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Review

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Review

W. Michelle Wang, *Eternalized Fragments: Reclaiming Aesthetics in Contemporary World Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 217 pp., ISBN: 9780814214374

Flore E. Coulouma

Université Paris Nanterre, FR

flore.coulouma@gmail.com

Abstract

Review of W. Michelle Wang, *Eternalized Fragments: Reclaiming Aesthetics in Contemporary World Fiction* (Columbus, The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 217 p.

Keywords

aesthetics, post-modernism, contemporary literature, cognitive sciences, neuroaesthetics

After decades of critics reading literature from the margins – substantial and formal, cultural and ideological – and discarding aesthetic concerns as irrelevant in the face of post-modern disruptions, W. Michelle Wang's monograph seeks to reclaim and rediscover the aesthetic dimension of literature. Her book questions what makes literature art in the 20th and 21st centuries; it is published by the Ohio State University Press in the Cognitive Approaches to Culture series.

Wang's study is largely though not exclusively grounded in a cognitive framework. She starts with an assessment of the current reality of literature as experienced by readers and critics. Wang points to the seemingly conflictual co-existence between the intellectual anti-aesthetics of contemporary philosophy and post-modernist literary theory, on the one hand, and the jubilant and outspoken interest in beauty from the non-academic world, on the other hand, noting 'an apparent rift' (3). This assessment of the place of literature in the world at large more than justifies a re-examination, from fresh perspectives, of literature as art, all the more so as Wang notes a 'revived interest in aesthetics' in the 21st century, particularly in the recent fields of 'neuroaesthetics and evolutionary psychology' (4).

Wang thus uses an 'experiential approach' (4) to literature, based on American psychologist John Dewey's pragmatic understanding of aesthetics and the subsequent *Pragmatist Aesthetics* of contemporary American philosopher Richard Shusterman.¹ This approach entails regular incursions into neurobiology and psychology throughout the book. Wang's reflexion starts with classic theories of aesthetics, from Enlightenment poet Friedrich Schiller and philosopher Immanuel Kant to the neo-Marxist Theodor W. Adorno and the post-modern Jean-François Lyotard. She then brings Western philosophy into conversation with the more scientifically oriented cognitive theories of the neurosciences to provide a fresh, though-provoking reading of her chosen corpus.

Wang offers a comprehensive study of 11 novels over 6 decades, from Flann O'Brien's 1939 *At Swim-Two-Birds* to Jennifer Egan's 2010 *A Visit to the Goon Squad*, via Alasdair Gray, Arundhati Roy, Cormac McCarthy, Jeanette Winterson, and Kazuo Ishiguro. She also examines novels by Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez. The geographical and cultural diversity of the corpus is not itself a matter of discussion, which could have been relevant here, inasmuch as Wang refers to her corpus as post-modern literature; most of the novels examined are distinctively Western (American, British, Italian), or written in two of the world's greatest colonial/imperial languages (English and Spanish). This restricted range of corpus could have been made more explicit since other, non-western modes of literature would reveal different experiences of aesthetics and artistic beauty. Wang also considers all the novels in her corpus to be part of the post-modern period; some justification here would be helpful, especially regarding O'Brien's 1939 *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Wang's introduction explains her cognitive framework and the three modes of cognitive play at work in the 'reader's overarching "aesthetic relation" to the text' (6): the form-drive, the moral-drive, and the sense-drive. Wang defines the sense-drive as a form of freedom impulse, close to Nietzsche's Dionysian impulse in its emancipatory dimension; the form-drive has to do with meaning through encoding and pattern-recognition; the moral-drive is defined in terms of psychologist Jonathan Haidt's hive hypothesis, which roughly refers to human cooperation. While the author concentrates on her chosen cognitive approach, she also carefully and precisely maps out the historical context and evolution of aesthetic theories up to contemporary philosophy for each of her main themes (play, possible worlds, beauty). This enables the reader to draw parallels between classical approaches and the more recent hypotheses of cognitive sciences.

