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I, David Wong, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy.

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Physical Attractiveness and Disturbing Art: A Case-By-Case Approach to the Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics

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Physical Attractiveness and Disturbing Art: A Case-By-Case Approach to the

Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics

A dissertation submitted to The Graduate College of the University of Cincinnati in

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine how ethical and aesthetic considerations interact and *should* interact. This, I believe, can usefully be tackled contextually, i.e., on a case-by-case basis. I attempt to demonstrate the worthwhileness of this approach by using it to throw light on the value and disvalue of beautification and adornment, and on the interaction of ethics and aesthetics in disturbing art. Upshots that emerge from my discussion will be that social background conditions often influence the meanings, in addition to the actual and likely consequences, of aesthetic practices; different aesthetic domains afford different types of interactions between ethics and aesthetics; and it is, *pace* some philosophers of art, valuable to examine *diachronic* and *indirect* interactions between ethics and aesthetics.

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Thorny Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics

Ethics and aesthetics are both *normative* domains. That is, they tell us what we ought to do and not do. This dissertation examines the questions what we should do when ethics and aesthetics seem to recommend conflicting actions and whether the moral status of an artwork or object of aesthetic experience has any bearing on its aesthetic status (and vice versa).

For example, Dave Chappelle has recently been criticized for telling transphobic jokes in his 2019 stand-up special *Sticks and Stones* and doubling down on them in his special *The Closer* one year later. In light of this concern, Netflix employees staged a walkout in 2020 (Trepany and della Cava 2021). Does *Sticks and Stones* promote immoral, transphobic attitudes? If so, does this make it less funny? Similarly, in promoting immoral attitudes, does a comic work fail to satisfy criteria for aesthetic success besides funniness?

Suppose that Chappelle is someone's "problematic fave": a pop culture figure of whom one is a fan but whom one judges to be immoral (Schwartz 2019). What is happening when one regards Chappelle as a problematic fave? Are they declaring their deep appreciation for his *other* jokes while acknowledging that his jokes about trans people fail *qua* jokes due to their immorality? Or, do they think that even his jokes about trans people are good ones even though they express immoral, transphobic attitudes? If so, is it that moral criticism has no place in the evaluation of comedy *qua* comedy, or is it that although the moral failings of Chappelle's jokes make them worse as jokes, they have other aspects that outweigh the effects of their moral flaws

(e.g., comedic timing or an unexpected punchline)?[1] How *should* one engage with *Sticks and Stones*?

We can ask whether the aesthetic flaws of Chappelle's stand-up specials at least partly stem from their moral flaws, their moral flaws at least partly stem from their aesthetic flaws, the two types of flaw stem from the same cause, or whether the two are unrelated in any of these ways. There is the corresponding normative question whether ethical considerations should shape our aesthetic evaluations of Chappelle's stand-up specials. Is the job of a comedy *only* to be funny? Is ethical criticism germane to the evaluation of a comedy *qua* comedy? Would criticizing comedy on ethical grounds be like criticizing a fork for serving as an inadequate doorstop? Although we can apply our criteria for evaluating doorstops to a fork, it would not make much sense to do so.

The influence that ethical considerations have, and should have, on objects' aesthetic value has been the object of much philosophical inquiry. For example, as far as back as 1757, David Hume argued in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" that the *moral* flaws of a poem can make it *aesthetically* worse (282).

In this dissertation, I discuss the question whether—and if so, how—ethical considerations and aesthetic considerations interact and *should* interact. I will not pretend to address, let alone resolve, every instantiation of this question, let alone every issue in the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, Instead, I discuss particular cases in which ethics and aesthetics interact that both philosophical and popular discourse neglect. That said, I hope that general lessons which shed light on similar issues can be drawn from my discussion. I say a bit

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[1] On yet other readings, problematic faves reflect not the interplay between morality and aesthetics, but a conflict within the moral realm. For perhaps the Chappelle fan who regards him as a problematic fave has a morally ambivalent stance with regard to his transphobic attitudes and beliefs, or the fan thinks that one should not engage with Chappelle's work or find it funny but fails to refrain from doing so themselves.

about this in the conclusion. The upshot for the general debate over the relationship between ethics and aesthetics is a view that carves a middle path between *autonomism*, which says that ethical considerations should not figure in aesthetic evaluation, and *interactionism*, which says that they should (Hanson 2020: 210). The tension between autonomism and interactionism turns up in each of this dissertation's chapters. To make headway in resolving it, I tackle it as it presents itself in them (hence, a case-by-case approach). I will also examine the cases I do with an eye towards resolving a different but related tension: that between a view which says that aesthetic considerations should not figure in ethical evaluation and one which says that they should.

In my three main chapters, I will offer types of cases in which the moral valence and aesthetic valence of artworks and objects of aesthetic experience interact in particular ways and match. However, I say that my view carves a middle path between autonomism and interactionism (rather than being a defense of interactionism) because, in *other* types of cases, moral valence and aesthetic valence might *not* interact in these ways and match. Although I am open to there being general principles of value interaction that hold across every type of case, my approach will be to extract domain-specific principles by examining particular domains.[2]

As the following paragraph suggests, I also attempt to shed light on another tension that appears in this dissertation's chapters—namely, that between the apparent moral value of certain aesthetic practices and objects of aesthetic judgments and their apparent moral disvalue. This is because to adequately address the tension between autonomism and interactionism—or the influence that ethical considerations have and should have on an object's aesthetic value (and vice versa)—it will be helpful to get clear on what those considerations are in the first place.

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[2] Thank you to Eduardo Martinez for helping me make this point.

In Chapter 1, I argue that it is morally desirable for our judgments of attractiveness to track at least some of the results of beautification (e.g., styling one's hair, putting on adornments, wearing cool clothes). This is because beautification enables more inclusive and empowering standards of attractiveness. In Chapter 2, I argue that beautification practices can be morally problematic, but that, via the mechanisms of social approval and disapproval, judgments of attractiveness can be made to track only morally desirable forms of beautification. This is because what we find attractive is shaped, at least partly, by social forces, which in turn can be shaped by moral considerations. So, there is in the case of attractiveness a mechanism by which moral considerations can, and at times should, influence our aesthetic judgments. In Chapter 3, I argue that although disturbing works can at times be both morally and aesthetically valuable in, among other things, presenting disturbing truths, they can at other times be both morally and aesthetically flawed in virtue of featuring excessive disturbing content. This can happen when they cause unexpected undesirable mental states in audiences. At other times, however, in serving *worthwhile* ends, disturbing content can be both aesthetically good and morally permissible (and even morally desirable).

Ch. 1: Beautification and the Search for Inclusive and Empowering Criteria for Aesthetic Attractiveness

I. Introduction

On the one hand, one might think that our judgments that particular people are attractive—i.e., beautiful, handsome, cute, sexy—or unattractive should be immune from moral criticism. These judgments should be informed by aesthetic, not moral, reasons, and it would be moralistic to think otherwise. On the other hand, this line of thought might seem to betray a kind of moral complacency, especially if our judgments of attractiveness reflect and reinforce sexism, racism, ableism, and classism. Confining its focus to what I call *aesthetic*, as opposed to romantic and sexual, attractiveness,[3] this chapter addresses the following questions: Given that many of our judgments of attractiveness reflect and reinforce oppressive systems, should we refrain as far as we can from judging whether people are attractive? If not, then on which traits is it morally permissible to base such judgments? My answer to the first question will be that we need not refrain as best as we can from making such judgments. However, this is not because our judgments of attractiveness should be exempt from moral criticism, but because not all such judgments are morally problematic. After all, finding people (including oneself) attractive often seems to be a great source of pleasure and value. My answer to the second question will be that although our judgments of the results of beautification (e.g., styling one's hair, putting on adornments, wearing cool clothes) are at times morally problematic, it can be not only morally permissible but also morally desirable for our judgments of attractiveness to track these results. On my view, although we ought not base our judgments of attractiveness on the results of *morally problematic* beautification practices, it is morally permissible and desirable for *other*

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[3] As I explain in the next section, *aesthetic attractiveness* consists in possession of formal bodily properties that are disposed to produce positive affective responses like delight or pleasure in perceivers.

beautification practices to inform these judgments. This chapter thus constitutes a partial defense of the conventional view that there is nothing morally wrong with finding someone attractive because of their jewelry, clothes, and hairstyle. Indeed, I will argue that beautification promotes autonomy by enabling members of marginalized groups to participate in the processes through which aesthetic norms are developed; it is in this sense uniquely empowering.

Here is how I will proceed. In the next section, I will explain in more detail how contemporary conventional beauty standards are problematic and insufficiently inclusive. In Section III, I will narrow my scope of investigation to what I will call *aesthetic attractiveness*, as distinguished from romantic and sexual attractiveness, and to judgments of aesthetic attractiveness, as opposed to practices related to aesthetic attractiveness. In Section IV, I will argue that Sara Protasi's (2017) and Glenn Parson's (2016) answers to the question of which traits judgments of aesthetic attractiveness ought to track (if any) do not explain how their selected traits are relevant to aesthetic attractiveness. In Section V, I will explain Sherri Irvin's (2017) view, according to which judgments of aesthetic attractiveness should track perceptible bodily features that are interesting in their uniqueness. I will argue in Section VI that although Irvin's suggestion is inclusive, egalitarian, and thus good as far as it goes, it is not empowering. In light of this, I will develop a positive account according to which beautification practices can enable greater inclusivity and empowerment in the domain of aesthetic attractiveness. Specifically, beautification enables not only the capacity to control how attractive one is but also the capacity to participate in the process through which aesthetic norms take shape. In Section VII, I will consider the objection that my view is classist. I will conclude in Section VIII.

II. What Is Wrong with Contemporary Conventional Beauty Standards?

Amia Srinivasan's (2021) much-discussed book *The Right to Sex* is an example of a work that takes seriously the suffering that contemporary conventional beauty standards cause.[4] For example, disabled people are often desexualized, while fat and trans bodies are often met with sexual disgust. In Western societies, Black women and Asian men are systematically regarded as less sexually attractive than other women and men, respectively. These standards reflect and reinforce various interlocking systems of oppression (84). To make matters worse, I would add, those judged to be unattractive are disadvantaged in ways seemingly unrelated to attractiveness. For example, those deemed ugly receive harsher punishment in the criminal justice system (Mazzella and Feingold 1994, Leventhal and Krate 1977) and suffer worse employment prospects (Johnson et al. 2010). Even children deemed unattractive are punished more harshly, their actions are judged more negatively, and they get less nurturing treatment (Langlois et al. 1995). Thus, even many beauty standards that do not reflect systems of oppression seem problematic. For example, even if the aesthetic norm that prizes symmetrical faces does not reflect such systems, those with relatively unsymmetrical faces end up disadvantaged. (Even here, however, one might wonder if this norm is part of a broader system of ableist attitudes and practices.) Moreover, conventional beauty standards for women are impossible or extremely costly to meet (Dworkin 1974), and concerns about body image are linked to low self-esteem (O'Dea 2012).[5]

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[4] While Srinivasan discusses sexual attractiveness, I will, as I explain in the next section, focus on what I call "aesthetic attractiveness." However, as I will explain below, aesthetic attraction plausibly makes sexual attraction more likely, and current patterns of aesthetic attraction are also problematically unequal.

[5] In these cases, we can distinguish between *judgments* of attractiveness and actions that *stem from* those judgments. One might, for example, deem another person attractive and, on the basis of that judgment, give them preferential treatment. With this distinction in place, one might wonder if, instead of altering our judgments of attractiveness to tackle the unequal distribution to burdens and benefits mentioned in the main text, we can learn to refrain from inappropriately acting on such judgments. However, particular patterns of attraction render certain lines of action enticing. For example, a woman who thinks she would be more beautiful with makeup (and who cares about being beautiful) will be tempted to put on makeup. Put simply, it might be quite difficult to refrain from acting on one's judgments of attractiveness. In addition, as Sherri Irvin (2017: 6) points out, if the influence of one's judgments of

The problem includes sexual fetishization in addition to aversion. Based on the testimony of Asian women, Robin Zheng (2016: 407-8) argues that the fetishization of Asian women leads to feelings of depersonalization, with the result that Asian women end up doubting whether they are desired as individuals rather than fungible objects of a racial category. Another problem is that Asian women end up feeling *otherized*, i.e., they are held to non-white standards of beauty. Similarly, Russell Robinson (2008: 2788) calls attention to racial stereotypes in some gay communities, e.g., the "aggressive black top" and "submissive Asian bottom." And as Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman (2013: 33-7) notes, White men often find Black women attractive and desire to have sex with them, while nonetheless regarding them—as opposed to White women— as unsuitable spouses or even social companions. This is stigmatizing.

I began this chapter by describing a dilemma between a potentially moralistic view of judgments of attractiveness and a potentially morally complacent view. Srinivasan would argue that to call the former view "moralistic" would be a misnomer. According to Srinivasan, a genuinely intersectional feminism ought to take seriously the concerns described above about problematic patterns of attraction, which are often masked through the seemingly harmless language of "personal preferences" (84).

Srinivasan seems to be aware of the possible objection that our patterns of sexual attraction are unmalleable so that it would be pointless to moralize about them. For she suggests that it is culture, in contrast to evolutionary forces, that determines our patterns of sexual attraction: "There is no 'fuckability, generally', if this means some kind of pre-political, pre-social desirability" (103).[6] So, insofar as culture is malleable, so are our patterns of sexual

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attractiveness on their behavior towards others is implicit, then it will be difficult to eradicate as long as those judgments remain in place.

[6] I take the evolutionary forces to which Srinivasan refers to be ones that draw us towards (among other things) symmetrical faces and particular waist-to-hip ratios.

attraction. The question arises, though, what *morally desirable* patterns of sexual attraction would look like.

In line with this, Oliver Traldi (2021) argues in a review of Srinivasan's book that she leaves unexplained what morally unproblematic sexual desires, freed from interference from oppressive social forces, would look like. He asks, "Why is one freer, and why does one leave others freer, when one's desires are determined by evolution rather than by culture?" It seems to me that Srinivasan has a simple answer available: in such a case, one neither is nor leaves others freer, for there would remain a systematic inequality in who is and is not deemed attractive. Specifically, those with symmetrical faces and certain waist-to-hip ratios would be favored, and in-group biases would promote racially segregated preferences. Thus, one would still have little control over how sexually desirable people find them. Moreover, a sense would remain that one has no choice in their own sexual desires. (Consider, for instance, someone who is ashamed of the disgust they experience when confronted with certain types of bodies.) Still, Traldi's remarks point to an interesting question: what traits ought to ground attractiveness? Similarly, Srinivasan asks, "What is a good reason for desiring someone? If not her body, then what about her mind? The beauty of her soul? Is the beauty of our souls up to us? Does it matter? Should it?" (115).[7]

As the case of the person who is ashamed of the disgust they experience when they encounter certain body types suggests, there seem to be not only moral but prudential reasons for individuals to attempt to find a broader range of people attractive: If they succeed, they will experience not disgust—and, perhaps consequently, shame—in response to certain types of bodies, but delight or pleasure instead. Insofar as one has, other things being equal, prudential

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[7] I argue in the next chapter that beautification practices are importantly different from the contemporary conventional beauty standards mentioned above insofar as their use to manage one's own outer (i.e., bodily) beauty can be both morally permissible and morally desirable.

reasons to minimize negatively-valenced affects and to maximize positively-valenced ones, one has prudential reasons to attempt to find a broader range of people attractive.[8] This suggests that an account of what our patterns of attraction should look like is, other things being equal, better to the extent that it enables more positively-valenced responses to bodies and fewer negatively-valenced ones. Other things being equal, positively-valenced responses to bodies will be more desirable than not only negatively-valenced but also neutrally-valenced ones. Thus, even if it turns out that, *pace* Srinivasan, current patterns of attraction do not lead to differential treatment in domains like the criminal justice system, we might have reason to make them more inclusive to maximize pleasure and delight. As I will explain in Section VI, this will be one of the motivations for my beautification-based account.

III. Preliminaries: Aesthetic Attractiveness, and Judgments vs. Practices

While Srinivasan discusses sexual attractiveness, I focus on what I call *aesthetic attractiveness* (or bodily/outer beauty), as distinguished from romantic and sexual attractiveness. As I use the term, the objects of aesthetic attractiveness are people's bodies. To be aesthetically attracted to someone is to have a positive affective response (e.g., pleasure or delight) as a result of attending directly to *formal* properties of their body. I take formal properties to be those that are directly perceivable without special knowledge (e.g., size, shape, texture, color, and the combinations thereof).[9] Even if it turns out that certain formal bodily features give us pleasure or delight because they are suggestive of desirable personality traits—a claim bolstered by research from

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[8] Tena Thau (2020) makes a similar point. There can, of course, be cases in which one has good reasons to experience disgust and shame and, conversely, good reasons *not* to experience delight or pleasure (hence, the "other things being equal" clause). However, the cases mentioned in the main text are not such cases; unlike, say, disease-causing stimuli, the types of bodies to which people unfortunately yet commonly react with disgust are not harmful.
[9] Although some philosophers of perception claim that "higher-level" properties like that of being a beech tree can also enter into the contents of our perceptions (e.g., Susanna Siegel 2014), one needs special knowledge—in this case, knowledge of how to identify beech trees—to directly perceive them.

Little et al. (2006)—this would not undermine the prevalence of aesthetic attraction insofar as we would still enjoy perceiving the formal bodily features *themselves* associated with desirable personality traits. Merely entertaining the thought that the target possesses such personality traits at least usually does not generate as much pleasure or delight. In addition, formal properties include more than just visual ones. Humans do, after all, sometimes take pleasure in directly attending to others' voices and smells. This description of aesthetic attractiveness is based on Sherri Irvin's (2017: 17) explanation of what makes a practice an aesthetic one. As she points out, many contemporary accounts of aesthetic practices claim that to consciously attend to the formal properties of an object is to engage in an aesthetic practice (e.g., Carroll 2002). Some accounts add that engaging in an aesthetic practice necessarily involves focusing on the formal features of an object *for its own sake* (e.g., Stecker 2006), or having some kind of affective response (e.g., Levinson 2014). So, the label "aesthetic," I hope, is appropriate for the kind of attractiveness I will discuss.

Aesthetic attractiveness does not imply romantic or sexual attractiveness just as having an aesthetic experience of an artwork (e.g., finding it beautiful) does not imply that one is romantically or sexually attracted to it, its contents, or the artist. Someone who identifies as heterosexual might have no problem claiming that certain members of the same sex are beautiful, where beauty in this context should be construed as aesthetic attractiveness. Neither does romantic or sexual attractiveness imply aesthetic attractiveness. One might find oneself romantically or sexually attracted to someone because of the latter's personality, interests, passions, status, or affiliations. In his discussion of sexual attraction, Stephen Davies (2016: 133) observes, "Perhaps a woman is besotted only by musicians." It seems to me that one can be *romantically* attracted to someone for the same reasons (although my arguments will not depend

on this).[10] Being a musician, however, is obviously not a formal property of one's body.[11]

Therefore, sexual and romantic attraction do not entail aesthetic attraction.[12] Another observation

that bolsters this last claim is that one can plausibly be sexually or romantically attracted to

someone they encounter in the virtual world whose body they have never perceived.

One might wonder if I am changing the subject here from the problem introduced in

Section II (namely, the problem that systematic disadvantages arise from current patterns of

sexual attractiveness) to a less dire one involving *aesthetic* attractiveness. I have two responses.

First, it is plausible that aesthetic attractiveness often contributes to romantic and sexual

attractiveness. Empirical evidence bears this out: according to one researcher, "abundant

empirical evidence has been collected to show that people clearly prefer physically attractive

partners over less attractive potential partners" (Greitemeyer 2010: 318).[13] So, even if it is

unequal patterns of romantic and sexual attraction that *directly* drive differential treatment in

domains like the criminal justice system, patterns of aesthetic attraction will *indirectly* do so

insofar as they contribute to romantic and sexual attractiveness. Those deemed less aesthetically

attractive will be disadvantaged in the romantic and sexual spheres. This *itself* would seem unfair

and would be unfair insofar as it leads to differential treatment in still other spheres (like the

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[10] I take romantic and sexual attractiveness to be different. As Megan Mitchell and Mark Wells (2018) point out, romance does not necessarily involve sexual feelings. This is especially clear in cases of impotence and asexuality. Neither does sexual attraction imply romantic feelings (947). Those who have "casual sex" without being in a romantic relationship give credence to this.

[11] We can suppose that the woman in Davies' example will likely be attracted to musicians even without having heard them sing or seen their bodies, as long as she knows that they are musicians. That is, her attraction is not based on perceiving any formal bodily properties associated with being a musician. If this is doubtful, consider instead someone who is attracted to those who fall into a category *not* associated with any formal bodily properties (e.g., lawyers).

[12] One might think this is too simplistic. Perhaps in coming to be sexually or romantically attracted to someone, one becomes at least more likely to take aesthetic appreciation in their body if they did not do so before. And vice versa: perhaps in coming to find someone aesthetically attractive, one is more likely to be sexually or romantically attracted to them if they were not before. Regardless, I take it that aesthetic attraction neither entails nor is entailed by sexual or romantic attraction.

[13] Greitemeyer cites Greitemeyer 2007, Sprecher 1989, and Walster et al. 1996 here.

criminal justice system). Second, as mentioned in the previous section, even if it turns out that aesthetic attractiveness is not what reflects and reinforces oppressive systems, we might still have reason to make our patterns of aesthetic attraction more inclusive to maximize pleasure and delight. This, I think, will be sufficient to motivate my beautification-based account of aesthetic attractiveness.

