discourse, but she willingly bites the perspectivist bullet by denying that her own theory has any absolute cognitive privilege. It too must prove itself by making its way in the theoretical marketplace, and its success will depend on the contingent value it has for its audience which itself is a product of contingent economic and institutional factors, including but also exceeding the audience’s “prior cognitive investments” (pp. 113–114). A work or theory is valuable, if it is widely and continuously valued, even if such value is institutionally programmed and enforced.

Smith is also very frank in recognizing the political factors and consequences of her theory, where the struggle to win acceptance for one’s own views could properly involve silencing an opponent “by voting him out of office, perhaps by paralyzing, imprisoning, or exiling him, and perhaps by killing him” (p. 165). One might prudently fear to oppose Smith’s theory, especially given her institutional power as

recent president of the MLA; and such fear might seem more a confirmation than a criticism of her view. But, for similar reasons, praise of her book might well be suspiciously taken (and given) as mere flattery aimed at self-promotion; for we are told that human action is “inevitably self-serving and incurably calculating” (p. 115). It is perhaps a tribute to a book on evaluation that it makes evaluating reviewers so very conscious of the difficulty and unavoidability of their task, as well as of the possible divergent meanings and consequences of their evaluative remarks.

I find myself much in sympathy with Smith’s attack on absolute objectivism, and I commend her socio-economic approach to taste (which is influenced by Bourdieu’s). But her position is somewhat marred by overstatement. In asserting that all value and indeed everything is radically contingent and arbitrary, she threatens to rob the thesis of significance, since there is no contrast-class to give it real force or meaning. All things may be contingent and arbitrary in the sense that they are neither logical necessities nor the product of nomological determinism, but not all things are contingent and arbitrary in the sense of being mere random accidents or capriciously wilful decisions. In other words, not all contingencies are radical, and to affirm repeatedly that they are seems to fall victim to an inverted absolutism, where radical contingency becomes necessity. One of the merits of Smith’s book is that despite her assertion that all values, properties, and norms are radically contingent, she realizes that some are obviously much less contingent than others; and she acutely distinguishes the factors producing greater and lesser contingency: degree of subject variability/uniformity, degree of resistance to cultural channelling, degree of sensitivity to “circumstantial context” (pp. 39–40). Indeed Smith comes to admit that “relative uniformities” may in certain domains, communities, or frames of reference be “unconditional” or “universal.” Thus in contrast to the radically contingent and variable we have what she calls the “contingently objective” (p. 182), which I would prefer to call the non-foundationally objective and to affirm as all the objectivity that anyone needs and that anyone (except philosophers) ever worried about.

To make her evaluative theory more compelling, Smith attacks the traditional axiological theories of Hume and Kant, which try to base aesthetic value on universal features of human nature and thus place it beyond the contingencies and variabilities of the subject’s (and society’s) economies of needs and interests. Again, though the general line of her critique is, I think, correct and commendable, readers of this journal may find her case weakened by its failure to deal with the secondary philosophical literature addressing and attempting to remedy the faults she

finds (e.g., the familiar circularity of Hume's standard of taste). Smith develops her economic and adversarial account of value and human behavior by criticizing both Bataille's attack on utility and Habermas's consensual theory of communication and critique of instrumental reason. She further elaborates and defends her brand of relativism by distancing it from Rorty's ethnocentrism and by addressing the charges of inconsistency and quietism that are frequently made against relativism. On these issues and throughout the book Smith's arguments are generally lively and stimulating, even when not entirely convincing.

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SMITH, JOSEPH H. and WILLIAM KERRIGAN, eds.
Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987,
xvi + 191 pp., n.p. paper.

Contributors to volume 10 in the "Psychiatry and the Humanities Series" include six psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and psychologists, three professors of philosophy, and one film theorist. The essays are also variegated. There is no unifying theme, despite what the conjunction in the subtitle implies. In what follows, I comment briefly on each essay, and then discuss the significance of Cavell's piece. His essay, I maintain, articulates and advances a new paradigm of philosophical skepticism.

Timothy Gould's intelligent, clear, and thoughtful essay, "Stanley Cavell and the Plight of the Ordinary" provides an excellent entry into and statement of Cavell's home brew of skepticism, psychoanalysis, and the cinema. Gould identifies and develops the particularly important Cavellian insight that "skepticism can be understood philosophically as a particular denial of the human voice" (p. 109). The notion of human voice here is complex. Denials and acknowledgments of human voice are not explicated but displayed, on this account, in enactments and re-enactments of human relationships. The different displays of denial define Cavellian skepticism. Gould's essay also importantly and helpfully positions Cavell *vis-a-vis* Rorty's attacks on contemporary philosophy.

Worthwhile also is Karen Hanson's essay, "Being Doubtful, Being Assured." Although Hanson's prose is precious and allusive, her piece merits and rewards rereading. Hanson, in reflecting on Cartesian and Cavellian brands of skepticism, identifies those characteristics of Cavellian doubt which distinguish it from a Cartesian problematic. Hanson offers as well an interesting analysis on the gendering of skepticism, and the relation of Cavell's work on this point to Freud's.

Of interest to interdisciplinary thought on films, though each for different reasons, are Irving Schneider's *The Shows of Violence* and Micheline Klagbrun Frank's *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*. Schneider provides a helpful overview of the vexed literature on the relation between film viewing and violence. In addition, Schneider urges a closer look at the audience's experience *qua* viewers of violent films. "The most complete understanding of a film comes from sitting with a live audience, observing and sharing its reaction, and then joining that experience with one's own speculations" (p. 144). Although his speculations point to interesting issues, Schneider does not develop his suggestions concerning the psycho-dynamics of the "cinema of humiliation."

Frank's analysis of the *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* is a worthy foray exploring the appeal of a film which plays strongly with issues of gender identity. Her essay, with its distinction between active and passive viewing, is an interesting companion piece for Karen Hanson's meditation on active and passive forms of skepticism. Yet Frank's piece attempts too much; her writing grasps at points, e.g., a linking of Cavell, Stoller, and Lacan, which exceeds her argument's reach.

Both Stanley R. Palombo and William Rothman discuss Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Their essays illustrate the underdetermination of interpretation. Palombo proffers a highly speculative psycho-analysis of the film's main character. "'Vertigo' traces the repercussions of ... infantile conflict in Ferguson's adult sexual life" (p. 49).

Rothman's essay links his own celebrated work on Hitchcock to Cavell's work on film genre. Rothman's essay is at its best when closely analyzing particular scenes. Yet Rothman advocates as well an obscure thesis concerning Hitchcock as author. He asserts, for instance, that: "In plunging to her death, Judy acknowledges the condition of her existence, the condition of any being condemned to the gaze of Hitchcock's camera" (p. 78). Rothman believes his reading of scenes supports assertions such as the one just quoted; the connections are, however, elliptical.

Bruce H. Sklarew's essay on Ingmar Bergman and Robert Weir's on Peter Weir address questions of how experiences portrayed on screen exemplify certain psychoanalytic accounts of character formation and development. Sklarew limits his focus to Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*. The subtitle accurately reflects his topic: "The Consequences of Preoedipal Development Disturbances." Weir concerns himself with how patterns of personal development are recapitulated within the development of Weir's cinematic *oeuvre*. "I take Weir's five major feature films to elaborate a developmental sequence of modes of participation and encounter that correspond to critical tasks from early adolescence to mature adulthood"