

## Book Reviews

### **Aesthetic Experience: Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal (Contemporary Psychoanalytic Studies, 5)**

George Hagman

Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2005, 181 pp.

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While he was held in detention by the Nazis, the great cultural historian Johan Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955). Huizinga's project was to show how every dimension of civilized organization contained a dimension of playing, which is beyond the sphere of morality and only limited by the evocation of ethical consciousness. Like play, aesthetic experience reaches down to what Winnicott called the ruthless levels of archaic consciousness and, as Nazism showed, aesthetic aims can sponsor violence beyond moral limits. Yet aesthetic experience is also at the root of our sense of personal integrity and continuity, and like play, it permeates every realm of civilized life. George Hagman's *Aesthetic Experience* lacks Huizinga's scope of learning and density of reference (and any reference to Huizinga's work), but his aim is to be as comprehensive with respect to aesthetic experience as Huizinga's was with respect to the play element of culture in general. His book succeeds in outlining as far reaching a theory of aesthetic experience as contemporary relational psychoanalysis has yet produced.

Hagman builds his theory on the fertile ground that Winnicott and Kohut ploughed, and his views are appreciatively responsive to the history of psychoanalytic writings about art, from Freud through Kris, Loewald

and Ehrenzweig to the more contemporary writings of Gilbert Rose, H.B. Lee, and many others. He is firmly at home in the contemporary relational and intersubjective thinking of Stephen Mitchell and the studies of mother–infant interaction exemplified by Beebe and Lachman and Daniel Stern. His conceptualizations of aesthetic form and the experience of beauty derive from the vastly expanded understanding of early infancy that has emerged in recent decades. What we now call the “procedural memory” of the earliest interactions is the deepest source of Hagman's thinking about the place of the aesthetic throughout life.

As Hagman theorizes it, aesthetic experience is nothing less than “the human drive to give form and value to the experiences of self and self-in-relation” (p 1). The rhythms, shapes, sounds, colors that comprise what Daniel Stern called RIGs (Repetition of Interactions that have been Generalized) (1985, p 97) establish the figurations for the subsequent “aesthetic resonance” of virtually every dimension of living (p 5). In one of his many summary statements, Hagman writes:

The protoaesthetic form of the mother/infant interaction becomes the prereflexive template for an individual's formal experience of the world. At the heart of aesthetic experience is the infant's interaction (playing) with the mother's face and body (and her playing back) that symbolizes the primordial processes of multimodal communication ...It consists largely of implicit knowledge and prereflexive, internalized representations of self-in-relation. This knowledge is extended



and elaborated to other aspects of one's life-world. (p 37)

Hagman's chapter on "The Development of Aesthetic Experience" summarizes the movement from this archaic interaction to the "mature aesthetic experience" that can enfold failure and mortality into the formal designs of life and art. "Our fearful imaginings are reconciled with the dreadful truth – they are merged within the perfect image" (p 40). The aesthetic experience establishes a continuity between the optimal communions of childhood and the formal aspects of our experience of art. I imagine that Hagman would agree with Nietzsche's idea that we have art in order not to perish of truth.

Beauty, in this view, coincides with the experience of sustaining self-objects, to use Kohut's language. Like all else that is aesthetic, beauty is an experience of idealized formal containment, a perfection of the transitional space between the isolated self and the world of indifferent objects. "Beauty is human subjectivity expressed in ideal form," writes Hagman (p 87). Like a Kohutian cure for the fragmented self, beauty supports the sense of wholeness, and the joy of discovering a "fit" with the world. In his chapter on "The Creative Process," Hagman applies this idea to the creation of art, in which the artist engages in a dialectical interplay with his medium, both shaping it through his subjectivity and being altered by its properties. Like Ehrenzweig, he discerns phases of the creative process that oscillate between projection of an idealized subjectivity and periods of disillusionment and fragmentation. The artist's goal is to restore the self and gain recognition of his self-experience, even when this means overthrowing conventions and received

traditions. In this respect, Hagman's theory opens a space for the political dimension of aesthetic experience.

Noting that Freud neglected ugliness (except to record his notion that the female genitals were a disturbing sight), Hagman's chapter on ugliness proposes to fill this gap in psychoanalytic theory, and, predictably, what is ugly turns out to be self-dystonic experience. It follows that ugliness is understood as the obverse of beauty. For Hagman, ugliness disrupts the formal organization of beautiful experience through "the emergence of powerful aggressive fantasies" (p 108), which create "a tear or discontinuity in the flow of being, the formal organization of self" (p 111). Here, as throughout his book, Hagman equates the positive dimensions of well-being according to self-psychology with beauty and the discontinuities or fragmentations of self with the experience of ugliness. Life becomes ugly when "[i]nner and outer realities are thrown into disjunction" (p 114). Ugliness is a kind of negative attachment, an intimate relation to objects and experiences that are felt to be disgusting, fearful, repulsive, dreadful, and the like. For Hagman, the creation of beauty is, like the process of analysis, a therapeutic transformation of the ugly features of experience into "a meaningful life world" (p 122).