It is also worth distinguishing sexual and aesthetic attractiveness more precisely. I understand sexual attraction towards individual A as simply the desire to have sex with A. So, one can be sexually attracted to someone without being aesthetically attracted to them if, say, they have ever only interacted with them virtually without ever having perceived their body. Conversely, one can be aesthetically attracted to someone without being sexually attracted to them if, say, a homosexual person takes pleasure or delight in directly perceiving interesting and novel features of the body of someone of the opposite sex. Now, there can also be cases of overlap in which someone is sexually attracted to individual A *for* formal properties of A's body. If sexual attraction involves pleasure or delight, then, on my definition of "aesthetic attraction," they will *also* be aesthetically attracted to A. This will, however, not be a case in which sexual attraction is a *type* of aesthetic attraction. For I distinguish sexual from aesthetic attraction not by their contents (in the case at hand, they are directed at the same content, namely, formal properties of A's body), but by the type of mental state involved in each. While sexual attraction involves a desire, aesthetic attraction involves pleasure or delight.[14]

With this in place, I can now articulate more precisely the questions I address in this chapter: Given that our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness plausibly reflect and reinforce oppressive systems—either directly or through their influence on romantic or sexual

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attractiveness)—should we refrain as far as we can from judging whether people are aesthetically attractive? If not, then on which traits is it morally permissible to base such judgments? I interpret the accounts I discuss below as handling these questions.[15]

Before moving on to these accounts, I want to address the potential worry, perhaps deriving from evolutionary psychology, that it is pointless to examine which traits (if any) judgments of aesthetic attractiveness *ought* to track—where these traits might differ from the ones such judgments *currently* track—if the types of people we find aesthetically attractive are unchangeable. In response, I draw both on an analogy with the phenomenology of our responses to paradigmatic cases of art and on empirical research. First, just as one might, through sustained attention, *come to* appreciate the formal features of a painting or sculpture, it seems that one can come to appreciate the formal features of someone's body through extended contemplation. As our efforts to appreciate artworks suggest, we often do not regard or treat our initial reactions to paintings and sculptures as fixed. Second, there is some empirical evidence that the types of bodies particular individuals find attractive can shift over time. For example, as the bodies around someone get fatter or thinner, their attitudes towards body fat change (Christakis and Fowler 2007). Additionally, the body types that are deemed attractive change both over time within particular cultures and across different cultures (Anderson et al. 1992). Moreover, even if

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[15] Although these are normative questions, if one accepts the "ought implies can" thesis, then they hinge partly on descriptive ones. Specifically, judgments of aesthetic attractiveness ought to track some particular trait only if it is psychologically possible for people to find that trait aesthetically attractive. Similarly, one ought not base their judgments of aesthetic attractiveness on some particular trait only if it is psychologically possible for them to refrain from doing so. In addition, I am not directly concerned with the descriptive question of which traits people's judgments of aesthetic attractiveness *in fact* track. However, I take it that, other things being equal, if one aesthetic practice more closely approximates our *current* aesthetic practices than another, then the former is more likely to be psychologically possible. (Indeed, I argue that one advantage of my account is that the results of beautification already influence our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness.)

the class of people we deem attractive is not *infinitely* expandable, expanding it to *some* degree

can be valuable for the sake of justice and maximizing delight or pleasure.[16]

It is also worth noting that although aesthetic attractiveness is a matter of formal bodily

features, one option is to claim that one's affective responses to such features ought to be based

on *inner* qualities of the perceived person. For example, on Sara Protasi's (2017) account, which

I will discuss in the next section, our judgments of people's outer beauty ought to be determined

by our judgments of their inner beauty (i.e., their moral virtue). In short, it may be that one's

inner qualities *indirectly* shape their aesthetic attractiveness.

One more preliminary point: The subject of this chapter is the moral status of various

judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. In addressing this subject, however, it will be informative

to examine the moral status of *practices* related to aesthetic attractiveness. This is because the

moral status of a practice related to aesthetic attractiveness plausibly affects that of aesthetic

judgments of its results. For example, if the practice of sweatshop labor is immoral, then

judgments that a sweatshop-produced garment is aesthetically attractive will be morally

problematic insofar as they reinforce a problematic practice. Conversely, if a certain class of

judgments of attractiveness systematically disadvantages a particular group of people and is for

that reason morally problematic (e.g., judgments that only non-fat people are attractive), then this

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[16] One might worry that if patterns of aesthetic attraction are malleable, then it is less plausible that they fuel patterns of unfair and oppressive behavior. For the question arises why people allow their judgments of aesthetic attractiveness to lead to such bad consequences. Here, I can only speculate. I suspect that people tend to underestimate the extent both to which their judgments of aesthetic attractiveness are malleable and to which such judgments reinforce oppressive systems. For example, I take it individuals would be surprised to discover that their views on how harshly particular criminals should be punished are influenced by how attractive they find them. Furthermore, perhaps an analogy with our engagements with paradigmatic cases of art would again be illustrative. In trying to appreciate a painting that one does not currently appreciate, one risks failing and spending time that could have been spent instead enjoying a piece they know they *already* like. One runs a similar risk in attempting to aesthetically appreciate a body type they do not already find aesthetically attractive. Indeed, although I think judgments of aesthetic attractiveness are malleable, I do not think they are *easily* reshaped. Thank you to Peter Langland-Hassan for pushing me on this point.

is a reason for changing those practices that encourage these judgments (e.g., the practice of casting only non-fat actors as the love interests of protagonists in mainstream films).[17]

Having made these preliminary points about aesthetic attractiveness and the distinction between judgments and practices, I will in the next two sections examine three existing answers to the question which traits (if any) judgments of aesthetic attractiveness ought to track, then develop my own positive account in Section VI.

IV. Protasi's and Parson's Views

Protasi and Glenn Parsons (2016) both argue that we should not refrain as far as we can from judging whether people are aesthetically attractive. However, they give different answers to the question on which traits we should base such judgments. I argue that neither account overcomes what I call the *problem of relevance*.

Protasi proposes that anybody is lovable (i.e., is an appropriate object of what she calls the *Loving Gaze*) as long as they possess some degree of *internal* beauty, which she understands in terms of moral virtue. If someone casts a Loving Gaze on another, then the former comes to appreciate not just the latter's mind but features of their body that they might not have noticed before. It is in this way that casting a Loving Gaze results in a change in the gazer's perceptions of the beloved's body (99). With this account, Protasi identifies a mechanism through which moral considerations can shape one's judgments of people's aesthetic attractiveness.[18] One advantage of Protasi's account is that lovability is attainable: striving to become a more virtuous

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[17] This suggestion of casting more fat actors as the love interests of protagonists in mainstream films is from a letter from a reader of *The Guardian* ("Why We Need to See Fat Actors as Objects of Romantic Desire in Mainstream Films" 2023).

[18] I take it that Protasi's view is not that we *should* deem the morally virtuous attractive but that we *can*. She writes, "This is a view about who *can* be objectively assessed as beautiful" (100, my italics). Moreover, in claiming that her view is "inclusive, aspirational, and empowering" (93), she suggests that finding the morally virtuous attractive is morally unproblematic.

person is at least usually not a lost cause. It is doable. Consequently, Protasi's account seems to level the playing field: everyone has more or less the same opportunity to become a better person. Of course, shaping one's body to better meet current standards of attractiveness (e.g., through cosmetic surgery) might for some people be as doable as becoming more virtuous. However, unlike at least many forms of cosmetic surgery, becoming a better person is not harmful. Indeed, it is desirable independently of any advantages of aesthetic attractiveness. Moreover, Protasi's prescription to base our judgments of people's aesthetic attractiveness on our judgments of their inner beauty seems psychologically possible. As she points out, we already cast a Loving Gaze on those with whom we have special relationships: "Think about how we see our children, siblings, parents: our affection makes us go beyond their aging, their physical flaws, and their imperfections. Every loving parent sees their infant as the most perfect creature on earth, even when bystanders (secretly) beg to differ" (98). Granted, our judgments of our close ones' outer beauty are not shaped by our judgments of their moral virtue in these examples. Still, if our aesthetic appreciation of our close ones' outer beauty is (partly) the result of our casting the Loving Gaze on them, then it does not seem far-fetched to say that we can adopt the same attitude to those we deem morally virtuous.

However, lacking in this account is an explanation of why the morally virtuous are appropriate objects of a Loving Gaze. I call this the *problem of relevance*. The point is not that it is unclear why the morally vicious ought to be condemned to unattractiveness.[19] Rather, it is unclear why the morally virtuous are appropriate candidates for aesthetic attractiveness. What is it about moral virtue such that it ought to play this role? Why not replace it with, say, taste in music? This question remains even if we acknowledge that we ought to be morally virtuous.

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[19] Indeed, I will argue in the next chapter that moral flaws can and should shape whom and what we deem aesthetically attractive and unattractive.

There are, after all, other ways to praise and reward the morally virtuous. Protasi herself writes, "The Loving Gaze is not a view about how in fact we can aesthetically appreciate everybody: personal preferences may still be at play, as they are in our loving relationships" (100). The question arises, though, what the ethically permissible ways are that personal preferences may be at play. After all, personal preferences are subject to the influence of oppressive social forces.

Here is another way to get at my point. Finding people attractive often seems to be a source of pleasure and value. If so, however, then it becomes unclear why we should *limit* those we deem attractive to the morally virtuous. To see this, imagine that we do not know how morally virtuous an elaborately and elegantly dressed stranger is. It is unclear why we should refrain from finding them maximally attractive if that would be a source of pleasure and value. In the absence of an explanation for why moral virtue is relevant or ought to be tied to attractiveness, Protasi's account seems overly restrictive.

To summarize: Protasi's reply to the question whether we should refrain as far as psychologically possible from judging whether people are aesthetically attractive is no. In response to the question which traits it is morally permissible for such judgments to track, Protasi's answer is inner beauty as understood in terms of moral virtue. In my view, however, this response to the second question is inadequate because it is unclear why moral virtue is an appropriate candidate for aesthetic attractiveness.

Like Protasi, Glenn Parsons (2016) answers the question whether we should refrain as far as we can from forming judgments of aesthetic attractiveness in the negative. Unlike Protasi, however, he thinks that physical traits associated with health ought to form the basis of such judgments. This is because we have ineliminable, rational grounds for desiring to possess these features to the greatest degree possible. Parsons asks, "What would such a world look like—a

world where improving the physical qualities associated with health did not matter, and ceased to affect one's survival and autonomy? Social change can reform our relations, and reshape our institutions, but it cannot eliminate our physical nature" (123). However, even if physical qualities thought to be associated with health are desirable, an explanation is again needed for why they are relevant, and ought to be tied, to aesthetic attractiveness. Indeed, as Irvin notes, "eating disorders, and many other behavior syndromes that diminish bodily health, are often associated with psychological distress, and to socially penalize the person simply adds to that distress, potentially exacerbating any unhealthy behavior" (17). Irvin also points out that we are not in a good epistemic position to tell just by looking what the underlying conditions are of someone's body (17). Lastly, Protasi notes that this view depends on ableist conceptions of health and normality (97).

Perhaps Parsons' point is that it is *psychologically impossible* for us to untether physical features thought to be associated with health from our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. This, however, seems false. Consider supermodel culture, in which extreme thinness, which is not only unhealthy but likely known to be so, is held in high regard. Lest one thinks that this is merely an exception that proves the rule, it is worth noting that this case is far from abnormal. There is an aesthetic preference for thinness in Western societies even though thinness is not a mark of health. Indeed, empirical research suggests that those who are slightly overweight according to their BMIs are, other things being equal, likely to live longer than those who are lighter (Afzal et al. 2016). Parsons might respond that his view is that humans' judgments of aesthetic attractiveness track not bodily traits that *in fact* correlate with health but those that are *believed* to do so.[20] Because thinness is (mistakenly) associated with health in Western societies,

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[20] Parsons himself makes this distinction clearly and clarifies his view in this way (123).

Parsons' view accurately predicts that it is a mark of aesthetic attractiveness in those societies. Even so, the claim that it is psychologically impossible to base one's judgments of aesthetic attractiveness on anything other than features that are believed to correlate with health seems too strong. As Davies argues, personal choice and cultural factors can shape our sexual desires so that they are not determined by only our genes. And even if our first-order sexual desires are biologically determined, "we can frequently override them, having higher-order preferences more generally about the kind of person we want to be" (134). I see no reason why our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness cannot similarly be shaped by personal choice and cultural factors. Similarly, as Anne Eaton (2016) points out in her discussion of fat bodies, by portraying historically stigmatized bodies in an appealing, beautiful light, art, advertisements, and, in general, "vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations" often invite audiences to view them as "likeable and attractive" (53). She cites Rubens' paintings and Leonard Nimoy's photographs of fat women as examples (54). Joan Semmel's paintings of elderly people also come to mind ("Joan Semmel, the Veteran Artist Who Is Never Afraid to Have Skin in the Game" 2023). Engaging with art is one way for us to reshape our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. Irvin's notion of *aesthetic exploration*, which I will discuss in the following section, is another way.

I argued in this section that Protasi and Parson's accounts need to explain why their selected traits—moral virtue and physical traits associated with health— ought to be tied to aesthetic attractiveness. In the next section, I will explain Irvin's *aesthetic exploration* view and argue that, while it is inclusive and avoids the problem of relevance, it can be usefully supplemented with an account of the aesthetic attractiveness of the results of beautification.

V. Irvin on Aesthetic Exploration

I drew above from Irvin to explain what makes aesthetic attractiveness aesthetic and to criticize Parson's account. I now turn to her positive account, which avoids the problem of relevance that besets Protasi and Parson's accounts. Indeed, I endorse what she calls *aesthetic exploration* as a means for reshaping our aesthetic attitudes towards bodies. I argue, however, that there are other desirable ways of shaping, and reshaping, such attitudes. Specifically, beautification practices can allow for the inclusion of more people as beautiful in a way that is not only morally permissible but morally desirable.

In light of the excessive influence that the degree of one's perceived physical attractiveness has on domains seemingly unrelated to attractiveness, Irvin recommends what she calls *aesthetic exploration,* which involves actively seeking to derive pleasure from the objects one encounters (2017: 9). When engaging in aesthetic exploration, an observer does not turn away from an object that initially evokes a negative aesthetic response. Rather, they try to seek out the object's aesthetically interesting features, especially those that are often ignored (12-3). Irvin claims that aesthetic exploration "involves a sense of adventure, a willingness to encounter and celebrate the unique and surprising, a willingness to tolerate and persist through moments that are jarring" (11). Similarly, Anita Silvers (2000: 218) argues in the context of mainstream desexualization of disabled people that, as in art, novelty in bodies ought to be prized. So, in response to the question whether we should refrain as best we can from judging whether people are aesthetically attractive, Irvin and Silvers' answer is no. Their answer to the further question which traits it is morally permissible for such judgments to track is perceptible bodily features that are interesting in their uniqueness.

One might worry that some bodies might not possess novel and interesting perceptible features, and that Irvin and Silvers' accounts reinstate an inequality in attractiveness. Irvin's account, however, has the resources to answer this challenge, as it suggests that every body possesses aesthetically interesting features that observers can discover by being attentive. It is worth quoting in full a wonderfully meticulous description that Irvin gives of the skin of her hand:

> Considering the skin alone, my hand has a remarkable array of colors and textures. It's completely different on the palm side than on the outside. The topography seems infinitely complex and shifts constantly with my movement—for my hand is in constant motion whether or not I intend it. There are wrinkles and folds and tiny divides, lines that run parallel, meet up, radiate out from a point, intersect. There are spots darkened with age, fine purple blood vessels visible below the surface. The tactile experience afforded by my hand is similarly rich. The skin on the sides of the fingers is soft and silky; the skin of the lower palms is smooth, but without that silky quality; the outer surfaces of the knuckles are rough. (10)

Irvin points out that this is a description of only the *visual* features of the *skin* of her hand. An even fuller account would include a description of the parts of her hand that can be seen and felt under the skin, and of the experience of her hand as colored by knowledge of "the movement of my hand as a function of an intricate system in which nerves, tendons, ligaments, bones, and muscles, and skin all have a part to play" (10).[21]

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[21] This example also brings to mind Antonio Finelli's hyperrealistic pencil face portraitures of elderly people, which invite viewers to appreciate the wrinkles that come with old age and that contribute interesting and unique detail to the body (Frank 2017).

Irvin clarifies that her view is not that the wrinkles, sunspots, and yellowed nails of one's hands are attractive (or unattractive for that matter) by some "intersubjectively valid standard," and that in judging them as such, one is correctly *tracking* positively (or negatively) valenced features: "Rather than aiming to detect aesthetic properties and aesthetic value that are really there (or really not there) in relation to some intersubjectively valid standard, the idea is to seek out valuable aesthetic experience of bodies" (19). Aesthetic exploration "isn't particularly interested in beauty or ugliness per se" (9), where judgments of beauty and ugliness are to be justified by some shared standard. This point is significant because it obviates the need to find some such standard in engaging in aesthetic exploration. However, although aesthetic exploration does not involve looking for shared aesthetic standards, I take it that if enough people engage in it for a long enough time, then problematic conventional standards will eventually lose their force on us, and room will be made for alternative, more inclusive standards.

Now, *if* aesthetic exploration results in more repulsion rather than newfound appreciation, then one should stop engaging in it. However, as Irvin argues, every body possesses features that can be appreciated: "There may be some things that are so recalcitrantly banal that even the most open and creative mind cannot find within them any source of aesthetic delight. But living human bodies, all of them, do have very rich affordances by virtue of their colors, textures, ever-shifting forms, complex structures, capacities for movement, and so forth" (14-5). One might still wonder if one might be repulsed by certain of *these* bodily features. Following Silvers, however, I rely here on an analogy with our attitudes towards paradigmatic cases of art. We prize and appreciate the surprising and novel in various art forms. This suggests that aesthetic

exploration is at least *likely* to succeed; the possibility of its success should certainly not be dismissed outright as impossible.

It is also worth noting that one can engage in aesthetic exploration for more than just bodies.[22] For example, one can look for interesting patterns in the waste of a garbage can. However, it is especially important and useful to engage in aesthetic exploration for bodies because it is embodied subjects who are harmed or wronged, or whose interests are set back, as a result of patterns of attraction. In contrast, the interests of the garbage can waste are not set back as a consequence of its being deemed ugly, because it has no interests.

I agree with Irvin's recommendation of aesthetic exploration as a means of reshaping our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. It is, in my view, inclusive and egalitarian. Moreover, in being guided by only bodily features or people's appearances, aesthetic exploration avoids the problem of relevance. I think, however, that beautification practices can also shape our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness in a way that is both morally permissible and desirable. I will now elaborate on this suggestion.

VI. In Defense of Beautification

In this section, I will argue that beautification enables members of marginalized groups to not only control how attractive they are but also to push back against restrictive aesthetic norms and to supply new ones. This is what makes beautification uniquely empowering.[23]

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[22] Irvin seems to suggest this in describing aesthetic exploration: "One directs an exploratory gaze at ordinary objects, *including* bodies, with the aim of seeking out sources of richness and interest" (11, my italics). This suggests that we can engage in aesthetic exploration for more than just bodies.

[23] I will also argue that beautification enables people—not just members of marginalized groups—to experience the joys of mastery and skill development. Although this is one way in which beautification is empowering, it is not a way in which it is *uniquely* empowering.

First, though, it is important to note that having judgments of aesthetic attractiveness track the results of beautification avoids the problem of relevance. For even if one thinks that the results of beautification should not influence their wearers' aesthetic attractiveness—an opinion I certainly do not hold— I take it to be incontrovertible that they alter their appearance. Like the bodies they decorate, the results of beautification contribute to one's presentation. They are fundamentally appearance-altering. Because aesthetic attractiveness involves formal bodily features or appearance, the results of beautification are suitable candidates for being attractiveness-conferring.

This is not to say that it is morally desirable for *all* beautification practices to shape these judgments; as I will explain in the next chapter, certain such practices, like extreme dieting and getting a Brazilian butt lift, are morally problematic. There are three reasons why I think that beautification practices are a valuable complement to Irvin's account. First, I take it for granted that, other things being equal, the more kinds of beauty there are in the world, the better. A world in which only a very specific appearance or artistic style is regarded as beautiful would be aesthetically boring. Beautification adds a different kind of beauty to the world.[24] Second, the results of beautification can facilitate aesthetic exploration of bodies by emphasizing and drawing attention to certain bodily features. Stephen Davies (2020), for example, notes that the cut of one's dress can emphasize "the transition from waist to hip" (168). Third, Irvin's account is not *empowering* for the person whose aesthetic attractiveness is being judged.[25] Protasi makes

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[24] I am assuming there are enough subjects available to appreciate the additional kinds of beauty in the world. Suppose an AI produces a multiplicity of kinds of beautiful images, but there are not enough subjects available to appreciate all this content. It seems that at a certain point, the additional kinds of beauty do not improve the world. Thank you to Eduardo Martinez for making this point to me.

[25] It might, however, be empowering for those who *engage* in aesthetic exploration, which allows them to combat the power that conventional beauty standards have over their judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. So, although Irvin's view empowers us to appreciate how aesthetically attractive we (and others) *already* are, we have little control over how aesthetically attractive we are *in the first place*. Relatedly, the view does little to combat the problem of fetishization because it does not offer those who are fetishized any means for controlling how

this point in her own discussion of it: "Bodily beauty, differently from goods such as dignity, health, or virtue, is a positional good, meaning that its absolute value depends on the possessor's place in the distribution of the good. If we were all beautiful, beauty would not be as valuable." It is a "psychological fact of human nature that we care about being beautiful because it sets us apart from others" (96).[26] It is not entirely clear to me, however, that a world in which aesthetic attractiveness is evenly distributed is worse than one in which it is less so but more highly valued.[27] In any case, I develop the claim that Irvin's view is not empowering differently than Protasi does. Feelings of empowerment involve a sense that one has the power to *do* something. In her discussion of the thigh gap ideal in certain Western societies, Céline Lebouef (2019: 18) suggests that, in engaging in physical activity, we should focus less on shaping our bodily appearances and more on experiencing physical pleasure.[28] Lebouef writes, "Besides the

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aesthetically attractive others find them. It provides only a method—aesthetic exploration—for expanding the class of people we find aesthetically attractive.