In Chapter 1, Wang examines the mode of play, which she considers the 'dominant aesthetic energy of post-modern fiction' (12). She examines play theorists, sociology, and cultural history together with the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, thus positioning literary form within general studies of human behaviour.² At this stage in the book, and considering the substantial overlap between cognitive and linguistic

questions, it might have been interesting to bring in Ludwig Wittgenstein on game-playing (besides a passing mention in Chapter 2), especially as the author briefly mentions the famous literary Wittgensteinian Marjorie Perloff. Wang shows how the cognitive disorientation caused by complex post-modern texts prompts the reader's 'formal instinct' (21): here, aesthetic pleasure results from the game of restoring coherence to a fragmented reality. To illustrate her point, Wang turns to Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a novel that forces readers to reassemble fragmented narratives and chronologies, and to Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. The latter novel Wang describes as an 'overt puzzle' (29) made explicit by the accompanying tarot illustrations; yet she notes that the book is not 'Calvino's most popular novel' (29), citing readers' weariness at its excessively intricate combinations. We might infer here that there is a cognitive limit to readers' love of puzzle solving. Both novels, in more or less explicit and reflexive format, provoke their readers' 'imaginative exploration' (35). At the end of Chapter 1 (and similarly at the end of Chapter 2), Wang provides a comprehensive table that maps out the narrative structures of the novels. This is helpful but raises a question about the place of poetic mystery in literature: what if part of the aesthetic pleasure we derive from complex texts was precisely our sense of unexplained mystery? Wang anticipates this objection in Chapter 2, noting that her analyses are by no means attempts at 'explaining away' the texts themselves, which would 'violat[e] post-modern fiction's purposeful chaos and ambiguity,' but rather aim to account for readers' cognitive experiences of those texts (67).

In Chapter 2, Wang examines the cognitive disorientation of readers faced with post-modern fiction from the perspective of possible worlds theory. For this, Wang undertakes a close reading of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*. Explaining fiction in terms of possible worlds is particularly interesting, as the approach addresses the necessary 'similarities' between the actual world and imaginative possible worlds, together with the intrinsic 'incompleteness' of fiction and its emancipatory dimension (43). Wang carefully untangles the different narrative levels at work in *At Swim-Two-Birds* but does not mention the quintessentially comic dimension of the novel at the narrative and linguistic levels, with fictional worlds mirroring the constant stream of word play at the micro level. She also identifies its multiple meta-fictions as an exclusively post-modern phenomenon, noting that 'the quality of play' associated with the Irish comic tradition is 'a distinct historical and aesthetic project of 20th-century post-modern fiction' (46), which seems debatable considering the ancient satirical function and reflexive dimension of bardic poetry. Closer to us, meta-fiction player-in-chief 18th century Anglo-Irish author Laurence Sterne had a considerable influence on his Irish successors, including James Joyce and Flann O'Brien. Wang notes the importance of indeterminacy as an enabler of the reader's imagination. Similarly, Wang uses *Lanark* to show us that post-modern