The counterpart for Hagman of the maternal world of idealized beauty is the paternal sublime. In his chapter on "The Sublime," Hagman develops the idea that the sublime is a transformation of the archaic experience of the father, who represents the immensity of the outside world and the incomprehensibility of potentially overwhelming power. Sublime experience represents this awesome power within a context of safety, as in the sublimity of a painted wild

landscape or, Hagman says, the production values of a *Star Wars* movie.

Finally, Hagman draws on Gadamer to include the role of culture in his theory. Culture is a “metasubjective” level of social experience in constant interplay with individual subjectivities, “an infinitely complex system of transference and countertransference that is chaotic, unpredictable, and protean,” but also “self-organizing” and shared (p 147). Culture is the container for both subjective and intersubjective experience. “Thus, the glue of culture, the ‘dark matter,’ so to speak, which holds everything together and powers relational ties between people, is the prereflective, procedural knowledge that we call aesthetic experience” (p 148).

To my mind, Hagman’s theory effectively explains many aspects of aesthetic experience, but his alignment of aggression and sexuality with ugliness, on the one hand, and attachment and intersubjective harmony with beauty, on the other, is overly schematic and over-generalized. Is every ego-syntonic experience beautiful? Are disjunctions and erotically charged experiences inherently unaesthetic or anesthetic? Hagman’s language repeatedly implies that the answer to both questions is yes, though I suspect that he would want to qualify his language if challenged. Similarly, the opposition of “maternal” and “paternal” spheres of aesthetic experience is overly schematic, and although Hagman does recognize that these terms refer to principles of organization, he presents no alternative to the stereotypes on which he builds his theories. It is one thing to acknowledge cultural variation and quite another to free theoretical terms from the cultural figurations that characterize experience in the Western nuclear family.

There are other serious weaknesses in Hagman’s too-perfect alignment of aesthetic

experience with self-psychology. He places enormous emphasis on idealization as a feature of every facet of the aesthetic, repeatedly distinguishing his concept from idealization as a defensive process. For Hagman, all forms of attunement, positive attachment and positive affect in infancy are idealized, that is, positively valued. Following Kohut, he sees a “biologically based drive to idealize” in human life. His argument is circular: everything positive is idealized, and everything idealized is positive, so that idealization becomes another word for perfect, fulfilling, whole, etc. Too often, he fails to distinguish between idealization as an inherent property of relationships (e.g., the “ideal” nature of the mother–infant bond) and the *process* of idealization, which is a motivated action performed on aspects of experience.

A further weakness of *Aesthetic Experience* is Hagman’s almost total neglect of language. He comes to psychoanalysis from his experience in painting, and his focus is on the pre-linguistic features of archaic life and their later, formal elaborations. There is no place in his book for the interplay of linguistic meaning and the formal dimensions of poetry and fiction. The beauty of a Shakespearean sonnet lies not only in its formal design but in the ways that design intersects with the meanings and ambiguities of words. Hagman’s book needs to be supplemented by kinds of explorations of the aesthetic represented by such works as William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and even parts of Ernst Kris’s *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, which is far from superseded by Hagman’s work. I am also struck by the absence of one of the greatest artists and writers in the psychoanalytic tradition, Marion Milner.

## References

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### Postcolonial Melancholia

Paul Gilroy  
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The central goal of Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* – originally delivered in May 2002 as the Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine – is to mount an impassioned defense of the possibilities of multiculturalism. In a post-9/11 world, in which “security” concerns too often justify xenophobia and in which political conflicts are rewritten as part of the inevitable clash between incommensurate cultures, such a project is more important than ever. As he has in earlier works (*Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, *The Black Atlantic*, and *Against Race*), Gilroy couples his appreciation of more fluid forms of identity and cultural expression with a powerful critique of patterns of thinking that remain, even if unintentionally, committed to essentialized views of racial difference.

The first section of Gilroy's book, “The Planet,” traces the roots of our contemporary situation to the European colonial past.

Fundamental to Gilroy's analysis in this section is his argument that the political practices of the modern nation-state have been forged out of the “investments in the idea of racial hierarchy” that characterized the colonial era (p 44). If today's politics are more likely to be organized around ideas of culture, rather than biology, the absolutism of these posited differences nonetheless demonstrates a continued – if unacknowledged – connection to racist patterns of thinking. We need, Gilroy argues, to confront this historical legacy more directly in order to diffuse the power it still holds over our ideas of nation, race, culture, and identity. Although he is attuned to the damage wrought in the name of race, he is equally insistent that race not be reified. If “race” is a *product* of racism rather than its *cause*, then a careful consideration of our colonial past should lead us “away from ‘race’ altogether” (p 9). Gilroy turns to anticolonial writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and George Orwell – and even Montesquieu – as examples of conscious cosmopolitan thinking that demonstrate the crucial ability to engage in a “principled and methodical cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one's own culture and history” (p 67).