[26] This claim seems to be too strong if Protasi means that the *only* reason why we care about being beautiful is that it sets us apart from others. This is so even if she is right that we would not value bodily beauty as *much* if we were all beautiful. Perhaps, as she suggests in her book *The Philosophy of Envy* (2021: 157), beauty "allow[s] people to get ahead in the world" insofar as it means greater opportunities for acquiring "jobs, education, and other scarce goods." So, perhaps this is one of the reasons why we care about being beautiful; the fact that it sets us apart from others means that it confers to its possessor an advantage in obtaining scarce goods. However, even in the absence of this reason (i.e., even if beauty were not instrumentally valuable in this way), we would surely still care about bodily beauty to some extent. For we would still value *positive* affective responses that result from attending directly to formal bodily properties. That is, we would still value aesthetic attractiveness. So, I take her claim to mean that *one* of the reasons why bodily beauty matters to us is that it sets us apart from others.

[27] Perhaps Protasi's point is that we should not trade value for justice *if we do not have to*. Matteo Ravasio (2022: 9-12) makes this point. According to Ravasio, human beauty is appearance-based, it is possible to rank people according to their beauty, and beauty and experiences of it are valuable (2). Ravasio argues that "strong revisionary" approaches to lookism, which replace this conception of human beauty with one that gives up one of these three features (5), fares worse than "redistributive" ones, which retain these features but expand the class of beautiful people (4), and "weak revisionary" ones, which "propose alternative conceptions of bodily beauty without arguing for the elimination of current practices" (5). This is because, if redistributive and weak revisionary approaches are available approaches to lookism, strong revisionary approaches unnecessarily compromise something valuable—beauty as standardly conceived—for justice. According to Ravasio, Irvin's view can be interpreted as a strong revisionist approach, replacing the standard conception of beauty with one that gives up the possibility of ranking people according to their beauty (6). I agree with Ravasio that we should not make this tradeoff if we do not have to. As I will explain in the next chapter, however, my beautification view, unlike at least one interpretation of Irvin's, is compatible with the comparative aspect of beauty. In my view, there is value in ranking adornments, clothes, and styles according to their beauty. Thus, it permits us to use these to, in Protasi's words, "set us apart from others."

[28] Even if obtaining a thigh gap gives rise to feelings of empowerment, mastery, and achievement, the value of feeling empowered in this instance is plausibly outweighed by the disvalue of oppression-congruent harms

physical enjoyment I have emphasized, such a shift may also bring a personal sense of empowerment, because feelings of pride and resourcefulness often come from *cultivating* a new way of being and *introducing* a positive change in one's life" (my italics). In my view, Irvin's suggestion is not empowering in Lebouef's sense for those whose aesthetic attractiveness is being judged. This is because they are not in control of their own aesthetic attractiveness.

One might at this point wonder why it is valuable for individuals to exercise control over their own aesthetic attractiveness. That is, why is it valuable for a view of aesthetic attractiveness to be empowering? I have two responses. First, being in control of one's own aesthetic attractiveness is an important source of empowerment because it has historically been, and often still is, a source of disempowerment. For instance, drawing from Paul Taylor (2016: 108), who discusses social and cultural rituals surrounding Black beauty culture, Andrea Mejía Chaves and Sondra Bacharach (2021) write, "Caring for Black hair using styles that reject White assimilation is a symbol of Black pride, emancipation, autonomy and freedom. Styling one's hair is not a passive act: it is a deliberate, racially affirming, emancipatory and political act" (340).

One might, however, doubt the value of a Black person styling their hair into, say, Bantu knots or cornrows if aesthetic exploration already enables appreciation of their unstyled hair.

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associated with the thigh gap ideal, especially if other, less harmful ways of feeling empowered are available. Lebouef objects to the thigh gap ideal for four reasons. First, she agrees with Susan Bordo (1993) that the aesthetic ideal of thinness for women originates from patriarchal associations "between femininity and insatiable appetites" and from "anxieties about women's role in society" (10). Second, she cites Sandra Bartky (1990) in claiming that the thigh gap ideal "is a creation of the fashion-beauty complex and an ideal not crafted by women" (10). Third, drawing from Alfred Archer and Lauren Ware (2018), Lebouef notes that the thigh gap ideal "conflicts with one's duties to preserve one's health" (10). Fourth, drawing on Husserl's (1913) distinction between the human body as a material object and "the human body as it is lived in everyday experience," Lebouef gives a novel reason for why the ideal is problematic, namely, that pursuing the ideal results in *bodily alienation*, which involves experiencing one's own body not as a subject but an object (10-1). It is also worth noting that instead of claiming that obtaining a thigh gap is empowering but overall problematic, Lebouef can claim that although it is in *some* respects or *prima facie* empowering, it is *overall* disempowering. For perhaps its congruence with oppressive systems renders it disempowering. I think the same can perhaps be said of the skills a woman masters to meet the ideal of a 1950's housewife (e.g., ironing the sheets and cleaning the house). Mastering these skills in this instance is either empowering but overall problematic, or it is in some respects or *prima facie* empowering but overall disempowering.

After all, a Black woman who does not have naturally straight hair, and who leaves it unstyled and unstraightened, might do so to challenge the "straight hair rule," which says that long straight hair is necessary for a woman to be beautiful.[29] The rule is an instance of White assimilation because it makes a physical feature that White people are more likely to have a necessary constituent of beauty (Taylor 2000: 59-60). So, one might argue that a Black woman who leaves her hair unstyled and unstraightened can already be performing, in Chaves and Bacharach's words, "a deliberate, racially affirming, emancipatory and political act." I agree with this last claim. It seems to me, however, that styling one's hair enables a more *distinctly* Black aesthetic. As Chaves and Bacharach point out, some non-Black people of color and even White people are born with curly and kinky hair. There seems to be no distinctly Black hair *texture*. It does not follow, though, that there are no distinctly Black hair*styles*. "Cornrows, Bantu knots, twists, locs, [and] freeform locs" are markers of Black identity: "Unlike hair textures, wearing a Black hairstyle signals recognition of Blackness, group identity and belonging; the practice transmits specialized knowledge, as well as particular experiences and hardships" (339). Thus, being able to actively style one's hair allows for a more distinctly Black aesthetic. In addition, a Black woman born with straight hair might want to style her hair into, for example, Bantu knots to challenge the straight hair rule.

Because not every social group has been systematically disempowered in the aesthetic domain, it is not important that everyone be able to control their own aesthetic attractiveness *as a form of resistance*. Still, those who have been systematically disempowered in the aesthetic domain can employ beautification to oppose assimilation.

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[29] Beginning in the 1960s, Black women have in fact maintained unstraightened hair as a form of resistance (Craig 2006: 171).

The other reason why aesthetic empowerment is valuable is more general. That is, more people can realize the value to which it appeals. I think that beautification enables the pleasures and joys of skill development, achievement, and mastery. Ann J. Cahill (2003: 59) makes this point when she writes, "Certainly part of the pleasure of beautification has to do with mastery of the techniques and materials." Achieving the aesthetically attractive look one wants via skillful employment of such things as makeup and attire is rewarding and pleasurable.[30] I worry that an account of aesthetic attractiveness that repudiates beautification throws away this distinctive kind of pleasure involving mastery and achievement. By contrast, an account that allows us to control our own aesthetic attractiveness makes possible this kind of pleasure.[31]

My point is not that being aesthetically attractive *per se* is empowering (even if it is, other things being equal, good in other ways). As the foregoing discussion of Irvin's view illustrates, one can be deemed aesthetically attractive through no volitional actions of one's own if others can direct their aesthetic exploration to them. Instead, the ability to *control* one's own aesthetic attractiveness is empowering. I argued that the empowerment that comes from being able to control one's own aesthetic attractiveness is valuable because it can serve as a form of resistance and enable the pleasures of achievement, mastery, and skill development.

At this point, one might wonder why empowerment is important in the domain of aesthetic attractiveness *specifically*. Why should one seek empowerment in this domain rather than that of, say, cooking, which would also facilitate the pleasures of skill development,

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[30] Mohan Matthen (2015: 186) makes the similar but more general point that "there is pleasure in activity that is both fluent and a match with one's aspirations with regard to skill; in other words, there is pleasure when there is no gap between aspirational skill level and achieved skill level."

[31] It is worth making two qualifications here. First, not *all* forms of beautification are morally acceptable on my view. I give some conditions in the next chapter for what makes a beautification practice morally problematic. Second, not *only* beautified bodies are aesthetically attractive on my view. As I will explain in more detail in the next section, where I consider the objection that my view is classist, my account allows the unadorned body to also be aesthetically attractive. Put briefly, I endorse a pluralism about aesthetic attractiveness.

mastery, and skill development? Moreover, it seems that marginalized groups can express their group identity through the kinds of foods they cook rather than through beautification.[32] Even if certain social groups have historically been marginalized in the domain of aesthetic attractiveness, why is it important for members of these groups to be able to control their aesthetic attractiveness through beautification when aesthetic exploration is *already* available as a tool for combating lookism? So, given that one can empower oneself in other ways and be deemed aesthetically attractive via aesthetic exploration, is there something special about the ability to empower oneself *by* controlling one's own aesthetic attractiveness?

In response, I think it is helpful to distinguish between the ability to control how aesthetically attractive one is through beautification and the ability to participate, via beautification, in the processes through which bodily aesthetic norms originate and are shaped. In my view, the former ability might not be *uniquely* valuable. However, I would still say it is valuable for the reasons given above, so it is better, other things being equal, for an account to allow room for it. The latter ability, however, is uniquely valuable. To see this, consider Madeline Martin-Seaver's (2024) discussion of *respectability politics*, an assimilationist strategy employed by members of Black communities to present themselves as "respectable" for the sake of promoting "the moral well-being—and therefore the physical well-being—of black people" and conveying "the social standing of black communities" (3-4). Martin-Seaver cites writer Garnette Cadogan, who, to preemptively protect himself from the police as a Black man in New Orleans, would wear V-neck sweaters, khaki pants, chukkas, or shirts with his university insignia (Cadogan 2016: 133-4). Martin-Seaver also cites Brittany C. Cooper, who calls such instances of respectability politics "reasonable" but not "laudable" (Cooper 2017: 15). Anti-assimilationist

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[32] Protasi seems to consider something like this line of thought when she mentions the possibility of seeking empowerment in domains other than that of physical beauty (101n11).

body aesthetics, in contrast, are "risker but more rewarding" in Martin-Seaver's words (13). Drawing from Chike Jeffers (2013), she describes young Black men who sag their pants as engaging in anti-assimilationist body aesthetics (14-5). Anti-assimilationist body aesthetics rejects White mainstream aesthetic norms, and Jeffers' account "take[s] marginalized people as worthy sources of guidance on moral and aesthetic ideals" (17).

Although Martin-Seaver does not focus on the aesthetic attractiveness of various looks, as opposed to the social meanings they convey, I think her discussion suggests that one can control how aesthetically attractive they are by engaging in respectability politics. This, however, leaves intact White mainstream aesthetic norms and even involves complying with them. Anti-assimilationist body aesthetics, in contrast, actively challenges these norms and seeks to develop or strengthen alternative ones. It is a way of participating in the processes through which bodily aesthetic norms originate and are developed. Now, aesthetic exploration of the unadorned body is a way of participating in these processes; as I said earlier, if enough people engage in it for a long enough time, conventional standards will lose their force on us, and space will be made for alternative norms. However, what makes empowerment through beautification *uniquely* valuable is that it enables marginalized groups to defy restrictive norms about how they ought to engage in beautification (e.g., the norm that Black men ought to dress in the way that Cadogan did and not sag their pants).

For another example, consider Cheryl Frazier's (2023) discussion of the "fuck flattering" movement, in which fat people wear clothes that bring out, rather than hide, their fat. Here, participants challenge the antifat norm that fat people ought to wear clothes that conceal their fat to maximize their attractiveness. As Frazier explains, the movement "enables members of fat communities to construct their own understandings of beauty, helping break down societal

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antifatness" (244). More generally, because certain restrictive norms dictate how members of marginalized groups ought to dress to maximize their attractiveness, pushing back against these norms and envisioning alternative ones will take the form of beautification. The kind of empowerment in such cases relies partly on many people not currently finding the subversive form of beautification attractive; this is what makes it subversive. Ideally, however, once aesthetic norms shift towards greater inclusivity, this form of beautification will no longer be subversive and empowering in a way that depends on subversion.

In my view, to have to abide by aesthetic norms one does not endorse to be aesthetically attractive is a restriction of autonomy or self-governance. If, for example, fat people who want to maximize their aesthetic attractiveness have to wear clothes that conceal their fat, when they would rather this norm not be operative, then their autonomy is limited. When, moreover, those who are excluded from the processes through which aesthetic norms are developed belong to oppressed groups, then their exclusion reflects and reinforces their oppression. My claim is not that each *individual* should be able to determine *collective* aesthetic norms. Insofar as individuals disagree on what such norms should look like, this would be impossible. Rather, I think that each individual should be able to participate in the processes through which these norms take shape.

It is worth noting that, as worn by a non-fat person, a garment will not defy restrictive norms about how fat people ought to dress. As Frazier says, it is "acceptable for women of a certain body type (namely, thin) to wear oversized, billowing silhouettes à la Rihanna and still be deemed beautiful and fashionable" (241). More generally, whether donning a particular garment succeeds in combating restrictive norms will vary across different contexts. As Charlotte Knowles and Filipa Melo Lopes (2023: 16) observe, the meaning of a garment depends on the characteristics of the wearer and of their social context. They give the example of a plus-sized

woman who wears hotpants "with a baggy T-shirt and sneakers walking casually down the street." As employed in this instance, the hotpants are subversive rather than problematically objectifying, as they perhaps would be if "paired with a crop top and high heels worn by a conventionally beautiful Daisy Duke-type figure, waitressing tables in an American bar."

VII. Is This View Classist?

I argued in the previous section that beautification practices can helpfully complement Irvin's account. One might object that my account is classist (and, thus, not sufficiently inclusive) and that those who do not engage in beautification practices will lose out. Not everyone has the time, money, and energy to beautify themselves. Recall the empirical studies mentioned above that suggest those who are perceived as less attractive fare less well in domains seemingly unrelated to attractiveness. One might worry that those who do not beautify themselves and are consequently seen as less attractive will be at a disadvantage. Not only will the less well-off be unable to control how aesthetically attractive they are, but they will be excluded from processes through which bodily aesthetic norms are developed. This is hardly fairer and more inclusive than a world that adheres to contemporary conventional beauty standards. Similarly, not everyone has the wherewithal to convey the "right" meanings with their style, adornments, and clothes. Certain clothes, adornments, and styles carry unfortunate social meanings. Piercings and tattoos, for instance, might cause a jury or interviewer for a job to prejudge. Black men wearing hoodies are often marked as criminals. In general, social penalties are imposed on those who do not look "appropriate."

I have four responses. First, my account need not welcome the fact that certain kinds of clothes, adornments, and styles carry unfortunate meanings. Indeed, I think that *other* meanings

that clothes, adornments, and styles carry allow for valuable self-expression. This is compatible with rejecting the claim that certain forms of beautification should carry the unfortunate social meanings they do. Still, it is important to be wary of the harmful social meanings that they can adopt and to challenge these meanings. An instance of this was spearheaded by Cephas Williams, a Black man from New Cross, southeast London, who started a campaign in 2019 titled "56 Black Men," for which he posted headshots of Black men in hoodies on social media. According to Williams, the campaign "serves as a reminder that for every black man you see represented doing something negative, there are 56 of us that aren't." The Black men in the photos occupy various societal roles: politician, director, teacher, etc. (Freeman-Powell 2019).

Second, the objection provides an opportunity for me to emphasize that my view on aesthetic attractiveness is a pluralistic one. In an interview in the *New Statesman*, Clare Chambers (2022) defends what she calls the "unmodified body": "What I'm trying to capture with 'the unmodified body' is the idea that there is something valuable in allowing your body to be good enough, just as it is." I agree that it is valuable to view and portray the unmodified body in a positive light. As mentioned above, Irvin's notion of aesthetic exploration can aid in this. My point is that it can be both morally and aesthetically desirable for beautification practices to enable a greater variety of forms that aesthetic attractiveness can take. I argued that beautification can be empowering and inclusive. Furthermore, it brings about not only *more* beauty in the world but different *forms* of it. Indeed, I take Chambers' view, which is not that modification is invariably bad but that non-modification is good enough, to be consistent with my own. For example, in her book *Intact* (2022) she claims,

> Both hair and make-up offer low-risk ways of experimenting with your appearance; they
> allow the creative use of colour and form, integrate brushwork, artistry, and maths. The

creativity and empowerment involved in hairstyling and make-up can be illusory but it

can genuine too, sometimes both at once. I have a lipstick with the shade name

'SUCCESSFUL': when I wear it, I mock its pretension at precisely the same moment I

allow it to give me a boost (280-1).

Hairstyling and make-up should not be felt to be compulsory. It does not follow from this,

however, that hairstyling and make-up are in every instance bad.[33]

Third, stylish, inexpensive clothes and adornments can be found in thrift and online

vintage stores, and fashionable styles need and should not include only expensive ones. Other

inexpensive ways to play with one's own appearance are also available. For example, image

consultant Daniyel Berry (2020) suggests that one way to look stylish without spending more

money is to come up with novel combinations of items in one's wardrobe instead of buying new

items. Another way is to make modifications to the clothes one already owns (e.g., by adding

silver beads around the neckline of a white T-shirt). The goal here is not and should not be to

make one's outfit look more expensive or luxe than it actually is. For even if an "expensive look"

can be attained without spending much money and is inclusive in this respect, judgments of

aesthetic attractiveness that track signs—even unreliable ones—of wealth would seem to me to

be part of a classist system of practices and attitudes that stigmatize the poor. My point, rather, is

that outfits and styles that are "in" and that express one's own interests, passions, values, and

ideals need not be expensive.

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[33] Alfred Archer and Lauren Ware (2018) argue that while some beauty standards should be rejected, others (e.g., the standard that "matching your manicure to your bathing suit" is an aesthetic good) should be regarded as *aesthetically supererogatory* (123-4). An act is aesthetically supererogatory if and only if, in terms of aesthetics, it is optional but better than the required minimum (120). I agree that some beauty standards pick out genuine aesthetic goods even though meeting them should not be taken to be compulsory. Taking a cue from Chambers, however, I want to stress that the beautified body is not aesthetically better than the unmodified one. (This is not an objection to Archer and Ware, as they do not deny this.)

Fourth, as I will explain in the next chapter, role models in the media like Ayanna Pressley who put on elaborate adornments can inspire confidence in those who cannot afford to do so themselves. Role models can thereby empower not just themselves but members of the groups they represent. With the aid of role models, aesthetically marginalized groups can see themselves, and come to be seen, as attractive.

One might accept the preceding four points but still wonder whether *runway fashion* is condemnable for being overly expensive and therefore exclusive. In my view, however, even expensive "high" fashion can positively influence what those who are not in the public spotlight wear. Here I draw from Alva Noë's (2015) discussion of art's "looping" ability. Noë distinguishes between dance and choreography:

> *We* dance; it is our nature to do so. Choreography puts this fact about us on display, for us to witness and understand. But the existence of choreographies—their image, their power to coalesce and stand forth as models of how the activity could or should be done—loops back down and shapes how we think about dancing, and thus how we dance, even when we are by ourselves or in our most intimate settings (31, italics in original).

For Noë, although choreography takes dance—the everyday kind that takes place at weddings and clubs— as its subject matter, it loops back down and influences the ways we dance. I argue for a similar distinction between everyday and "high" fashion. The latter, on my view, shapes what we wear in our day-to-day lives and, in particular, introduces into them fresh new styles. There is empirical support for this. Computer scientists at the University of Rochester and National Taiwan University used a machine-learning-based approach to extract and then compare visual features from images of New York Fashion Shows and New York street-chic images (Chen et al. 2015). Results suggested that runway trends significantly influence what

people wear in their everyday lives. New Yorkers apparently emulated the models in the 2015

New York Fashion Shows by wearing more tank tops; garments with plackets; striped, blue,

cyan, red, and multicolored clothing in the upper body; and blue in the lower body. By

introducing new trends into people's day-to-day lives, fashion shows help keep everyday fashion

fresh and exciting. In general, even expensive "high" fashion can positively impact the aesthetic

lives of people who cannot afford it. Indeed, stores hire those with an eye for fashion and fashion

trends to help them select pieces to sell that fit runway styles but are less expensive. Sarah

Halzack (2015) describes in *The Washington Post* the jobs of Gia Ghezzi and Denise Magid,

fashion director and chief merchant at Intermix respectively thus: "translating the outlandish and

wildly expensive clothes seen on the runways of Paris and Milan into looks that women want to

wear on a date, at Sunday brunch or when presenting at the boardroom." Thus, "high" fashion

exerts influence on everyday fashion. I take this to be favorable, as the former helps maintain

novelty in the latter.

  "High" fashion, moreover, is particularly well-suited to promote novelty in everyday

fashion because it supports experimentation in clothing. Madeline Martin-Seaver (2024) makes a

similar point about art more generally when she claims that "an artwork can consider

(purportedly or genuinely) outrageous ideas without encountering immediate pushback" (17).

Moreover, "everyday aesthetic practices and artworld practices mutually inform each other.