fiction 'modifies aesthetic experience' (57) by making readers imaginatively more agile and adaptable. Beyond literature, Wang concludes, post-modern art as a whole is a form of 'cognitive play' (66). Wang's analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* allows Flann O'Brien specialists to adopt a fresh perspective that is radically different from the one usually adopted in Irish studies – Wang leaves aside contextual information such as literary tradition and the post-colonial situation in order to read the novel from the perspective of cognitive effects. This is interesting but does not explain how the background knowledge of readers (i.e., the varying degrees of linguistic and cultural common ground they share with a text) affects their understanding and enjoyment of literature.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Wang addresses the literary sublime, again through Calvino and Flann O'Brien. She briefly outlines a history of the sublime, then parallels its core concepts of boundlessness, awe, emotional 'transport' (76) to the findings of neuroscience, translating them into a conflicted relation between sense-drive (imagination) and moral-drive (reason). Wang gives a reading of *The Third Policeman* from the prism of Kant's mathematical sublime, which involves reason rather than intuition and 'overwhelms our perceptual and imaginative capacities' (85), to address the question of transcendental knowledge and the unknowable in the novel. It is an interesting reading but in this particular instance, Wang's cognitive approach could have been more fleshed out to help her reader understand better how it relates to the Kantian notion of the sublime. Calvino's *Invisible Cities* similarly exposes the limits of human knowledge, 'foreground[ing] the difficulties of representation and communication' (88). Here, Wang argues, the literary sublime is grounded in the imagination, not in reason. On the other hand, the 'dynamical sublime' (97), which Wang explains in Chapter 4, is about the conflict between moral reason (the moral-drive) and the imagination. Wang draws from American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory to examine how Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* 'mobilize "moral intuitions" driven by human evolution and biology to shape readers' aesthetic experiences of fiction' (97). This approach enables Wang to draw out the universal appeal of Roy's novel beyond its usual postcolonial interpretation. While McCarthy's novel has been called out for its sense of limitlessness (in space, in violence, in cyclical narrative) and 'lack of ethical commentary' (120), Wang proposes a more productive reading in terms of a dynamical literary sublime whereby readers exercise their own moral compass in the face of the novel's apparent nihilism, using 'the fictional text as a means of training and stretching [our] capacities for ethical response' (121). This dynamical understanding of reading means again reasserting the crucial role of readers in the cooperative interaction prompted by the fictional text. Wang mentions the linguistic

notions of 'co-construction of meaning' (122) and 'unfinished acts of meaning-making' (125); a detour *via* pragmatic theories of cooperation and construction grammar might be fruitful here to understand how the interactional construction of linguistic meaning mirrors the elaboration of a complex, multi-dimensional ethics in McCarthy's novel. Wang's examination of ethics in the novel brings us back to aesthetics *via* the dynamical sublime 'in which tensions between the sense- and moral drives operate at maximal conflict' (97).

In Chapter 5, Wang examines how contemporary literature expresses the aesthetic category of beauty as a harmonious meeting of imagination and reason, as shown in her case-study of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, but also as friction between harmony and conflict, as in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Again, here, Wang provides a very useful historical overview of classical theories. She then turns to the cognitive experience of beauty, pointing to the importance of form in the cognitive processes of object recognition. Object recognition, according to neuroscientists, is prompted by our 'sense of mirror symmetry' (132), our sensitivity to harmony and patterns. Similarly in literature, Wang argues, readers experience beauty at the micro and macro levels as they process the literary text. While Winterson has a more classical approach to beauty, Ishiguro pairs his 'muted beauties' (157) with questions of moral injustice. This more complex and ambivalent experience of beauty does not, however, detract from the intensity of emotional experience that the novel offers. Wang gives space to the critical appraisals of the book's seeming reticence regarding the horrors it depicts (cloning and human organs trafficking) but argues that this very reticence, or muteness (as relating to beauty), is part of the novel's moral stance.

Wang concludes her examination of post-modern literature with a coda devoted in part to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. She emphasises how reader participation defines the 'aesthetic paradigms' of contemporary literary fiction (164). In Marquez's novel, the various modes of play, the sublime, and beauty intersect and overlap. Indeed, as neuroscience points out, there is 'no art cent[re] in the brain' (164), but rather, it is the constant interaction of neurons that drives our aesthetic, moral, and rational experience.

Overall, Wang's exclusion of overtly context-specific information enables her fresh perspective on her corpus, but it sometimes detracts from our understanding of the singularity of works grounded in different literary traditions and socio-historical experiences. Nevertheless, Wang propitiously fills a gap in research regarding neuroaesthetic appraisals of literature, and her main argument – that the reader's love of fiction is primarily grounded in aesthetics – will no doubt contribute to a rich and exciting conversation on literature in the cognitive sciences.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Notes & references

¹John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1934) aimed to focus the examination of art on the process experienced by subjects rather than on the inanimate objects of art. Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatic Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992) builds on Dewey's aesthetics to develop a comprehensive theory, also based on the notion of aesthetic experience.

²A purely typographical problem at this stage is the recurring reference to the late cultural historian Johan Huizinga as 'John Huizinga' (currently an economist at the University of Chicago) including in the index – this might be problematic for readers not versed in cultural history.