Young black men sag their pants on the street, in music, videos, and canvasses on museum

walls" (17)—an observation that resembles Noë's. As a form of art, "high" fashion involves

experimentation and even weirdness. For example, in an article in *The Washington Post* about

the weirdness of runway fashion, Robin Givhan (2016) claims that designer Rei Kawakubo's

clothes "pushes us to rethink the way in which clothes must fit. They do not have to directly

follow the line of the body but can be cut contrary to it." Although people outside of "high"

fashion can also experiment with what they wear, one of the *essential* functions of "high" fashion

is to creatively play with ideas. To the extent that a social media influencer who is an outsider

also experiments with the clothes they wear, they would be doing something like what "high"

fashion does.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

In sum, in response to the question whether we should refrain as far as we can from judging

whether people are aesthetically attractive, my answer is no. In response to the further question

what such judgments should track, my answer is that they should track not only the unadorned

body but also the results of beautification.[34] I argued that Protasi and Parson's answers to the

question what our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness should track lack an explanation for why

moral virtue and bodily traits associated with health respectively are relevant to attractiveness. I

then argued that while Irvin's recommendation of aesthetic exploration avoids this problem,

beautification is a useful complement. In my view, it is an empowering and inclusive way to

experience the joys of mastery and skill development, manage one's aesthetic attractiveness and,

most importantly, participate in the processes through which bodily aesthetic norms originate

and are developed. Finally, I defended my view against the objection that it is classist and, thus,

not sufficiently inclusive.

     In the next chapter, I will further develop my view of the value of beautification and

adornment. Specifically, I will define them more precisely, offer further reasons for why they are

valuable, provide criteria for determining when a beautification practice is morally problematic,

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[34] In the next chapter, however, I will qualify this answer by offering conditions for determining when a beautification practice is morally problematic.

and explain how the moral status of a beautification practice can come to shape its aesthetic

status via social approval and disapproval.

Ch. 2: The Normativity of Beautification

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that a beautification-based account of aesthetic attractiveness is both inclusive and empowering. Qualifications, however, are needed: Certain forms of beautification, like extreme dieting, seem morally problematic. If so, how do we determine which ones are morally problematic? In response to this question, I will argue in this chapter that a beautification practice is morally problematic to the extent that it is excessively costly for those who engage in it, producing the products required for it does more harm than good, it expresses disrespectful or degrading attitudes or *social meanings*, and it reflects and reinforces interlocking systems of oppression. However, even if some forms of beautification are morally problematic, the question arises whether it would be moralistic to criticize them and the individuals who engage in them. In response to this question, I will also argue in this chapter that criticizing a problematic beautification practice will often be more appropriate than criticizing the individuals who partake in it, and, drawing from Robin Zheng's (2021) distinction between *summative* and *formative* moral criticism, that formative criticism of individuals who engage in problematic forms of beautification will often be more appropriate than summative criticism of them.

In Section II, I will define beautification and adornment. In Section III, I will provide some reasons additional to the ones offered in the previous chapter for why beautification and adornment are valuable. In Section IV, I will offer four conditions for a beautification practice to be morally problematic. In Section V, I will argue that judgments of aesthetic attractiveness can be shaped by moral considerations so that my view can rule out incontrovertibly problematic beautification practices while ruling in desirable ones. In Section VI, I will respond to the objection that my view unfairly condemns those who engage in morally problematic forms of

beautification for weighty prudential reasons. In Section VII, I will provide guidelines for

determining the moral statuses of particular instances of beautification and for bringing our

moral and aesthetic judgments into harmony. I will conclude in Section VIII by discussing

phenomena related to beautification like Instagram filters and the prospects of extending my

view to sexual and romantic attractiveness.

II. Defining Beautification and Adornment

I will understand *attempts at beautification* as involving complements and modifications to one's

body for the sake of aesthetic improvement that exceeds some baseline. *Beautification* takes

place when this intention is realized. (However, as I will explain below, my definition includes a

class of exceptions in which the aim of aesthetic enhancement is absent but *normally* present.)

"Beautification" is thus a success term. With the clause about exceeding some baseline, I hope to

exclude from beautification routine bodily maintenance like brushing one's teeth and showering.

Social expectations are a guide to what the baseline is. For example, expectations that we shower

or brush our teeth suggest that these count as bodily maintenance, not beautification. As this

suggests, what counts as the baseline will vary across sociocultural contexts. While brushing

one's teeth will in many contexts be an instance of bodily maintenance because it aims only at

meeting or continuing to meet an aesthetic baseline (in addition to a health baseline), teeth

whitening will in many contexts be a form of beautification because it aims to exceed such a

baseline. In the context of show business, however, teeth whitening may be *expected* and thus

may be a form of bodily maintenance. In general, what is beautification in one context will be

bodily maintenance in another and *vice versa*.[35]

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[35] Stephen Davies (2020: 53-6) also explicitly distinguishes beautification from bodily maintenance, although, as I will explain below, he defines beautification differently than I do.

It might be helpful to compare my definition to Stephen Davies' (2020):

> If a person attempts an aesthetic improvement to her appearance, intends the outcome to be appreciated, and intends that her decorating intention be apparent, she aims at decoration. If such intentions are absent or unfulfillable, she does not, unless she is deliberately employing a conventionalized decorative practice (38).

Because Davies uses "decoration" interchangeably with "beautification" (1), this can be taken as a definition of beautification, not just decoration.

It might be worth noting two similarities and three differences between Davies' definition and mine. First, both involve an intention to aesthetically enhance one's appearance. Second, Davies' definition includes an exception about "deliberately employing a conventionalized practice." Specifically, even in the absence of the intention to aesthetically enhance one's appearance, one can count as having engaged in beautification if they participated in a practice in which such an intention is "conventionalized" or "institutionalized," i.e., in which it is normally present (19). Davies writes, "A person's intention might be to *dress up* in the socially sanctioned manner for a special event, rather than to beautify his appearance, but he succeeds in adorning himself in the process" (19, italics in original). This is because, conventionally, dressing up involves the intention to aesthetically improve one's appearance. I will follow Davies in allowing for such exceptions. For, as I will discuss below, one might engage in beautification if one intends not to aesthetically improve their appearance but to convey particular meanings.

I think there are also three important differences between my definition and Davies'. First, my definition drops the condition that those who attempt to beautify intend that the outcome be appreciated. For suppose that someone attempts to aesthetically improve their appearance beyond some baseline. They succeed in their attempt, but no one appreciates the

result. (Perhaps no one else perceives the outcome, and they themselves lack the self-confidence to appreciate it. So, they are unaware that they have succeeded in aesthetically improving their appearance beyond the relevant baseline.) My intuition is that they have succeeded in beautifying themselves.

Second, my definition of beautification involves exceeding some aesthetic baseline. As I explained above, this condition allows my definition to exclude cases of routine bodily maintenance. Perhaps Davies' definition of beautification can also exclude these cases of with its condition that those who attempt to beautify intend that the outcome be appreciated. For those who engage in bodily maintenance do not intend that the result be *appreciated*. Only special, not routine, outcomes are appropriate objects of appreciation. I prefer to omit the appreciation condition, as I explained above, and to have instead a condition that refers to exceeding some baseline. Indeed, in his discussion of bodily maintenance, Davies himself rules out cases of bodily maintenance "on the grounds that they don't involve making special" (53). I prefer a condition that refers to "making special" or exceeding some baseline over one that appeals to appreciation.

Third, I omit the condition that those who attempt to beautify intend that their "decorating intention be apparent." This omission is motivated by cases in which makeup is used to obtain a "natural look."[36]

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[36] Davies himself considers this objection to his definition. He has two responses. First, he replies, "If makeup really were invisible as well as beautifying, that would be a reason to doubt that its application involves decoration" (20). This seems to me to be a bare denial of the intuition that problematizes his definition. His acknowledgement of the objection suggests that he recognizes that at least a significant portion of people hold this intuition. So, I think that the intuition should be taken seriously. Davies' second reply seems to me to be more substantive: "It's [makeup's] not invisible, though it can be comparatively understated and subtle. Most people, especially those who use cosmetics themselves, are sensitive to their presence as well as to the effects they facilitate" (20). However, I think that even if it is always apparent that those who have applied makeup have done so, makeup users often *intend* that this be *un*apparent. Davies' definition of *attempts* at beautification thus has the unappealing consequence that such users do not aim at beautification.

Before moving on, it might be worth discussing a case that may seem to put pressure on my definition. Suppose that a company expects that its women employees wear makeup. Thus, women employees who adhere to this expectation meet, but do not exceed, a baseline. One might object that my definition delivers the counterintuitive result that makeup is not beautification in this context. I have two responses. First, we might still regard makeup as beautification by the standards of a *broader* context. The society in which the company is situated may not expect that women wear makeup regularly. Indeed, the leadership of the company might take pride in the fact that its women employees exceed broader aesthetic expectations. Insofar as the women employees are still going beyond the baseline of the sociocultural context to which they belong, they can still legitimately be said to be engaging in beautification. Second, even if we confine the context to the company, the women employees will be exceeding an aesthetic baseline and therefore beautifying relative to the class of the company's employees *in general* (which will include men). In any case, I think that my definition will include at least most of what is considered beautification (e.g., wearing jewelry, getting tattoos, and styling one's hair) while excluding most of what is not so considered. Thus, I hope that my definition will suffice, but that my arguments below about the moral desirability of beautification will succeed even with a different definition.

Unlike Davies, who uses the terms "beautification" and "adornment" interchangeably, I distinguish between the two. While Davies does not consider the subset of *temporary* beautifying products but only beautification generally, I understand *adornments* as beautifying products that temporarily enhance one's appearance aesthetically. As will be explained below, isolating the subset of temporary beautifying products is useful for three reasons. First, as I argue below, a valuable feature of adornments is that they can be worn to temporarily become more

*un*attractive. Second, following Iris Marion Young (1994), I will contend that adornments enable us to temporarily adopt different identities. Third, thanks to the temporariness of adornments, role models can do *more* role modeling. On my conception, the line between adornments and beautifying products that are not adornments is a blurry one insofar as there is no definite point beyond which something goes from being temporary to permanent. So, jewelry, makeup, clothes, and piercings will count as adornments, while the results of cosmetic surgery will be cases of beautification that are not adornments. Given the possibility of laser removal of tattoos, these will be a borderline case. As this suggests, the technological background partly determines the class of adornments. For example, tattoos will definitively not count as adornments in the absence of technology for removing them.

While Davies argues that beautifying products, adornments, and the bodies they decorate are not art (30-3), I leave this question aside. I think, however, that there is value in *treating* these as art. Specifically, we can apply the attitudes and practices we adopt in attempting to appreciate artworks to our encounters with human bodies. As Elizabeth Cantalamessa (2018, para. 9) notes, "To categorize something as a work of art is in some sense to elevate its social value. We preserve, promote, and admire works of art in way [sic] that we don't for other artifacts like tools or microwaves." Just as we think that sustained attention to a painting in a museum might allow us to discover and appreciate aesthetically interesting features, we can treat adorned bodies as attractive in ways that we might not immediately appreciate. So, following Anita Silvers (2000), I think that treating bodies as artworks can enable us to appreciate novel and unique features. I would add that beautification allows for even more aesthetic diversity.

III. Sources of Value of (De-)Beautification

In the previous chapter, I discussed how beautification can be empowering insofar as it allows us to manage our own aesthetic attractiveness. However, I think there is also value in *de*-beautification, which I understand not as a species of beautification but as the attempt to make oneself *less* aesthetically attractive via complements and modifications to one's body. Those who are sexually fetishized as a result of belonging to particular intersecting identities (e.g., Asian women) might find it empowering to curtail their aesthetic attractiveness by putting on less attractive adornments. By "less attractive adornments" I mean those that are less prone to attract attention and that enable the wearer to blend in to the crowd. Directing aesthetic exploration, which looks for interesting and unique features, will be relatively unproductive. So, what counts as attractive will be context-, or more specifically, crowd-dependent. For example, wearing bright colors at the Coachella music festival, where many festival-goers will also be wearing bright colors, will attract less attention than at a supermarket. De-beautifying oneself can also be a way of conveying that one does not want to be gazed at.[37][38] For this reason, I do not claim that *every* result of modifying or complementing one's body should be deemed attractive. There is value in there being unattractive adornments. An advantage of being unattractive through one's adornments—as opposed to many bodily features or more permanent beautifying products—is that one would be only temporarily unattractive. So, in deliberating on whether to don an unattractive outfit for the day, one would not need to weigh the costs of long-term unattractiveness. Moreover, an unattractive adornment, in contrast to bodily features that one did not choose to have, will often be something that one freely decides to put on. Thus, although my view embraces unattractiveness, it will be a kind of unattractiveness that one often chooses.

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[37] This is something some women in fact do (Hughes 2022).
[38] I hesitate to make the corollary claim that beautification is a way of conveying that one wants to be gazed at. For one might beautify themselves for the sake of self-confidence and empowerment, not attention from others, and I hope to avoid providing a basis for creepy, unwanted ogling.

Lastly, if some beautifying products are more attractive than others, then someone who beautifies will be able to stand out. So, my view preserves this feature of attractiveness that, as Protasi points out, partly explains why we care about being attractive.

Additionally, one often has a variety of options in *how* they beautify themselves. My account allows for the expression of one's own ideals, interests, values, and passions through donning certain clothes or adornments. For instance, a punk might express their love of punk music and anti-authoritarian values in donning a stud belt, baggy pants, Converse shoes, and a band hoodie, and styling their hair into a mohawk. In accordance with this, Iris Marion Young (1994: 185) writes with regard to fashion, "This fantasy of multiple and changing identities without the anxiety of losing oneself is possible because fashion creates unreal identities in utopian places." Fashion and adornments more generally allow individuals to experiment with different identities (soccer fan, coastal grandmother, punk, prep, goth, etc.). It is worth noting that while I discussed at length in the previous chapter beautification practices that are deployed to express Black identity, the identities mentioned in the previous sentence do not stem from race. This is important because, as K. Anthony Appiah (1994: 134) observes, ethno-racial identities "lead people to forget that their individual identities are complex and multifarious— that they have enthusiasms that do not flow from their race or ethnicity, interests and tastes that cross ethno-racial boundaries, that they have occupations or professions, are fans of clubs and groups." Here again, the temporariness of adornments is a virtue, allowing adorners to experiment with more identities. Now, one might alter their appearance in this way not to manage their aesthetic attractiveness, but to signal their allegiance to or membership in the punk subculture. My point is only that *one* of the functions of beautification practices is to control one's level of aesthetic attractiveness.

In my view, one reason why beautification is valuable is that it facilitates the valuable influence of *role models*. Role models in the media who put on elaborate adornments inspire confidence in those who do not do so themselves and aid them in imagining what they themselves would look like adorned. I understand a *role model* for individual *A* to be someone a) in the public spotlight who b) is similar to *A* in ways that are salient to *A* and c) whom *A* desires to be like in certain respects. On this definition, congresswoman Ayanna Pressley would be a role model for those with alopecia—especially Black girls and women with alopecia—who, as such, relate to her and who desire to be as, say, confident as her. Alopecia is an autoimmune disorder that causes hair loss on various parts of the body—in particular, anywhere from a few bald spots to hair loss on the whole body. When Pressley was diagnosed with alopecia shortly after she took office and could no longer style her hair into her characteristic Senegalese twists, she used clothing as her main avenue for self-expression. Regarding her image consultant and stylist, Donyelle Shorter, Pressley says, "What Donyelle did for me on that day was special. It set me on a path to healing. I felt peace. She restored something for me that I hadn't felt until that moment; she restored myself" (Feller 2022). In this way, Pressley serves as a role model to, and offers representation for, those who have experienced distressing hair loss:

> One woman came up to me and said, "I suffer from female pattern baldness. Thank you for how you show up in the world every day. It means a lot to a lot of people." The disability community embraced me immediately. Various advocates have shared their stories with me since the day that video hit. How many of them were DMing each other and tweeting at each other and texting, "Have you seen it? Have you seen it? Have you seen it?" (Feller 2022)

Pressley demonstrates that while baldness forecloses some aesthetic opportunities (specifically, those involving hair), it opens up others. Without the distraction of hair, other features of her appearance are accentuated. The clothes she wears enjoy a newfound salience. Her baldness thus contributes to more aesthetic diversity, i.e., ways of realizing aesthetic value. Plausibly, this inspires confidence in those with similar experiences. Similarly, clothing can itself be a way of expressing confidence. In dressing confidently while simultaneously and unapologetically displaying her baldness, Pressley conveys the message (even to those for whom she is *not* a role model) that there is no shame in hair loss. In short, she helps destigmatize hair loss. This claim is bolstered by empirical research that suggests a link between media portrayal of social groups and audiences' perceptions of those groups. For example, there is empirical evidence from media studies that media depicting members of particular social groups as having stereotypical traits distorts audiences' attitudes towards those groups (e.g., Arendt and Northup (2015)). Similarly, via positive representation, those with hair loss can come to be seen as more attractive. Moreover, Pressley serves as a model for what bald Black girls and women would look like in certain beautiful clothing. Images of Pressley thus aid other Black girls and women who have experienced hair loss in imagining what they themselves would look like in her clothes. In addition, thanks to the temporariness of her adornments, Pressley is able to do *more* role modeling by presenting herself in more adornments.

IV. Morally Problematic Forms of Beautification

Despite the immense value of beautification in general, it is also often criticized for a number of reasons. In accordance with these criticisms, I think there are moral reasons against certain forms of beautification. I contend that how aesthetically attractive the effects of a beautification

practice are should be inversely proportional to how morally problematic it is.[39] That is, the more

problematic a beautification practice, the less aesthetically attractive we should find its effects.

This is important if my theory is to avoid situations in which we engage in, and thereby

reinforce, a beautification practice for *aesthetic* reasons while knowing that it is *morally*

problematic. In light of situations of this kind, I think moral considerations should shape

judgments of attractiveness. If such judgments can be engineered to avoid conflicts between the

moral and aesthetic domains without losing the pleasure and value that come from beautification

and finding people attractive, then they should be so engineered. Now, even if the results of

morally problematic beautification practices are deemed less attractive, there will be other

beautification practices, whose results, in my view, can permissibly inform judgments of

attractiveness. So, we can preserve the pleasure and value that stem from beautification and

finding people attractive even if we modulate the aesthetic attractiveness of beautification results

based on moral considerations.[40]

 A type of beautification practice is morally problematic to the extent that it meets the

following four conditions:

1. The practice is excessively costly for those who engage in it.

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[39] This is a normative claim about what ought to inform our judgments of attractiveness. In Section VII, I provide
suggestions for what we can continue to do and do differently so that such judgments better approximate this ideal.
[40] In my discussion of Protasi's view in the previous chapter, I argued that moral virtue is irrelevant to, and thus
should not inform, judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. Here, I suggest that there is an asymmetry between moral
virtue and moral vice insofar as the latter should defeat aesthetic attractiveness. This is because, in cases in which
we do not know how morally virtuous a well-dressed stranger is, there does not seem to be anything morally wrong
with finding them attractive. (Insofar as finding people attractive is a source of pleasure and value, refraining from
finding the well-dressed stranger attractive would be an unnecessary diminishing of pleasure and value.) If that is
right, then there is no conflict here between the aesthetic and moral domains that we find in cases in which one finds
that results of a morally problematic beautification practice aesthetically attractive.

Costliness, on my understanding, includes the amount of time, effort, and resources spent, in addition to the impairment incurred and degree of harm (including psychological harm and harm to one's self-respect[41] and autonomy). Extreme dieting can be unhealthy and involve much suffering. Less controversially, foot-binding, which was popular among women in China from the 10th century to the late 19th century (Schiavenza 2013), often resulted in weakened bones and ligaments, infection, and confinement to the home (Malchik 2020). The line between excessive and non-excessive costliness will be blurry. Nonetheless, there will be clear cases: while I take foot-binding to be a clear case of excessive costliness, doing a few sit-ups and push-ups will be a clear case of non-excessive costliness, despite the time and effort it takes to do them. Even if sit-ups will be more strenuous for some bodies than for others, the expenditure of *excessive* time and effort is not a *typical* feature of it.[42] This condition should not deliver the result that any form of beautification that requires lots of exertion is morally problematic; indeed, exertion might contribute to feelings of achievement. Applying the condition, however, should lead us to cast a skeptical eye towards beautification practices that go against participants' reflectively endorsed values, interests, desires, preferences, and commitments.[43] Now, as a heuristic, one should *not* be blamed or shamed for partaking in a costly beautification practice that they claim brings them pleasure, confidence, or peace of mind. As I argue in Section VI,

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[41] See Hill 1973 for an account of self-respect and servility.

[42] That said, even if doing sit-ups and push-ups is not excessively costly, the promotion and celebration of lean or muscular bodies to the exclusion of others would meet the fourth condition: it reflects and reinforces a cruel system that oppresses fat bodies, especially fat women. (See Manne 2024 for what I think is a well-researched defense of the claim that "fatphobia" is a form of oppression.) This is especially so if doing sit-ups and push-ups is more strenuous for some bodies than for others. That said, I am not against attempts to train one's body to expand its capabilities. Such attempts might take the form of doing sit-ups and push-ups. This motivation, however, is different from that of trying to obtain a lean or muscular body for the sake of aesthetic attractiveness.

[43] I say "reflectively endorsed" to handle cases of *deformed desires*. This strategy for dealing with such cases is inspired by Walsh 2015.

however, refraining from criticizing individuals who participate in a practice is compatible with criticizing the practice itself and with a weaker form of criticism than blame or shame.

2. The production process of the items required for the practice does more harm than good.

This condition is intended to elucidate the wrongness of clothes and adornments the production of which significantly harms humans, non-human animals, and the environment (e.g., "blood diamonds").[44] That said, it can in some cases be uncertain whether purchasing a particular garment actually does more harm than good. For example, as Lisa Cassidy (2011: 191-2) points out in her discussion of sweatshop labor, "many economists, philosophers, activists, and politicians do not agree that American-style consumption hurts the Global South." So, whether this condition delivers the result that the practice of buying and wearing sweatshop-produced goods is morally problematic will depend one's particular view of sweatshop labor.[45]

3. The practice expresses disrespectful and degrading attitudes and *social meanings*.

This condition is intended to exclude from the class of aesthetically attractive types of beautification garments and adornments that display disrespectful or degrading symbols or that

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[44] It is worth noting the unfortunate fact that meeting this condition might be inversely correlated with meeting the costliness condition. For clothes that are produced in sweatshops tend to be cheaper. This might lead to the worry that article of clothing is either produced in a sweatshop or most likely relatively expensive. As I explain below, however, the ethics of purchasing sweatshop-produced goods is complex. Moreover, as I argued in the previous chapter in response to the objection that my view is classist, there are ways to engage in unexpensive forms of beautification without breaking the bank.

[45] In addition to Cassidy (2011), see Pierlott (2011) and Ferguson and Ostmann (2018) for discussion of the ethics of purchasing sweatshop-produced garments.

disrespectfully appropriate elements from particular cultures. At least many offensive symbols and instances of cultural appropriation express disrespectful or degrading attitudes towards their targets.[46][47] For example, stiletto heels are often criticized for reducing women's ability to walk and run freely. So, in a cultural context in which a misogynistic norm is operative that women should remain inactive or stay indoors, stiletto heels reinforce this norm and express a degrading attitude towards women. This is so regardless of the intentions of those who enforce or abide by this norm (Langton and Ashwell 2011: 141).

Now, although a practice might express disrespectful attitudes, efforts can be made to dissociate it from the unfortunate *social meanings* it carries. According to Sally Haslanger (2013: 13), something carries *social meaning* when it has "significance by virtue of our collective [cultural] understandings" (Haslanger 2013: 13). For example, regarding the Unite the Right rally of 2017, Robin Givhan (2017) notes in *The Washington Post*,

> In the multitude of images from Charlottesville, the race-baiting protesters are decked out in white polo shirts and khakis. Others are wearing neat jeans, button-down shirts, cargo shirts. They are wearing jeans and striped pullovers that look like they could have come from the sale rack of Gap.

There are two points I want to make with regard to this case. First, I think it is aesthetically valuable to set the white polo shirt-khakis combination free from its associations with White nationalism. For one should be free to wear this combination without fear of being associated with White nationalism. A collective effort to accomplish this might involve wearing this combination while protesting or explicitly condemning White nationalism. Cephas

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[46] See Elizabeth Anderson and Richard Pildes (2000) for an account of expressive harm.
[47] I leave open what counts as cultural appropriation and why it is wrong (when it is). For some accounts, see Young (2010), Nguyen and Strohl (2019), and Matthes (2019).

Williams' "56 Black Men" campaign, which I mentioned in the previous chapter, attempts to do this (Freeman-Powell 2019). I do not deny, however, that certain styles and looks more often than not carry *innocuous* social meanings. As I mentioned above, these associations enable valuable self-expression (e.g., expression of membership in the punk subculture).

Second, it is worth considering a case in which someone who is *not* a White nationalist *happens* to wear a white polo shirt with khakis. It seems to me that we should not condemn them to aesthetic unattractiveness. This is because this outfit does not seem to be a reliable indicator of whether the wearer is a White nationalist. As Nosheen Iqbal (2020) writes in *The Guardian*, "From tennis nuts to Jamaican rudeboys, skinheads, mods, ska-punks, indie kids, and Camden popstars, all have done the Perry polo before Proud Boys came along." Because the look is associated with various subgroups, it does not seem to be a reliable guide to whether the wearer belongs to any *one* of these subgroups. For the same reason, in donning a certain type of outfit, an *individual* Neo-Nazi does not thereby invest it with meanings of Neo-Nazism. This is because the type of outfit is not yet a symbol or reliable indicator of Neo-Nazism.

The case is more difficult, however, if this outfit-type *is* a reliable indicator of Neo-Nazism. Should we then regard a non-White supremacist who dons it as aesthetically unattractive? If the outfit is in fact a good heuristic for judging that someone is a White supremacist, then we should *initially* refrain from finding them attractive. This reason we have for suspecting them of harboring White supremacist beliefs, however, can be *defeated* if we discover that they are not a White supremacist. Once that happens, we can begin to perceive as aesthetically interesting their appearance, including their white polo shirt and khakis. Our newfound knowledge that they are a decent person colors our perception of their appearance.[48]

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[48] Marcia Eaton (2000), from whom I draw below, holds a similar view.

Aesthetic exploration in Irvin's sense becomes appropriate. Admittedly, we will have been

misled about their beliefs and values at first, but this does not seem to me to be a terribly

unfortunate consequence. After all, the heuristic we used is by stipulation a good one.[49][50]

Here is the fourth and final condition:

4. The practice reflects and reinforces various interlocking systems of oppression.[51]

An example is straight hair for women: Especially because Black women often are or feel forced

to straighten their hair to meet the beauty standards of a White-dominant culture (Taylor 2000:

59-60), the promotion and celebration of straight hair for women becomes morally problematic

when other hairstyles, specifically those associated with marginalized subgroups of women, are

not promoted and celebrated to an equal degree. This reflect and reinforces White supremacy, in

this case, White aesthetic supremacy. Dieting to look thin is another example. As Kate Manne

(2022) points out in an essay in *The New York Times*, in dieting to look thinner, one contributes

"to a society that lauds certain bodies and derogates others for more or less arbitrary reasons and

ones that lead to a great deal of cruelty and suffering."[52]

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[49] This analysis can also throw light on the merchandise of artists with extremely immoral views. For example, given that Kanye West has voiced antisemitic views, we have reason to find the products of his clothing brand aesthetically unattractive.

[50] If the non-White supremacist's outfit had aesthetically interesting properties all along, one might wonder whether the same outfit as worn by a White supremacist also has aesthetically interesting properties. There are two options here. One is to say that while the outfit as worn by the White supremacist is aesthetically attractive, we should refrain from appreciating it. That is, we should refrain from being attract*ed* to it. The other option is to say that while the outfit as worn by the non-White supremacist is attractive, it is not so when the White supremacist wears it. This is because the presence of aesthetically interesting properties depends on the absence of external moral flaws. In other words, the moral flaws of the White supremacist render unattractive their appearance. I leave open which description is correct.

[51] Thank you to Vanessa Carbonell for helping me come up with this condition.

[52] Manne goes so far as to claim that diet culture is *immoral*, and that it is "*obligatory* for individuals to divest from it [dieting], to condemn it and not to teach it to our children, either explicitly or by example" (my emphasis). I find Manne's unreserved condemnation of dieting and diet culture inspiring. However, as I explain in the next section, my own view is that sufficiently weighty prudential reasons might render morally permissible an otherwise morally

V. How Moral Value Can Shape Aesthetic Value in the Case of Beautification and Adornment

One might object that I have not given an account of how moral considerations can influence an object's aesthetic value. On what grounds can I simply narrow the range of aesthetic attractiveness based on moral concerns? Much ink has been spilled, after all, on whether—and if so, how—the moral value of an artwork can influence its aesthetic value. Am I simply taking for granted that the immorality of a form of beautification can diminish its aesthetic value? If it turns out that the correctness conditions of aesthetic judgments are not subject to the influence of moral considerations in the first place, then it does not make much sense to talk about *how* our aesthetic judgments should be reshaped in accordance with such considerations. This follows from the "ought implies can" thesis.

Although I do not in this chapter attempt to give a general account of the influence of moral on aesthetic value, I argue in response to the objection that what is aesthetically attractive and unattractive *in particular* can be shaped by moral considerations. My argument for this relies on social approval and disapproval as the mechanism that enables this:

> P1: What we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive is at least in part determined by social approval and disapproval.
>
> P2: Social approval and disapproval can be shaped by moral considerations.

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unacceptable instance of beautification. Put in slogan form, the prudential modulates the moral. In her more recent 2024 book on diet culture, Manne does specify that her view is not that "you should be blamed or shamed or criticized for taking an easier path, or doing what you may need to do to make your life bearable or even livable in some cases (191). I leave open whether this is compatible with an *obligation* to "divest from it [dieting]."

Conclusion: Moral considerations can shape what we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive (follows from P1 and P2).

With P1, I am not claiming that what adornments, attire, and styles we find aesthetically attractive is co-extensive with those that enjoy collective approval. I leave open whether there are objective, universal constraints on what can be aesthetically attractive. Likewise, there might very well be what I call *personal constraints* on the influence that social approval and disapproval have on our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. These are constraints on one's taste that can be traced to their personal history or individual psychological makeup. Empirical research suggests that the music we listen to as teens shapes the music we listen to as adults (Stephens-Davidowitz 2018). Perhaps one's preferences in fashion are often like this, and the styles to which one is exposed in early childhood constrain which ones they find aesthetically attractive later in life. Still, this is consistent with there being *some* influence of social approval and disapproval on one's taste later in life. In addition, my bigger point is that moral considerations *should* guide our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness. (Given the "ought implies can" thesis, it is in defense of this point that I am attempting to show here that moral considerations *can* guide such judgments.) This bigger point can still be made in the context of early childhood; as long as the beautification preferences of children are still malleable, children should not be encouraged to engage in morally problematic beautification practices or to find their results attractive.

So, I am open to there being *some* limits on the influence of social approval and disapproval on what we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive. Below, I describe three mechanisms through which social approval and disapproval shape our judgments of aesthetic

attractiveness and unattractiveness. However, to secure the claim that social approval and disapproval *do* have such an influence in the first place, I draw from Lauren Ashwell and Rae Langton (2011: 146), who write, "Think about a case where a fashion item which you once shunned starts to look good; skinny jeans, for example, just a few years ago didn't look good, but then, seemingly all of a sudden, people started finding the look aesthetically pleasing." I explain below *how* this is possible by evoking three mechanisms. For now, though, I want to note that, most charitably interpreted, Ashwell and Langton's point is not that what an individual finds aesthetically attractive tracks precisely what they think is fashionable (where the referent of "fashionable" here is whatever styles, clothes, and adornments have garnered social approval). Imagine a Boomer who is unreceptive to skinny jeans, which are worn primarily by Millennials and Gen Z. I have two points to make with regard to this example. First, a Boomer who resists the aesthetic appeal of skinny jeans might be under the sway of the collective opinions of a *different* subculture, in which case their judgments of aesthetic attractiveness would still be the result of what they take to be fashionable. One's taste in fashion will likely be influenced by what members of their social class wear, the kind of media they follow, etc. Second, I do not claim that social approval and disapproval are the *only* determinants of one's taste in fashion. Again, there might very well be objective, universal constraints. My point is only that social approval and disapproval can and sometimes do shape our fashion tastes.

I take P2 to be relatively uncontroversial. Societies disapprove of torturing innocent people for fun because doing so would be immoral. More pertinently, moral opposition can put pressure on and eventually change beauty norms. For example, in the 10th century, women in China started to bind their feet in such a way that they resembled hooves (Schiavenza 2013). In the early 20th century, Chinese reformers vehemently objected to foot-binding on the grounds

that it symbolized outdated values and everything that was wrong with China (Keeling 2008: 16). Foot-binding was banned in 1912, and by the 21st century, only a few women had bound feet (Mills 2015). In China hoof-like feet are no longer regarded as aesthetically attractive (Schiavenza 2013). So, P2 seems to me to be on firm ground. The conclusion of the argument results from replacing the phrase "social approval and disapproval" in P1 with "moral considerations"—a move that P2 warrants.

There are three mechanisms through which social approval and disapproval can shape what we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive. First, something like *social desirability bias* might shape what we wear and refrain from wearing. As Pamela Grimm (2010) defines it, "Social desirability bias refers to the tendency of research subjects to choose responses they believe are more socially desirable or acceptable rather than choosing responses that are reflective of their true thoughts or feelings." Similarly, even if we are aesthetically drawn towards a certain garment, we might refrain from wearing it in public if we worry that others would find it morally reprehensible. (For the garment might be associated with a morally problematic brand.) In this way, if the garment is fashionable, it will become less so as fewer people are seen wearing it. Conversely, if we predict that others would find a particular outfit aesthetically attractive, if it is "in," we might wear it more often.

Second, even if we do wear it, others might respond negatively to us, for example, by giving us dirty looks as their eyes pass over the garment. This might drive the first mechanism as we wear it less often or even not at all. Additionally, in witnessing others respond negatively to the garment, we might conclude that it is unfashionable and begin to perceive it as aesthetically unattractive. Conversely, compliments on our outfit choices might lead us to conclude that our attire is fashionable or put on that attire more often, *making* it fashionable.

Lastly, the media is well-positioned to promote certain attitudes towards certain styles and adornments. Again, there are both positive and negative versions of this mechanism. Positively, in selecting certain styles and outfits, media figures can lead their fanbase to emulate them. In other words, they can be trend setters. For example, Madonna plausibly contributed to the popularity of low-rise pants ("12 Fashion Trends That Were Started by Celebrities"). Negatively, in condemning or just avoiding certain styles and outfits, media figures can lead them to go out of style. The media can also support the first two mechanisms and even make them more salient. For example, a viral TikTok video of someone disapproving of a celebrity's outfit can contribute to shaping people's aesthetic attitudes towards that outfit.

There also seems to me to be a more direct argument for the conclusion that moral considerations can shape what we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive. The one above appeals to social approval and disapproval as the mechanism through which moral concerns can shape judgments of aesthetic attractiveness and unattractiveness. However, perhaps one can perceive a style, adornment, or piece of clothing as less aesthetically attractive in light of knowledge that it is morally problematic. This would be a synchronic mechanism, in contrast to the diachronic mechanism of social approval and disapproval. Marcia Eaton (2000) provides examples of aesthetic judgments that one might make after discovering that the objects of their judgments fly in the face of their interests or purposes: "I used to think purple loosestrife was beautiful, but then I learned what it does to wetland ecosystems, and now I find it ugly," "Those melodies sung by Carmen sounded beautiful to me before I thought more deeply about what they imply about women's role; now they only make me angry," etc. (33) Consider also the Christmas song "Baby, It's Cold Outside," which might strike listeners as cringeworthy at best and repulsive at worst after they realize that its lyrics are a celebration of date rape. This would be an

instance of a synchronic mechanism through which the moral influences the aesthetic—one that does not rely on social disapproval. Perhaps judgments of aesthetic attractiveness are like this. After finding out that the brand of a pair of jeans belongs to a morally reprehensible artist, we might come to find it ugly or at least less aesthetically pleasing. This reaction might then lead us to disapprove of the jeans to others, who, thanks to this, might come to find them ugly or less aesthetically pleasing as well.

VI. Is My View Moralistic?

I offered in Section III reasons for why beautification and adornment are valuable. In Section IV, I argued that beautification practices are in some cases morally problematic. I also tried to show in Section V that, in virtue of being morally problematic, beautification practices can become less attractive via patterns of social approval and disapproval. In this section, I consider and respond to the objection that my view is moralistic.

First, one might object that, despite also commending beautification, my view unfairly condemns those who engage in morally problematic forms of beautification for weighty prudential reasons. I claimed above that beautification practices are morally problematic to the extent that they meet the four conditions above. However, for reasons of autonomy and prudence, there might be cases in which it is morally permissible to engage in a morally problematic beautification practice. Consider, for example, a fashion model who agrees to wear stiletto heels for her career. Even if stiletto heels restrict movement, it seems inappropriate to blame her for promoting a morally problematic beautification practice and to demand that she act against prudential reasons regarding her career. In light of this, my view might strike one as moralistic.

I have three responses. First, I do not claim that participation in a type of beautification practice that meets any of the four criteria is always blameworthy, all things considered. In the case of the fashion model, if any blame is appropriate, it would be better to direct it at the fashion industry for promoting morally problematic beauty norms. Social sanctions are often imposed on those who engage in aberrant aesthetic practices. Women often feel pressured to wear makeup at work. Even if makeup can be expensive and putting it on can be time-consuming, individual women should not be blamed for putting on makeup to avoid social penalties in the workplace.[53][54] For I take it that prudential considerations constrain what is morally demanded of individuals. After all, as Ruth Holliday and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor (2006) note, those who are less privileged with respect to class, education, and race experience greater aesthetic demands than others, who are better positioned to take alternative routes to access goods. In addition, as Beauvoir (1949: 664) points out, although women's liberation requires "revolt," this is a daunting process and impossible if other women do not also participate. In the absence of other participants, resisting engagement with problematic beautification practices may be costly

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[53] In her overview of literature on the duty to resist one's own oppression, Ashwini Vasanthakumar (2019: 5) brings up a similar argument: "It [resistance] requires significant psychological, social, epistemic and capital resources that the oppressed, in particular, are less likely to hold or to hold adequately. It exposes the oppressed to the risks of retaliation: being harassed by police, being labelled and dismissed as a 'troublemaker' at work, being politely ostracized from their social circle." Heather Widdows (2022) also makes a similar argument in her informatively titled article "No Duty to Resist." I agree with Widdows that we should avoid shaming and blaming individuals who engage in problematic beautification practices (40). That said, as I argue below in my third response to the objection, it can be useful to point out to individuals—without blaming or shaming them—how in engaging with problematic beautification practices, they fall short of the moral ideal. Widdows (2017: 23) herself acknowledges in another article that "it is reasonable to infer that rising engagement in beauty practices is one factor which contributes to a culture in which beauty standards will continue to rise, and in which normal will be harder to attain, and in which beauty will be increasingly valued." In light of this, I welcome productive ways of encouraging individuals to resist engaging with problematic beautification practices.

[54] Elizabeth Sperry (2013: 893) considers a similar case, in which a female women's rights attorney "abjures female beauty ideals" but nonetheless shaves because "judges treat skirt-wearing female attorneys better, and juries will penalize her clients if she does not shave." Although her shaving is congruent with the oppressive demand that women shave, she is what Uma Narayan (2002) calls a "bargainer with patriarchy": she makes a decision after weighing the costs and benefits of a cultural practice. One perhaps noteworthy feature of Sperry's case is that, although the attorney might be motivated partly by prudential reasons, she is also, as an advocate for women's rights, plausibly driven by moral reasons and acting for the sake of other women.

with few benefits. In short, it is useful to distinguish the individual and practice levels. When I claim that a form of beautification is morally problematic, I am criticizing the practice, not the individual. To criticize a practice is to claim that engagement with it results in unnecessary harm and suffering. This, I take it, is a distinct claim from the one that individuals who engage with the practice have all-things-considered reasons to resist it or act wrongly. Insofar as criticism of practices and criticism of the individuals who participate in them are usually leveled together, I am offering an at least somewhat revisionary suggestion. This has an interesting implication: a practice can be morally problematic even if few or even none of its participants act wrongly.[55]

Second, I do not claim that any type of beautification practice that meets any of the four criteria above should automatically be rejected even at the practice level. In calling a practice problematic, I do not mean that there are no advantages to it or even that it is more bad than good, but only that some aspects of it are significantly detrimental.[56] For instance, although buying and putting on makeup can be costly, individuals can engage with this practice healthily. In line with this, Kathleen Higgins (2000) claims that "neither [self-adornment nor attention to one's appearance] is intrinsically counterproductive to health or bodily ease. Either can become so, however, if it becomes an end in itself, or a project of obsessive defense against one's flaws" (105). Even if wearing makeup reinforces self-doubt in some cases ("Is it me or is it my makeup?" (100)), it can serve as a valuable means of self-expression in others. Still, even if an individual has a healthy relationship to makeup, in wearing it (in a conventionally acceptable way), they seem to be promoting an aesthetic practice which many *others* engage with

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[55] Here, however, diminishing returns should be kept in mind. A celebrity who is thinking of getting a Brazilian butt lift (BBL) to get even wealthier has less weighty prudential reasons than one who is less well-off.

[56] Indeed, the term "problematic" might connote to some a lack of severity in comparison to "immoral" and "condemnable." For example, torturing innocent people for fun is immoral and condemnable, but to call it problematic is perhaps misleading at best and mistaken at worst. Although I use "problematic" in the broader sense in the main text to mean "wrong to some degree or other," I take it that my arguments fare just the same if the term is read in the narrower sense to mean "wrong but not severely so."

obsessively and in which many women feel pressured to take part in the workplace. Ultimately, there seem to me to be compelling reasons both for and against the moral desirability of makeup, with neither set of reasons clearly trumping the other. If makeup were to meet the four conditions above to a greater degree, or if it were a less effective means of self-expression, then there would be more reason to reject its use as a technique for controlling one's own aesthetic attractiveness. It is not as problematic as, say, Brazilian butt lifts (BBLs), which are expensive; are often followed by a painful, expensive stay in a recovery house; have a high mortality rate compared to other cosmetic surgeries; and reflect and reinforce the oppression of women, especially Black and Brown women (Garcia 2022).

Third, borrowing Robin Zheng's (2021) distinction between *summative* and *formative* moral criticism,[57] I want to argue that the latter can appropriately be applied to individuals who participate in problematic beautification practices even if the former cannot. *Summative moral criticism* is appropriate when its target fails to live up to moral demands which all agents are expected to follow (512), e.g., the demands to not lie and cheat (506). When an agent fails to comply with these demands, then, in the right conditions, they are legitimately subject to negative sanctions like ostracization (506, 512). Accordingly, summative moral criticism is "only justifiable when we have confidence in the fairness and accuracy of our judgments of blameworthiness" (512). *Formative moral criticism*, which, in contrast, does not involve sanctions, is appropriate when its target does not live up to a moral *ideal* (512-3). Ideals, unlike goals, are unattainable (506-7). Still, formative moral criticism "helps us to learn, feel, and be motivated in the right ways—that is, it enhances our moral aspirations" (513). It does so without ostracization, hostility, or charges that the target harbors ill will (515).

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[57] Zheng herself borrows the distinction from Scriven (1967) and Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus (1971).

Everyday examples of formative *non*-moral criticism are "exams, papers, and final course grades" (511). Zheng offers another helpful example when she notes, "A driver's license examiner produces a summative evaluation; by contrast, the driving instructor engages only in formative assessment—pointing out mistakes, making suggestions, and so on—not used for determining whether to grant a license" (511). Formative *moral* criticism takes place when someone points out to a good friend, without altering their relationship with them or claiming that the latter harbors ill will, how they have fallen short of the moral ideal.[58] Thus, in drawing the distinction between summative and formative moral criticism, Zheng is drawing from a practice we *already* engage in.

According to Zheng, formative moral criticism can appropriately be directed at agents who perpetuate *structural wrongs,* while summative moral criticism cannot. We lack confidence in our judgments of blameworthiness in cases of *structural wrongs* (522), which are "actions of an otherwise morally unobjectionable type that harm others by forming part of unjust social-structural processes—usually without the agent's knowing, willing, or desiring to do so" (519). Only together with the behavior of others do structural wrongs cause harm (519). In these cases, while summative moral criticism is out of place, formative moral criticism is not (527).

I contend that even if an individual who participates in a problematic beautification practice is not appropriately subject to summative moral criticism, formative moral criticism is valuable. For example, it strikes me as inappropriate to blame a woman who gets a BBL before getting a loan or starting a business—as many women in fact do (Garcia 2022). For if their getting a BBL is wrong at all, then it is a structural wrong. This is because it reinforces a problematic practice only in conjunction with the actions of others who get BBLs, cosmetic

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[58] Zheng uses a particular example of this from August Wilson's 1986 play *Fences*.

surgeons who advertise and perform them, those who favor women with larger butts, etc. Thus, summative moral criticism and blame seem inappropriate here.[59] Nonetheless, formative moral criticism might actually improve her agency by helping her understand her decision to get a BBL as part of a set of social-structural processes and as implicated in structural injustice. Put crudely, it might help her make *informed* decisions. As Zheng notes, formative moral criticism need not be condescending in such cases. Insofar as formative moral criticism directs our attention to how we fall short of ideals, which are unrealizable, we can *all* benefit from receiving it (529-30). Additionally, even if one is usually better epistemically positioned than others to make accurate judgments about themselves, to the extent that others might, in *some* cases, be better suited to make particular judgment about them, formative moral criticism—in contrast to no criticism at all—can usefully be employed in these cases. That said, if a woman has *already* gotten a BBL and does not have the time, resources, or energy to reverse it, even formative moral criticism might be inappropriate.

It is also worth emphasizing that, even if a wrong is structural, an individual's contribution to it nonetheless carries moral weight. As mentioned above, the mortality rate of getting a BBL is high compared to that of other cosmetic surgeries, and the aftermath is painful enough to necessitate an expensive stay at a recovery house (Garcia 2022). Thus, even if a woman would like the way her BBL looks, this consideration may not be weighty enough to justify her contribution to a harmful practice that many other women feel pressured to engage in.

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[59] While women who get BBLs might not appropriately be subject to summative moral criticism, a cosmetic surgeon might who unapologetically and aggressively advertises them and who endorses the norm that Black and Brown women are more attractive the larger their butts are. As Margaret Little (2000) notes, however, there is a moral difference between cosmetic surgeons like this and those who denounce the problematic norms that provoke feelings of inadequacy in their patients and who attempt to alleviate these feelings (171). Cosmetic surgeons, according to Little, can block unfortunate meanings otherwise conveyed by their line of work by publicly condemning problematic norms of attractiveness and "informing patients of the options they face" (174-5).

On the other hand, if getting a BBL would give a woman a transformative confidence boost or peace of mind—and nothing else would—then these may be sufficiently weighty reasons.

VII. Upshots: An Only Partial Vindication of Convention

I argued that beautification can be a valuable way to control one's own aesthetic attractiveness, while expressing some skepticism towards more problematic practices like dieting. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, this is a partial vindication of conventional wisdom and practices regarding beautification. I also argued that even if moral considerations do not currently inform our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness, they can via patterns of social approval and disapproval. I then defended my view against the objection that it blames and shames individuals who participate in problematic beautification practices for prudential reasons. In this section, I give five upshots of my discussion. The first two provide guidelines for determining the moral status of an instance of beautification, while the final three give suggestions on what we can do to bring our moral and aesthetic judgments into harmony. I will explain to what extent each upshot vindicates or challenges conventional wisdom and practices.

1. The prudential modulates the moral.

This condition reflects the response in the previous section to the objection that my view is moralistic, that it overemphasizes the moral at the expensive of the prudential. So, if a particular instance of beautification brings about sufficiently weighty prudential (or moral)[60] goods, then it

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[60] Elizabeth Sperry's case of the female women's rights attorney who shaves, which I describe in note 38, is perhaps one in which moral reasons render morally permissible an instance of beautification that reflects and reinforces oppressive systems.

will be morally permissible (but problematic) even if it reflects and reinforces oppressive systems. The strongest formulation offered above of this upshot is that, as a heuristic, those who claim to derive much pleasure, confidence, or peace of mind from engaging with a problematic beautification practice should not be morally blamed or shamed. The case of the fashion model who agrees to wear stiletto heels is an example. However, I hope that my view also avoids moral complacency: In the absence of prudential (or moral) goods, I contend that participation would be morally impermissible. Again, it is perhaps worth bearing in mind that contribution to a structural wrong still carries moral weight. So, formative moral criticism will often be appropriate. Even if it is not, however, the claim that participation in a particular beautification practice is morally impermissible need not entail the appropriateness of moral criticism in any *interpersonal* contexts. I admit that there is no bright line between sufficiently weighty (or significant) and insufficiently weighty (or marginal) reasons. Thus, there may be genuine dilemmas. However, there will also be relatively clear cases.

This upshot might strike one as nothing more than a vindication of convention, in effect telling us not to attempt to change what people already do (aside from formative criticism), even if what they do reinforces problematic practices. This upshot is indeed partly a vindication of convention. However, once we draw distinctions more fine-grained than that between those who partake in problematic beautification practices and those who do not, ways to combat conventional practice emerge. Although Margaret Little (2000: 174-5) focuses on what cosmetic surgeons should do, I think her point that cosmetic surgeons who perform problematic procedures can block unfortunate social meanings otherwise conveyed by their work generalizes to those who *get* cosmetic surgeries or engage in any other problematic beautification practice for strong prudential reasons. For even if it is morally permissible for them to participate in such

practices, they can condemn them or express that it is unfortunate that they feel that they have to partake in them.

Moreover, it is helpful to distinguish between victims and non-victims who engage in beautification, or between those for whom aesthetic subversion is riskier and those for whom it is less risky. As non-victims for whom combatting prevailing norms is less risky, cosmetic surgeons have more reason to push back against costly aesthetic norms that pressure women to get cosmetic surgeries. Amy Olberding (2015) makes a similar point about the differences in the ways professors dress pre- and post-tenure: "While seeking employment or in the pre-tenure period, a certain reserve in how one expresses identity through dress is often treated as a necessary prudence, a strategy (perhaps often even pursued unconsciously) for winning credibility in a role one seeks to play" (701), whereas "the post-tenure period is frequently described as a process of reclamation, with job security affording freedom to close the gap between "dressing for the part" and inhabiting the part by bringing to it some expression of one's broader identity (701). So, although my account grants quite a bit of discretion to victims, it grants less to non-victims or those for whom resistance is less risky.[61]

2. Aesthetic subversion is not only morally permissible but morally good.

In accordance with Young's observation that fashion enables us to experiment with different identities, those who publicly resist confining aesthetic norms contribute to a society in which more people can experiment with more identities. Again, as Knowles and Melo Lopes point out,

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[61] Vasanthakumar similarly points out that arguments about whether victims have a duty to resist their oppression tend to tend to "concede a substantial amount of discretion to the individual victim in determining whether, when and how to resist" (7).

the meaning of an adornment—in this case, whether it counts as subversive—depends on characteristics of the adorner and of their social context. For instance, those who participate in drag, like the artist, Arthur Jafa, who was photographed in black lipstick for a piece in *The New York Times* in 2019, disrupt assumptions about identity and promote a culture in which men wearing makeup is not a taboo (O'Grady et al. 2021). Insofar as people like Jafa already engage in aesthetic subversion, this upshot is a partial vindication of convention. However, insofar as aesthetic subversion challenges conventional norms by its very nature, it is a form of resistance to convention. This second upshot leads to the next:

3. As a heuristic, it is both prudentially and morally good to be open-minded about aesthetically subversive looks.

If aesthetic subversion is morally good, then it is also morally good to encourage it. It is also prudentially good for one to derive pleasure from a greater variety of looks. Here, Irvin's recommendation of aesthetic exploration is handy. Even if a subversive look initially elicits a negative aesthetic response, perhaps partly in virtue of being something to which we are not accustomed, we should not simply conclude that it is unattractive, but continue to seek out its interesting and unique features. Indeed, because aesthetic subversion is something essentially *unique*, it is a prime target of aesthetic exploration, which looks for unique properties. Because aesthetic exploration is not something we often do for bodies, this upshot recommends a change to current practice.

4. As another heuristic, morally problematic beautification practices should not be encouraged and, at the practice level, should be morally condemned.

If we are to take, for example, Manne's objections to dieting and diet culture seriously, then we should not congratulate our friends and family who lose weight after dieting. For to do so would be to reinforce a problematic aesthetic ideal that leads to much suffering and unfair exclusion. Of course, if one participates in a problematic beautification practice oneself, then they would also be reinforcing a problematic practice. (Again, however, prudential considerations will limit the range of impermissible actions here.) Insofar as conventional practice already includes collective attempts at moral reform, this upshot is a vindication of convention. *Particular* criticisms of currently *common* practices like dieting, though, will be especially salient challenges to convention.

Furthermore, my account will be more revisionary at the practice than at the individual level. Given that individuals usually have at least intelligible reasons to engage in problematic beautification practices, they will often not be apt targets of what Zheng calls "summative moral criticism." At the practice level, however, condemnation will more often be called for. For example, one of the more radical implications of my account is that dieting and exercising to attain a lean body will be problematic at the practice level insofar as it reflects and reinforces the oppression of fat people, especially fat women.

5. The media should exhibit not only a diversity of styles but a diversity of people taking up those styles. Conversely, it should refrain from promoting morally problematic beautification practices.

For example, the Cottagecore Black Folks Instagram page displays Black people (especially Black women) taking up "cottagecore" fashion against rural backgrounds. Cottagecore fashion includes puff sleeves, '70s-style prairie dresses, ruffles, and floral patterns. In short, cottagecore imagery evokes ideas of rural and farm life. There have been conversations about the lack of people of color in cottagecore communities, which is especially worrisome given that farm life "is tied to a colonial past where Black people were forced into servitude, while others were redlined from land and farming due to racist policies" (Jackson 2022). This background makes the promotion of diversity in the Cottagecore Black Folks page all the more important. Again, one of the reasons why diversity of representation is valuable here is that it contributes to a society in which more people can play with different identities. Black people who take up cottagecore fashion help undo unfortunate social meanings of cottagecore, freeing space for other Black people to engage with it. Like the first upshot, this one vindicates conventional practice insofar as much media already actively promotes diversity of styles and of people taking up those styles. However, insofar as it encourages subversion, it recommends a shift away from convention.

One final note on the importance of diversity of representation: By showing people from underrepresented groups (e.g., disabled people and fat people) in aesthetically attractive adornments, the media can combat the unequal patterns of attraction described at the beginning of this chapter. There is empirical evidence that traditional forms of media like music videos lead consumers to internalize specific beauty ideals (Mills et al. 2017). More generally, the media (including social media) plausibly contributes to what we find aesthetically attractive. In presenting those from underrepresented grounds as aesthetically attractive via adornment, the

media can combat unequal, problematic patterns of attraction. This is especially useful if people *already* find certain adornments aesthetically attractive. Thus, by taking advantage of what people already find attractive, the media can help them expand the range of people they deem attractive. I think productions that showcase and promote diversity, like the Cottagecore Black Folks page, are steps in the right direction.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

In the previous chapter, I argued that beautification is an empowering and inclusive means of managing one's aesthetic attractiveness. In this chapter, I argued for some further ways in which beautification is valuable. I also argued that, despite this, beautification is in some cases morally problematic. In virtue of being problematic, the results of beautification can become less attractive via patterns of social approval and disapproval. Then, I responded to the objections that my view unfairly blames individuals who participate in problematic beautification practices. Finally, I provided guidelines for determining the moral status of an instance of beautification and for avoiding conflicts between our moral and aesthetic judgments.

To conclude, I want to point out that the discussion above on the moral desirability of various beautification practices can be generalized to shed light on related phenomena. Specifically, using Instagram filters and Photoshop to alter photos of oneself may in some cases result in loss of self-esteem or perpetuate unfair beauty norms. Filters that make one's skin look smoother might fuel feelings of inadequacy about one's own body and, in a culture that prizes the appearance of youth, reinforces the aesthetic disgust with which the bodies of the elderly are often met. Via patterns of social disapproval, the results of problematic filters and uses of Photoshop can come to be seen as less attractive. On the other hand, other filters and uses of

Photoshop can enable valuable self-expression. For example, a black and white filter seems to me to be an innocuous way of expressing moodiness or pensiveness.

Moreover, if our judgments of aesthetic attractiveness ought to track the results of some beautification practices, and in coming to find someone aesthetically attractive, one is more likely to be sexually or romantically attracted to them, then perhaps I have made some headway towards establishing that our judgments of sexual and romantic attractiveness also ought to track the results of some beautification practices. Indeed, I suspect that this would be a morally desirable account of sexual and romantic attractiveness.

Ch. 3: Disturbing Artworks and Artistic Excess

I. Introduction

On the one hand, we want to avoid needlessly moralizing about disturbing works like extremely

gory movies, which we might think have their own artistic, non-moral goals. On the other hand,

we might feel that such caution against moralizing fails to account for some moral residue: we *do*

at times feel that, and talk as if, an artwork is less good *qua* art when it is immoral in being

excessively disturbing.[62] I argue in this chapter that excessive disturbing content[63] is at times a

source of both artistic and moral flaws. I will argue that artworks are bad *qua* artworks (i.e.,

artistically bad) when they either fail to fulfill worthwhile artistic purposes or fail to produce

artistically good consequences. On my view, what makes a disturbing work fail in this way can

also diminish its moral status.

To reach this conclusion, I first unpack the *prima facie* puzzling claim that a work can be

immoral in being excessively disturbing. (How can disturbing works be immoral when they, say,

provide thrills and present disturbing truths?) Authors like Gianluca Di Muzio (2006: 290) have

argued that it is immoral to produce, distribute, and watch *gorefests* or *slasher films*, which

"primarily aim to produce terror and powerful emotions in the spectators."[64] This is because such

films erode viewers' dispositions to respond sympathetically and compassionately to human

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[62] Take, for example, criticism of the horror movie *Antebellum* (2020), which follows a modern-day Black woman who wakes up one morning to discover that she is now in a slave plantation during the Civil War era. In his review, titled "*Antebellum* Isn't Just Bad—It's Vile," reviewer David Sims suggests that the movie "relish[es] the brutality that its protagonist experienced." Sims writes, "It loads up on visceral scares and disturbing imagery in service of a shallow film that feels like a gory theme-park ride showcasing the horrors of slavery" and "The terrifying realities of slavery are reduced to horror-movie tropes." As the title of the review suggests, this is not only an artistic but also a moral critique.

[63] The phrases "excessive disturbing content" and "excessively disturbing content" should be distinguished. While the first refers to quantitative excess, the second refers to qualitative excess. For example, a *single* scene of a beheading would probably be excessively disturbing content if featured in a children's movie, while *too many* beheading scenes (or an *overly long* beheading scene) in a horror-thriller would be excessive disturbing content. I take it that my points below about excessive disturbing content can be extended to excessively disturbing content, and vice versa. Thank you to Eduardo Martinez for this distinction.

[64] I take the claim that a work aims to X to be shorthand for saying that the creator(s) of the work aims to X.

suffering. Authors have responded—I think compellingly—that the empirical data have not decisively borne this out, and that desensitization need not be morally inappropriate and can instead be useful (Kreider 2008, Pascale 2019, Stoner 2020).

Despite this, some might still feel that there is something morally inappropriate about these films and other disturbing works. Drawing from Joel Feinberg's (1985) work on offense, I argue in this chapter that a more plausible way to unpack the immorality charge against disturbing works is in terms of offensiveness. On my view, some artistic content is offensive if it is likely to cause unexpected and undesirable mental states in audiences for no good reason. In this case, whether some content is excessively disturbing depends on whether it serves sufficiently worthwhile ends (although I am open to there being other ways in which the lack of a sufficiently valuable purpose leads to immorality in an artwork). When some content is excessively disturbing, then the work of which it is a part would have been both morally and artistically better without that content.[65] This, I think, is an interesting and often neglected way in which ethics interacts with aesthetics, and sheds light on the negative moral/artistic criticism of some disturbing works.

One other consideration motivates my argument. I think that excessively disturbing content is an often overlooked instance of ethics-aesthetics interaction. In 1757, Hume made note

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[65] The invocation of offensiveness might recall to some readers arguments that violent entertainment causes violent behavior. I want to distance my argument from these. For example, in 2015, on his talk show *The O'Reilly Factor*, Bill O'Reilly claimed, "The rap industry, for example, often glorifies depraved behavior, and that sinks into the minds of some young people—the group that is most likely to reject religion" (Campbell 2015). Plausibly, O'Reilly has in mind the violent content in gangsta rap (among other things). Similarly, the day after a mass shooting in 2022 at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, US Rep. Ronny Jackson told Fox News, "Kids are exposed to all kinds of horrible stuff nowadays. I think about the horrible stuff they hear when they listen to rap music, the video games they watch … with all this horrible violence" (Powell 2022). A number of scholars have disputed these types of arguments (see, for example, McCool 2021, Savage 2004, Savage 2008, Coyne 2007, Freedman 2002, Olson 2004). My argument makes no appeal to the incitement of violent behavior.

of what has been referred to as "imaginative resistance," whereby the moral flaw of a work mars it artistically:

> Where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. (246)

Recent work on how the moral failings of a work diminish its artistic status focuses on pieces that were produced by immoral artists (Bartel 2019), with immoral intentions (Harold 2006: 260), or via unethical means (Nannicelli 2014); that have a reasonable chance of morally corrupting audiences or leading them to commit immoral actions (Di Muzio 2006); or that endorse immoral attitudes and prescribe that audiences do the same (Gaut 2007). I think that excessively disturbing works deserve more attention in the philosophical literature.

The four following upshots will emerge from my discussion. The first two offer heuristics for ethically creating disturbing art and morally evaluating it, the third concerns the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and the fourth offers a tool for ethically creating disturbing artworks and morally evaluating them by looking to their *artistic* status.

1. Creators of disturbing art should ensure that intended and likely audiences will know beforehand what kind of disturbing content they would be consuming. Likewise, when morally evaluating a work, critics should consider whether intended and likely audiences were well-positioned to know beforehand what kind of disturbing content they would be consuming.

2. Creators of disturbing works should consider whether the purposes of their works justify any undesirable mental states they would likely cause in audiences. Likewise, when morally evaluating a work, critics should consider whether the purposes of their works justify any undesirable mental states they would likely cause in audiences.

3. One and the same fact can correspond to both moral and artistic goods, or to both moral and artistic flaws.

4. Artistically good-making features can cancel the immorality of a work.

Here is how I will proceed. In Section II, I will explain what I mean by "disturbing art," my choice of examples, the role that art-critical practices will play in my arguments, and what is at stake in claiming that a disturbing piece is immoral in virtue of its excess. In Section III, I will explain how I will use the two types of offense Feinberg offers. In Section IV, I will argue that creators of disturbing works can modulate the degree to which their works might cause undesirable mental states. The first upshot will emerge from the discussion in this section and the second from the discussion in Sections V and VI. In Section V, I will use my framework of weighing the purposes of a disturbing work against its potential to cause undesirable mental states to show how one might morally *censure* disturbing works. In Sections VI, I will show how one might use my framework to morally *vindicate* such works. In Section VII, I will explain how the same fact that renders a disturbing work *perceptually offensive* can also mar it artistically, and similarly, how the same fact that morally vindicates an otherwise perceptually offensive

disturbing work can also be an artistically good-making feature. The third and fourth upshots

will emerge from the discussion in this section. In Section VIII, I will conclude.

II. Preliminaries

Before I explain Feinberg's two types of offense, I want to make four preliminary points. First,

by "disturbing art," I intend to refer to something a bit more specific than what Aaron Smuts

(2007) calls *painful art*. According to Smuts, painful artworks are those that would produce

negative emotions in audiences (60).[66][67] Disturbing works, on my understanding, are those that

would produce a specific kind of negative emotion in audiences: extreme anxiety, anger, or

disgust (including moral disgust), in some cases the kind that lingers after the audience has

engaged with the work.[68] So, disturbing works are a subset of painful works, which, as Matthew

Strohl (2018) points out, also include intensely spicy or sour foods, noisy music, frustratingly

difficult video games, and boring works (9-10).[69] These might in some cases, but need not, be

such that they would provoke extreme anxiety, anger, or disgust. I take it that it is partly for this

reason that they are rarely, if ever, morally criticized for being offensive. So, I leave open

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[66] Smuts actually says that painful works are those "whose *primary* purpose is to arouse negative emotions" (60, my italics). I drop the mention of primacy to leave open the possibility that some painful works aim not to evoke negative emotions primarily, but for the sake of some other end. Indeed, I consider below some views on which this is precisely the case.

[67] Smuts actually says that painful artworks are those "whose *primary purpose* is to arouse negative emotions" (60, my italics). I prefer not to refer to purposes; rather, on my usage, painful works are simply those that would produce negative emotions. I define painful art in this way because I will discuss works that are, in my view, morally flawed in virtue of being such that they would unjustifiably produce negative emotions in audiences (rather than in virtue of being such that they unjustifiably aim to produce negative emotions in audiences).

[68] One qualification: On some theories of the appeal of painful art, the arousal of negative emotions is not the aim of painful works but an unavoidable, foreseeable byproduct of the realization of their aims. Noël Carroll's (1990) theory of the appeal of horror, which I discuss below, is one such view. Accordingly, the arousal of extreme anxiety or disgust might not be the aim of some disturbing works but an unavoidable, foreseeable byproduct of the realization of their aims. For simplicity, I omit this qualification in what follows, although the reader should take it as implied.

[69] Following Strohl, I am using a broad sense of "art" that encompasses even extremely spicy and sour foods. If one denies that they are works of art, we can still claim that they are similar to works of art insofar as they elicit negative emotions in consumers.

whether my remarks and general framework apply to them. Furthermore, even if some thrillers would produce some anxiety in viewers, they do not count as disturbing unless they would produce *extreme* anxiety, anger, or disgust. The difference between a disturbing work and non-disturbing work is one of degree. There are tough cases. For example, some horror-comedies (e.g., *Freaky* (2020), in which a serial killer and teenage girl switch bodies), although violent, are not especially so, and temper the grisliness of their violence with humor. In any case, I think that this characterization of disturbing works rules in at least most of the works that should be included while ruling out at least most of the works that should be excluded. If my characterization is unsatisfying, then I hope that at least my examples of disturbing works will suggest to the reader the kind of art I have in mind.

Second, the examples of disturbing art that I describe below are all horror movies. However, I take my framework to apply to disturbing works in general (e.g., paintings, short stories, plays, songs, performance art pieces, haunted attractions). I focus on horror movies because I think that charges of offensiveness are especially compelling (at least at first glance) in certain instances of this medium-genre combination. Consider torture horror films, rape-revenge films, gorefests, faux snuff films, cannibal films, and slasher films. Still, there are other kinds of disturbing works (e.g., highly disturbing dark comedies and hyper-violent video games) that fall within the scope of my analysis.

Third, I will appeal to our art-critical practices to support claims about artistic value. Although I take no position on whether there is objective artistic value, appealing to art-critical practices is justified either way: If there is no objective artistic value, what is artistically valuable or unvaluable is, at least partly, whatever critics say is so. If there is objective artistic value, critics are plausibly good judges of objective artistic value. I will thus assume that, other things

being equal, it is better for a view to accommodate a greater chunk of art-critical practices and pre-theoretic intuitions about artistic value. Of course, things are sometimes not equal. In that case, it is open for us to reject some of our pre-theoretic intuitions. My point is that we should do so only for good reasons.

Lastly, my remarks should not be taken to imply any legal claims about censorship. In addition, when I claim that a particular disturbing piece is immoral in virtue of containing excessive properties, I do not mean that from the moral point of view, it should not have been produced (barring unusual circumstances). I do want to say, however, that from the moral point of view, it should not have been produced *with those excessive properties* (other things being equal).[70] This is what will be at stake in calling a work immoral. I ultimately bracket the question when, if ever, the c*onsumption* of excessively disturbing works is immoral. Perhaps the widespread consumption of these works creates or perpetuates a market for them and is for that reason *pro tanto* immoral. Moreover, one might respond to an excessively disturbing work in a number of alternative ways and engage with it for a number of alternative reasons. They might react with disgust towards, enthusiastic support for, or moral ambivalence towards a brutal murder depicted. Likewise, they might have ended up watching a misogynistic, cruel slasher film because they mistakenly thought it would be an illuminating commentary on, rather than a reflection of, real-world misogyny. Alternatively, perhaps they went into the movie hoping to indulge their misogynistic fantasies. In short, some of these motivations and reactions arguably

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[70] I am assuming that without these properties, the piece in question will not be an entirely different one. That is, I am assuming that those properties are not essential ones. If they are, then I *do* think that the piece should not have been produced. In that case, however, I can reformulate my point to say that when a piece is immoral in virtue of containing excessive elements, it does not follow that a piece that is similar to it in all respects except for those elements should not have been produced.

point towards an immoral character; others do not. In any case, the ethics of consuming

excessively disturbing content will not be the focus of this chapter.

III. Two Types of Offense

I will now explain Feinberg's distinction between two types of offensive conduct, *mere*

nuisances and *profound offenses*. For reasons that I will explain shortly, I prefer to use the terms

perceptual offense and *moral offense* instead. Moral offenses can offend even when the offended

party is not directly perceiving them; the mere thought that they are taking place can offend. The

offensiveness of perceptual offenses, on the other hand, depends on their being perceived.

Furthermore, perceptual offenses are believed to be morally wrong because they offend, whereas

moral offenses offend because they are believed to be morally wrong. Finally, in the case of

moral offense, the offended party need not regard *themselves* as the victim of the offensive

conduct. They can be offended on behalf of another party (59).

Someone who experiences firsthand extremely loud music from a neighbor's house or

nudity on a crowded bus and gets offended as a result would be perceptually offended. Someone

who does not witness an instance of flag desecration firsthand but who gets offended upon

learning that it took place would be morally offended. The offense in the first two cases depends

on other people perceiving the offensive behavior. Few people, if any, are offended at the mere

thought that others are nude in the privacy of, say, their own bathroom. On the other hand, one

can be offended at an instance of flag desecration itself even if they do not witness it firsthand.[71]

It is because it is believed to be morally wrong in the first place that it offends, whereas, when

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[71] I say "flag desecration *itself*" because one can be offended by an instance of, say, nudity even if they do not witness it firsthand, if they learn that it took place in public. In this case, they would be offended on behalf of those who perceived it firsthand. However, they would not be offended by the nudity *itself*, only by *public* nudity or the fact that it took place in an inappropriate context.

nudity is thought to be morally wrong, it is thought to be so only because it has offended. In the case of nudity, moreover, the offended party that is forced to witness it firsthand is the victim, while someone can be offended at an instance of flag desecration even though they are not the victim of the act.

In a word, something is perceptually offensive only if its offensiveness depends on its being directly perceived. In contrast, something can morally offend someone even if they do not perceive it directly. Not only can an act be both perceptually and morally offensive, but because we can be morally offended on behalf of perceptually offended parties (see note 71), moral offense will at least often be warranted whenever perceptual offense is.[72]

A word about perceptual offense in art contexts is in order. Although we would be morally offended upon learning that a real-life instance of, say, racialized violence has taken place, we would be less inclined to be morally offended that a film features a movie scene depicting racialized violence. This is because, as I will argue below, the inclusion of such a scene can be morally permissible, as in the movie *Get Out* (2017). However, I will also argue that scenes of racialized violence can be immoral in virtue of being perceptually offensive. That is, they can be immoral in virtue of being apt to produce undesirable mental states in those who watch them. Thus, a movie scene depicting racialized violence can be morally offensive in virtue of being perceptually offensive. So, even if we have not ourselves seen a particular scene depicting racialized violence, we might be morally offended on behalf of those who witnessed it (i.e., those who were perceptually offended by it). (See note 71 for a similar example.)

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[72] Perhaps an example of a moral offense that is not a perceptual offense is the offense one takes upon hearing that someone's house was broken into when no one was home. No one witnessed the break-in, so it was not perceptually offensive. Insofar as one believes the break-in was immoral, though, they might take moral offense upon learning that it took place.

Two more points about the distinction between perceptual and moral offense are worth making. First, on my usage, perceptual offenses may be not simply annoying but triggering or distressing, while moral offenses may violate only one's weakly held moral convictions.[73] For example, as I will explain below, many people experience extreme discomfort in response to rape scenes. There can thus be extreme perceptual offenses. Conversely, someone who holds, but is not deeply committed to, the belief that guests should thank the host before leaving a party might be slightly offended when a guest commits this *faux pas*. There can thus be slight moral offenses. In addition, a moral offense might violate a strongly held conviction that a particular kind of act (e.g., killing one ant) is only *slightly* immoral. In that case, the offense taken will be less severe.

Second, both perceptual and moral offenses are all-things-considered (in contrast to simply *prima facie* or *pro tanto*) immoral.[74] If, riding roughshod over my neighbors' concerns, I blast music at a painfully loud volume, then I have acted immorally.[75][76] Even putting aside any damage I cause to their long-term hearing, moral censure seems appropriate. When perceptual offense is apt, so will moral offense that one should not have caused that particular perceptual

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[73] My usage here deviates from Feinberg's, according to which perceptual offenses (or, in his terminology, mere nuisances) are trivial compared to moral offenses (or profound offenses in his terminology), which are "deep, profound, shattering, serious, even more likely to cause harm" (58). In accordance with my different conception of the distinction, I prefer to avoid the sense of comparative triviality suggested by the term "mere nuisance" and the sense of comparative seriousness suggested by "profound offense." My usage departs from Feinberg's here because I will consider below some disturbing works that can cause deep and shattering perceptual offense.

[74] I say "all-things-considered" so that I can pose the question I will address a bit more concisely: Instead of asking when (if ever) a disturbing work is immoral on grounds of perceptual or moral offense, I can simply ask when (if ever) a disturbing work is perceptually or morally offensive. Thus, on my conception, if an *otherwise* perceptually offensive disturbing work has redeeming qualities, then it is not *actually* perceptually offensive.

[75] I say "riding roughshod over my neighbors' concerns" because we can imagine an alternative scenario in which I have good evidence that there is no one close enough to hear even extremely loud music I put on. It seems to me that, in this alternative scenario, I have not acted immorally in blasting loud music.

[76] Below, in my discussion of disturbing art, I focus on *unexpected* disturbing content. However, perceptual offenses need not be unexpected. For example, suppose my best option is to live in a town known for having inconsiderate residents. Their inconsiderate behavior might be expected but perceptually offensive all the same.

offense.[77] For Feinberg, moral offenses might be thought to be immoral without actually being immoral (e.g., a racist who is offended at the thought that there are interracial couples)[78] while perceptual offenses might neither be, nor be thought to be, immoral (e.g., a swarm of spiders).[79][80] On my usage, however, both perceptual and moral offenses are immoral. I use these terms in this way because I will argue that disturbing works are in some cases immoral (and not simply believed to be immoral) in virtue of being perceptually or morally offensive.

IV. Modulating Perceptual Offense in Art Contexts

In this section, I discuss four interacting factors that shape how disturbing a work is: the art context itself, the type of disturbing content depicted, the frequency with which audiences encounter the type of disturbing content, and audience expectations. On my view, all four factors can contribute to perceptual offensiveness.

The offensiveness of perceptual offense is typically but not always attenuated in art contexts. Witnessing an extremely gruesome real-life murder is likely to be more perceptually

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[77] Feinberg offers a further difference between perceptual and moral offense that I have not yet mentioned: in the case of moral offense, *we* are offended, not "merely our senses or lower order sensibilities" (59). I confess that it is not entirely clear to me that this condition differs from the one that moral offenses offend us even if we are not perceiving them. For it seems to me that if we try to unpack the idea that moral offenses offend *us*, as opposed to just our senses or lower order sensibilities, then we will get something like the thought that they offend us even if we are not perceiving them.

[78] Feinberg claims that, in cases of moral offense (or what he calls "profound offense"), "unpleasant effects are the consequence of the behavior's affront to his [the offended party's] moral sensibilities" (67). Insofar as one's moral sensibilities might be misguided, Feinberg's understanding of moral offense allows for cases in which moral offense is thought to be immoral without actually being so.

[79] Although there may be nothing immoral about a swarm of spiders in real life, I will argue that an artwork that depicts a swarm of spiders will, under conditions to be specified below, be immoral for that reason. Unlike the real-life swarm, the artwork was deliberately created and shaped by a moral agent (putting aside the possibility that God or any other moral agent deliberately brought about the swarm's existence).

[80] Feinberg notes that "the word "offense" has both a general and a specifically normative sense, the former including in its reference any or all of a miscellany of disliked mental states (disgust, shame, hurt, anxiety, etc.), and the latter referring to those states only when caused by the wrongful (right-violating) conduct of others" (1-2), and that he uses the word in the general sense (1).

offensive than watching a fictional one take place in theaters.[81] There are exceptions, however. Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011) points out that although artworks very rarely trigger the senses involved in the most powerful disgust reactions—smell and taste (56-7)—we are often *utterly* disgusted even when we know that the object of our disgust does not exist, as in a disgusting scene in a horror movie. This is because, when we are disgusted in our engagement with art, what disgusts us is what the artwork presents to our senses, regardless of whether it exists in real life (39, 47-8, 53, 55-6). Another possible exception is cliff shots in movies, which might be as vertigo-inducing as real-life cliffs. They might even be more so if the camera gets audiences closer to the cliff than they would go in real life, or if it shows the perspective of going over the cliff.

In addition, a perceptual offense may be more offensive than another in virtue of the type of act each one instantiates or depicts. For example, both within and outside of art contexts, there are different levels of goriness. Also, as I will explain shortly, depictions of sexual assault and rape are typically more perceptually offensive than those of murder in horror works.

I leave open the empirical question whether and how the frequency with which we encounter a type of act both outside and within art contexts influences the degree of perceptual offense we take towards it. For example, how often we encounter beheadings both outside and within art contexts may increase, decrease, or leave unaffected the degree of perceptual offensiveness of a depiction of a beheading in a horror movie. It could be that other things being equal, the more frequent our encounters, the less perceptually offensive it will be. This is because

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[81] As this suggests, a real-life murder can be both perceptually and morally offensive: It is morally offensive because murder is immoral independently of whether anyone witnessed it. It is perceptually offensive because witnessing the murder is painful. The former reason appeals to the harm inflicted upon the person murdered, while the latter appeals to the harm inflicted upon those who witnessed the murder. Of course, the former reason is significantly weightier.

we might become inured to these kinds of experiences. Conversely, if one lives in a society in

which people are beheaded regularly, a depiction of a beheading might take on real-life

significance and, for that reason, elicit even more distress. Given the mixed results I mentioned

earlier from empirical studies on the link between exposure to violent media and desensitization,

I also leave open whether and how the frequency with which one encounters beheadings in art

contexts influences their emotional responses to beheadings.

Disturbing works can become perceptual offenses when they are excessive even with

respect to genre expectations. The aptness of the offense taken toward a distressing scene

depends on the genre of the work in which it occurs. Even though horror works are expected to

provoke fear and disgust, they can still be unexpectedly distressing (and unpleasantly so), given

current genre standards.[82] This reflects Feinberg's claim that the degree of offensiveness of some

conduct is determined by the degree to which observers can avoid that conduct and whether they

willingly took the risk of being offended by it (26). I would add that the willingness to assume

such a risk can be *informed* to a greater or lesser extent. For example, I found the sexual assault

scene in the horror action film *Overlord* (2019) excessive. Even if the viewer goes into the movie

expecting jump scares, extreme gore, death, horrific imagery, and even some degree of

tastelessness—the movie is, after all, about American soldiers who take on Nazi zombies in

World War II—depicting sexual assault might, in this case, be reasonably regarded as beyond the

pale.[83] Lucia Schwarz (2022) argues that many horror fans are put off by rape scenes in horror

movies because distance—which enables them to enjoy other horrific depictions—breaks down

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[82] Conversely, a horror work might be unexpectedly tame, given current genre standards of scariness and
disgustingness.
[83] My claim is not that the *only* wrong-making feature of the scene is its perceptual offensiveness. As I argue below,
disturbing content might also be morally offensive in virtue of exploiting the vulnerabilities of an individual or
group.

in the case of depictions of rape. This is because "rape is common in real life and a gendered form of violence that is implicated in social injustice" (2). Plausibly, the same can be said of depictions of racialized violence (11). My contention is that an artwork is perceptually offensive only if it features types of disturbing content that prospective consumers cannot reasonably expect going into it.[84] So, intro credits that provide appropriate warnings up front would cancel any perceptual offensiveness. This is because perceptual offenses are all-things-considered immoral and releasing disturbing content that prospective consumers *can* reasonably anticipate is not immoral for causing undesirable mental states in consumers. Thus, on my account, *expected* disturbing content is not a perceptual offense. So, artists can and should anticipate the likely moral reactions that their likely audiences will have.[85]

Genre expectations can function as a kind of nonspecific content warning. Viewers who intend to watch a horror film in full knowledge that it is a horror work will expect it to be scary or disgusting to at least some extent. Even content warnings, however, might be insufficiently specific. For example, a content warning to the effect that a particular horror movie features

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[84] Annette Hill (1997) points out that another example is the special aversion that even seasoned horror fans might experience when confronted with depictions of animals or children dying (56). Although the website doesthedogdie.com includes content warnings about more than just animals dying (e.g., clowns, ghosts, and gaslighting), the name of the website is telling: many audiences are turned off by depictions of dogs dying.

[85] As Feinberg notes, there might be moral reformers who attempt to change a prevailing but unreasonable susceptibility of discomfort or moral anger towards certain practices. Feinberg's example is a "nude housewife in the supermarket" (41). Breastfeeding in public would be another example. Artists might also try to reform prevailing attitudes through works that cause discomfort or moral anger. It seems to me that this would be a case in which a worthwhile purpose outweighs the unpleasantness of the audience's mental states. I describe more such cases in Section VI. I will ultimately leave open how reasonable audience reactions are to be determined. I am, however, assuming that the audience can be unjustified in being upset by an artwork. There are at least two different kinds of such cases that can be derived from Ronni Gura Sadovsky's (2023) discussion of queer iconography. (I say "at least" because there may be others.) According to Sadovsky, those who endorse the norm that queer iconography ought not to be displayed perhaps "believe that straight people have rightful claims to superior status that are threatened by queer iconography" or that "the target of this norm is some other social group whose rightful status claims they believe to be vulnerable" (937). In the first case, annoyance or moral disgust would be based on a false belief about superior status, and in the second, a false belief that the upsetting conduct threatens the status of a vulnerable social group. In both cases, the upset party would be unjustified in being upset. While Sadovsky focuses on social groups, the same analysis can be extended to individuals: annoyance or moral disgust can be unjustified when it is based on a false belief that an *individual* has superior status or that the upsetting conduct threatens the status of a vulnerable *individual*.

gendered violence might be too generic if those scenes of gendered violence turn out to be extremely and unexpectedly long and detailed. It is a—I think welcome—consequence of my view that a dramatic work that contains excessively gory or violent scenes will, other things being equal, be more offensive than a horror work whose scenes are equally gory or violent.

Genre norms and expectations will vary across different times and cultures. For example, as Bart points out in *The Simpsons,* the *Friday the 13th* movie is "pretty tame by today's standards." Moreover, the offensiveness of a disturbing work is modulated by current practices surrounding content warnings and genre expectations. At least most streaming services provide more or less inescapable content warnings for their series and movies. Artists who know that their works will be available exclusively through these services can reasonably expect that their audiences will receive at least some content warnings. This gives them more freedom to include disturbing content without moral censure. Nonetheless, if an artist does not know *what* content warnings will be provided, they might end up producing excessively disturbing content or, erring on the other side, being overly cautious and producing a tame work. Furthermore, the presence of external sources that provide content warnings, how detailed these warnings tend to be, and how widely known and available these sources are among prospective audiences all determine the scope that artists have for creating disturbing content. My view embraces this contingency in offensiveness. Being attuned to likely audience expectations, which can and do change across contexts and cannot be discovered *a priori*, is a moral virtue.

Although I will discuss in more detail how the value of the purpose a work serves influences whether it is perceptually offensive, it is worth noting here that violating audience expectations and shocking the audience can be morally desirable, even if the shock is not pleasurable (i.e., even if it carries no hedonic value). Perhaps an example of this is British street

artist Banksy's 2012 mural "Slave Labour," which depicts a child using a sewing machine to make Union Flag patches. Painted on a wall of a Poundland store in Wood Green, London, the piece protests the use of sweatshop labor for the 2012 Diamond Jubilee of Elizabeth II and the 2012 London Olympics (Batty 2013). I take it that, as street art, the piece is meant to shock passersby out of complacency.

Although universal standards of offensiveness would be convenient for artists and critics, there is reason to doubt that there are such standards. Cases in which the standards of offensiveness in effect when a work is produced differ significantly from those in effect when it is consumed illustrate this point and generate two questions: First, how should the variability of standards of offensiveness shape artists' decisions about what disturbing contents to include in their works? Second, in morally evaluating a work, should consumers use current standards of offensiveness or those that were in effect when the work was produced? In response to the first question, I claim that current standards of offensiveness should serve as artists' frame of reference because this is the best they can do. Even if standards will likely shift, it is impossible to know for certain how they will shift, so artists should use the standards epistemically available to them. I think this answer to the first question suggests one—but, as I explain below, not the only—answer to the second: Although a work might be excessively disturbing by the standards of consumption, moral criticism of it on these grounds is inappropriate if it is not excessively disturbing by the standards of production. This is because if ought implies can, and artists cannot know how current standards of offensiveness will shift, they do not have an obligation, duty, or responsibility to create works that are not excessively disturbing by future standards.[86] However,

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[86] It is worth noting that an artist might find current standards of offensiveness morally objectionable, and so create a work that they know would upset contemporary audiences but that they hope would not upset future audiences. See the previous footnote on unreasonable standards of offensiveness.

an alternative answer to the second question relies on a different view of the purpose of the moral evaluation of artworks: On this view, moral evaluation of an artwork does not aim to determine whether the artist failed to fulfill any moral obligation, duty, or responsibility in creating their work, but to determine whether the work is fit to be consumed by the evaluator's contemporaries. Understood in this way, moral evaluation of a work should draw from current standards of offensiveness.[87] Thus, the question whether consumers should use current standards of offensiveness when morally evaluating a work or those in effect when it was produced is actually under-described. On one gloss, we are asking whether the artist failed to fulfill any obligations. On another gloss, however, we are asking whether their work is fit to be consumed by contemporaries. Although both are reasonable questions to ask, it is important in any given case to determine which of the two we are attempting to answer.

The first upshot of this chapter emerges from the discussion in this section:

1. Creators of disturbing art should ensure that intended and likely audiences will know beforehand what kind of disturbing content they will consume. A corollary claim is that, in morally evaluating a disturbing work, critics should consider whether intended and likely audiences were in a good epistemic position to know what kind of disturbing content they would be consuming.

Factors to consider here are genre expectations, what the likely and intended audiences are, how distressing the disturbing content in question tends to be, which platforms would offer (or likely

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[87] This last point is a bit of an oversimplification because a critic might aim to determine whether a work is fit to be consumed *in a particular way*. If a critic's objective is to direct others' attention to works that were considered offensive when it was released, then they should apply the standards of offensiveness in effect when the work was released.

offer) the work in question, what kinds of content warnings those platforms provide, how reliable

they are in thoroughly and accurately providing such warnings, how familiar consumers are with

external content warning providers, and how reliable and accessible these external providers are.

These, I take it, are ways to minimize perceptual offense.

V. Weighing Disturbing-ness against Valuable Ends

Despite Schwarz's point that artistic distance breaks down in cases of rape scenes, I think few

would agree that artworks should *never* depict rape. For such depictions can be valuable, painful

though they may be to engage with. As Feinberg notes, the reasonableness of some offensive

conduct in general is influenced by (among other things) its social value (26). Renée Bolinger's

(2017) discussion of the use of slurs in artworks is instructive. According to Bolinger, an art

context can silence the offensiveness of the use of a slur when the slur needs to be used to realize

the purposes of the artwork and those purposes are worthwhile enough to justify its use. These

two conditions, moreover, are more likely to be satisfied by artworks that aim to "improve the

social position of the group targeted by the slur(s)" than by those that use the slur(s) for mere

laughs (454). In my view, these conditions apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to disturbing content in

general. The unpleasantness of some disturbing content should be weighed against the

worthwhileness of the purpose(s) it serves.

Moreover, in determining what the purpose of an artwork is, it is helpful to ask for *whom*

it was created. A work created for gorefest aficionados will be morally permitted to contain more

violence and gore than one created for children. This also follows from the claim I defended in

the previous section that some content is perceptually offensive only if the type of content it is

could not have been reasonably expected. A work created for children is not usually expected to

contain depictions of beheadings. Put briefly, moral criticism of a work should attend to its intended audience.

Similarly, moral criticism of a work should attend to its *likely* audience. Although there will usually be large overlap between the likely and intended audience, the two sets are distinct. Of particular importance is the possibility that children would likely engage with a disturbing work. (Note the parallel here to other potentially harmful artifacts, e.g., firearms.) Although I think this is an important factor to consider in moral criticism of disturbing works, it is an empirical question how likely it is that children will engage with a particular disturbing work and how they would react to it. (Perhaps the children who are most inclined to seek out a gorefest are not those who would likely be perceptually offended by it.)

I will now apply this framework to some disturbing movies. In this section, I explain how this framework can be used to morally *criticize* certain disturbing content. In the next, I show how it can be used to morally vindicate certain disturbing content. I will start with the aforementioned scene from *Overlord*, which was, as far as I could tell, not essential to the plot and did not shed any light on the experiences of sexual assault victims. It was difficult to discern a worthwhile purpose that the scene advances. One might think that it serves to produce terror in viewers. However, a viewer who, after having watched the movie, says "That scene was cruel, off-putting, and unpleasant" has a very different opinion from one who enthusiastically says "That scene sure was scary!" Even philosophers of horror who think that the main attraction of horror works lies precisely in the negative affective responses they evoke (e.g., Gaut) can—and I think should—hold that not *every* part of a horror work that produces negative affective responses is appealing to horror fans. The sexual assault scene in *Overlord*, however, seemed to me to be not pleasant but painful. It was not thrilling but uncomfortable.

93

Indeed, excessive disturbing imagery might, in some cases, produce not terror but numbness or weariness, which is another negative reaction but, unlike terror, is usually unwelcome in the context of horror. Although I call into question this review in the next section, this is how reviewer David Crow (2019) describes the multiple rape and murder scenes (many of whose victims are Black characters targeted by racist White characters) in Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale* (2018), a rape-revenge period piece film set in 1825 (present-day) Tasmania which tells the story of a woman, Clare Carroll, who seeks revenge against a British officer who destroyed her family and raped her:

> The result is an expertly crafted film that loses its own way through the muck of fatiguing brutality and violence. The excess inflicted serves a thematic point that is potent enough to avoid the critique of being gratuitous, but Kent's aesthetic is nonetheless needlessly cruel, repeating the same narrative hell over *five* rape scenes and multiple murders, including that of an infant. Kent's impulse to create a queasy disgust with a symphony of torment is bold and initially breathtaking at instilling in audiences an inescapable helplessness, but the overall effect is withering after the film's overlong running time.

As this suggests, there are qualitative and quantitative dimensions of excess. With this distinction in place, we can make sense of Crow's view that *The Nightingale* is not "gratuitous" but is "needlessly cruel." As I mentioned above, drawing from Schwarz, depictions of certain kinds of things are more likely to cause extreme distress than others. This is the qualitative dimension of excess. Crow seems to suggest that *The Nightingale* is not qualitatively excessive because the *kinds* of disturbing things depicted in the movie must be depicted for it to convey its themes about evil and revenge. As for the quantitative dimension, a disturbing scene can be overly long or there can be an excessive number of such scenes. Crow seems to suggest that *The Nightingale*

is quantitatively excessive because it contains an excessive number of disturbing scenes.[88] In any case, whether the disturbing content in question serves a sufficiently valuable purpose will determine whether it is quantitatively or qualitatively excessive.

It is also worth noting that in the case of disturbing artworks, originality becomes a moral matter. If *Get Out* (2017) already sheds light on the racism experienced by Black people in Western societies, then *Antebellum* (2020) and *Them* (2021-) are less valuable for reproducing those same insights and, equally as important, the way in which they are conveyed. Their use of distressing images becomes more difficult to morally justify. Although *Get Out* features racialized violence, it illuminates the fetishization of Black bodies in Western societies and the sense of discomfort and alienation that Black people experience in White spaces. Plausibly, the film's depictions of racialized violence does interesting, valuable work. On the other hand, similar depictions in copycat movies would not be similarly justified if they do no *sui generis* work. As in the practice of medicine, a minimum dosage ought to be administered to produce the desired effect. If a particular horror work already conveys certain themes using distressing images (among other things), then another horror work that uses similar images in the same way to achieve the same result would be administering an excessive dosage of such images.

When some unexpected distressing content lacks redeeming features that justify its inclusion in the work of which it is a part, then it is perceptually offensive and immoral. (Again, perceptual offenses, on my conception, are all-things-considered immoral or unjustified.) This means only that from the moral point of view, the work should not have been produced with that distressing content. Again, this should not be taken to imply any legal claims about censorship.

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[88] Again, I will dispute this review in the next section and argue that the admittedly many disturbing scenes in *The Nightingale* are neither qualitatively nor quantitatively excessive. For perhaps the fatigue Crow mentions is precisely the point. I think a virtue of my framework is that it can make sense of the disagreement between Crow and me.

VI. The Rewards of Disturbing Art

I have argued that disturbing art can be immoral in virtue of being perceptually offensive. In the next, I will argue that such moral failings can entail artistic ones. Before doing so, I will qualify my claim that disturbing art can be immoral when it causes undesirable mental states in audiences by describing redeeming features that *justify* the inclusion of extremely disturbing content. The general theme will be that good consequences of disturbing art can render it morally acceptable. By describing the good that disturbing art makes possible, I hope to clarify under what conditions disturbing art is perceptually offensive.

Solutions to, in Aaron Smuts' (2007) terms, the *paradox of painful art* are helpful here in identifying the potential sources of value of painful, disturbing works. As Smuts explains, the paradox arises from the fact that many people willingly engage with art that provokes painful responses (e.g., horror and tragedy), yet people usually avoid painful experiences.

Broadly, there are two ways to try to resolve the paradox. First, some think that negative emotions are the price to be paid for the rewards gained by engaging with painful art. In other words, such rewards compensate for the negative emotions. For example, according to Noël Carroll's (1990) answer to the paradox of horror, an instance of the paradox of painful art, horror audiences accept the fear and disgust they experience as the price to be paid for indulging in their curiosity about what he calls *monsters*, entities that violate our culture's conceptual categories. For example, haunted houses, zombies, and the killer doll Chucky are, in a sense, both animate and inanimate. Skinwalkers and werewolves are both human and inhuman. The narratives of the most satisfying horror works satiate the audiences' curiosity by unveiling the monsters' origins, natures, weaknesses, etc. via "processes of discovery, explanation, proof, hypothesis,

confirmation and so on" (185). Another way to address the paradox of painful art is to argue that the attraction of painful art lies precisely in the pleasure of the negative emotions experienced. For example, Berys Gaut (1993) holds that fear and disgust, while typically painful, can be pleasant instead in art contexts.[89] Painful art, on this approach, is exciting or thrilling, and this is pleasurable. Negative emotions are not the price to be paid but the attraction of painful art. There is empirical evidence that supports this view (e.g., Winfried Menninghaus et al. 2017). I take a pluralistic approach to the value of painful art; people can and do reap a variety of rewards from painful art. By this, I do not mean only that I am open to the truth of both Carroll's and Gaut's views; as I explain below, there can be, and are, other rewards.[90]

As this debate between Gaut and Carroll suggests, the cognitive rewards that a disturbing piece offers can be distinguished from its affective or hedonic rewards. I understand cognitive rewards as opportunities for learning, especially moral learning.[91] Cognitive rewards can be further divided into meta- and first-order rewards. I provide two examples of types of meta-rewards below: those that throw light on the viewers *themselves* (e.g., on their fascination with evil) and those that display and subvert a norm about moral education. I will start by describing some more first-order rewards before moving on to meta-rewards.

i. First-Order Rewards

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[89] One might wonder if fear and disgust are in fact what audiences experience if they feel no pain. A response can be found in Gaut's cognitivist theory of emotions, according to which types of emotions are individuated by certain types of evaluative beliefs (as opposed to types of physiological responses or feelings). For example, one experiences fear when one believes that something bad will happen. As long as one has this belief when engaging with a horror work, they are experiencing fear, even in the absence of pain. That is, pain need not accompany fear.
[90] It might be worth noting that to justify the inclusion of disturbing content, we should examine the *unique* rewards they offer. In other words, if non-disturbing content can offer the same rewards without the costs, then it is hard to see why the production of disturbing content is worthwhile.
[91] Of course, if learning is pleasurable or enjoyable, then cognitive rewards also give rise to hedonic rewards.

Despite the moral criticisms mentioned in the previous section, I do not want to downplay the potential value of engaging with challenging and disturbing artworks. I think, for example, that one might reasonably disagree with Crow's review of *The Nightingale* above: the multiple rape and murder scenes serve to reveal the brutal racism and sexism of 1825 Tasmania. Likewise, Bolinger notes that the 46 occurrences of the n-word in the film *42* (2013), a tribute to Jackie Robinson, serve to illustrate the racist attitudes prevalent in the US in 1947 and the intensity of Robinson's struggle (454-5). Moreover, the displays of utmost racist and sexist cruelty in *The Nightingale* allow the film to starkly present its themes on revenge: Does someone who commits *such* horrendous acts deserve to be killed? If so, do they deserve a long, painful death? (It is worth noting that the main perpetrator of the brutality in the film is killed surprisingly quickly at the end. I found it smartly anticlimactic.) If not, how should they be punished? One might also argue that the numbness experienced by Crow in response to the multiple depictions of extreme brutality might be worthwhile after all: perhaps it allows the viewer to empathize with Clare. Having experienced such traumatizing events, she is presented as weary and numb to evil, focused on revenge as her only goal. Aaron Smuts (2013) argues that a full grasp of certain insights (e.g., that people are capable of profound cruelty) requires experiences of painful emotions: "Partly what it is to appreciate the significance of some event is to feel its significance" (133). Perhaps a full understanding of humanity's capacity for cruelty involves an experience of not just terror but numbness. This would be an important first-order cognitive reward. I concede that this suggests the absence of a bright line between excessive and justified disturbing content. Reasonable parties might therefore disagree about whether a work falls on one side of the line or the other.

Disturbing content may also be necessary for an empowering triumph over an obstacle or traumatic event at the end, generating both hedonic and first-order cognitive rewards. I think this is especially clear in the genre-transcending rape-revenge thriller *Revenge* (2017). In the film, the protagonist, Jen, vacations with her lover, Richard, a married man with whom she is having an affair, in his vacation home in the middle of the desert. The beginning of the film intentionally presents Jen through the male gaze. There are multiple close-up shots of her body, and the camera follows her closely and creepily. A day into Jen and Richard's vacation, Richard's friends, Stan and Dmitri, show up for their annual hunting trip. When Jen refuses to have sex with Stan when Richard is away, he rapes her as Dmitri watches. Richard finds out, but against Jen's wishes, refuses to send her home. When Jen threatens to reveal their affair to his wife, he pushes her off a cliff and leaves her to die. However, she survives and begins to hunt the three men, hell-bent on revenge. As many reviewers have noted, the point of view of the film now shifts to Jen's. She is now a resourceful, tough, intimidating hunter. As reviewer Matt Cipolla (2020) puts it, the film "rips the male gaze out of the audience's skull." While most rape-revenge films use disturbing imagery for the sake of shock value, *Revenge* emphasizes empowerment and empathy, and subverts the expectations and norms of the rape-revenge genre, which is often criticized for exploiting sexual violence.[92] Witnessing the triumph is thrilling and pleasurable. This is a hedonic reward. However, the disturbing content in *Revenge* is also necessary for thematic purposes. In particular, it offers cognitive rewards regarding the rape-revenge genre and genre subversion.

Even in the absence of a depicted triumph, both consuming and creating disturbing works can be therapeutic, as sociologist Thomas J. Scheff (1979) points out. Specifically, it can bring

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[92] As journalist Amanda Hess (2017) writes in *The New York Times*, the formulas of rape-revenge films "exploit sexual violence, follow it up with murder, and still claim the moral high ground."

forth the process of *catharsis*, during which painful repressed emotions are released. Catharsis is produced by reliving the painful emotions at an "optimal distance." While reproduction of a traumatic event will be too much to bear (i.e., not distanced enough), verbal recall of it may be too distanced. Catharsis also requires knowledge that one has the option to escape the pain being relived if it becomes unbearable. Creating and consuming disturbing works can enable someone to relive a distressing emotion at an optimal distance knowing that they have the option to escape. This, I take it, is a valuable hedonic reward.

Plausibly, disturbing content that, unlike depictions of sexual assault and rape, is not involved in social injustice and that depicts types of acts that, though vile, are not as common in the real world can be justified in other ways. Again, I embrace a pluralism about the appeal of disturbing art. Besides the fascination with monsters that Carroll makes the crux of his theory, disturbing artworks can be valuable in many other ways. For example, over-the-top gore and violence can be funny in its ridiculousness, as in *Evil Dead II* (1987) and certain parts of *Overlord*. As suggested above with respect to Gaut's view, over-the-top violence, even if not funny, can be exciting or thrilling. Graphic content can also offer technical pleasures. Cynthia Freeland (2000) observes, "Devotees of horror appreciate the niceties of costume, makeup, and special effects, and they consider how scenes have been made at the same time that they react to them" (259). Yet another attraction of disturbing content is that experimenting with immoral, even evil, perspectives can be pleasurable and interesting. Paul Bloom (2021) puts the point eloquently:

> Some of us occasionally do wish to dominate and control, to be feared, to get what we want. We might enjoy enacting these fantasies in imagination. Who isn't occasionally jealous of the psychopath, so unencumbered by guilt and shame and worry? Some genres

100

help this along by making the bad guy more appealing, often charming and interesting"

(114).

Taking a note from Smuts, I would add that even if such imaginings are not enjoyable or pleasurable, they might have non-hedonic, cognitive value. Disturbing art, by portraying examples of extreme wrongdoing, can support moral learning. For example, the difficult-to-watch thriller *Soft & Quiet* (2022)—in which a group of White supremacist women gets into an altercation with two Asian-American sisters, breaks into their home to "prank" them, and ends up committing worse acts than they initially intended—offers what is far from a pleasurable viewing experience. However, the movie shows how racists attempt to justify their and others' profoundly evil acts and shows that, in a climate of racism, such acts need not begin with the intention to commit them. This accords with Freeland's view that horror movies afford viewers the opportunity to learn about evil. Disturbing art can also complicate the relationship between extreme wrongdoing and moral responsibility. In *Joker* (2019), a brutal origin story for Batman's archnemesis, Arthur (who becomes the Joker by the end of the movie) is portrayed as mentally ill, lacking support, and mistreated by those around him. Given that his villainy is a product of these causes, can we hold him morally responsible? As Nick Stang (2019) writes,

> I think it is at least highly questionable whether we can describe Arthur, once we understand the cause of his action, as evil. Once we medicalize his actions, by tracing them back to an untreated mental disorder for which he is surely not responsible, we withdraw them from the scope of his responsibility. They are no longer *actions*, i.e., expressions of his agency, but *symptoms*, i.e., manifestations of a condition.

Art, moreover, can be especially useful in conveying these lessons if they elicit strong emotions, which can facilitate learning and memorization by influencing attention (Tyng et al. 2017). So, if

a gorefest succeeds in doing what it was intended to do and elicits such emotions, this can make

engaging with it an especially effective way to learn about death, violence, and evil.[93]

ii. Meta-Rewards

I will now describe some meta-cognitive rewards. First, there is value in understanding—or more

precisely, feeling—the appeal of evil. Disturbing artworks can reveal to audiences their own

moral precariousness and jolt audiences into understanding how easily they can be led to adopt

pro-attitudes towards evil characters. This is famously the case in the horror-thriller movie *The

Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in which FBI agent Clarice Starling works with incarcerated

cannibal and former psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter in pursuit of serial killer Buffalo Bill. Hannibal

Lecter proves to be charming and polite and shows a deep respect towards Clarice. In this way,

the audience is led to like Hannibal Lecter. In addition, as Freeland notes in connection with

slasher films, horror can also get audiences to confront their own fascination with violence: "The

slasher horror film, by its very hyperbolic excess, may actively encourage the audience in its

critical awareness of its own interest in spectacle" (189).[94]

In addition, Katerina Bantinaki (2012) argues that engaging with horror works gives

audiences the opportunity to learn in a safe environment how to cope with fear and disturbing

stimuli so that they are better equipped to deal with them in more high-stakes situations (390).

Susan Feagin (1983) argues that although someone who takes pleasure in consuming tragic

works has unpleasant *direct* responses to it, they experience satisfaction in knowing that they are

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[93] Di Muzio describes gorefests as "film[s] whose purpose is to provide the spectator with exceptionally strong emotions by simulating the suffering of a victim as he or she is pursued and killed or narrowly escapes after being assaulted, wounded, or tortured" (281).

[94] Although I agree with Freeland here, I would replace the word "excess" with "extremity," for the former suggests a lack of value, which is precisely what she denies in this quote.

the kind of person who has such responses to tragic events: "In a way it shows what we care for, and in showing us we care for the welfare of human beings and that we deplore the immoral forces that defeat them, it reminds us of our common humanity. It reduces one's sense of aloneness in the world, and soothes, psychologically, the pain of solipsism" (98). Schwarz (2022) points out that, similarly, we might take pleasure in consuming horror because we feel satisfaction in knowing that we are the kind of people who experience fear and disgust in response to scary and disgusting things, or who are brave enough to tolerate them (5).

Finally, in my view, the apparent valuelessness of some disturbing works is in some cases precisely the point. I focus here on slasher films, which Gianluca Di Muzio (2006) argues are morally problematic for undermining viewers' dispositions to adopt compassionate attitudes. In reply to the objection that slasher films educate viewers about violence and death, Di Muzio maintains that the success of a slasher films depends on the extent to which it makes violence and death *un*intelligible. Focusing on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1973), Di Muzio writes, "The film makes a point of having no moral point" (290) and

> This kind of representation of violence and death was groundbreaking at the time and
> became exemplary in the slasher film genre because it is completely irreducible to the
> traditional categories of storytelling. Instead of revolving around suspense, passion, and
> the familiar confrontation between good and evil, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*
> displays inexplicable acts of violence, offered in a dispassionate, objective style that has
> the audience "walk in" on the unspeakable and thus catches the spectators completely by
> surprise, maximizing their confusion and disgust. (290-1)

Interestingly, it seems to me that these same quotes can coherently figure in a favorable review of the film. In intentionally flouting conventional norms and expectations for narrative works, it

gets audiences to confront the background assumptions that they bring with them to their

engagements with narrative works.[95] It is assumed that a narrative work must have a moral point

and center around "suspense, passion, and the familiar confrontation between good evil." Thus,

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre reveals to audiences something about themselves and their

assumptions, preferences, and practices.

My interpretation of the film is inspired by Alva Noë's (2015) view on the value of art.

According to Noë, "design organizes and enables; art subverts. It does this by abrogating the

background that needs to be in place for things to have their functions" (101). Moreover, "art

directs itself to products whose standards of excellence, to the extent that there are any, are

always open to consideration and reconsideration" (103). *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* poses

the same kinds of questions posed by Marcel Duchamp's sculpture *Fountain* (1917). Duchamp

famously bought an ordinary prefabricated porcelain urinal from a hardware store in New York

City and signed it with "R. Mutt," a made-up name. He then submitted it to the inaugural

exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. By subverting traditional norms of art and

artistic excellence, *Fountain* prompts us to ask: what is art and why do we care about it? Both

Fountain and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are, in Noë's words, "strange." They provoke

confusion, at least initially. In attempting to make sense of them, we are forced to make explicit

to ourselves our background norms and expectations for artistic value and excellence. *The Texas

Chain Saw Massacre* may not educate viewers about violence and death, but what prevents it

from doing so nonetheless makes it valuable. By showing acts of cruelty for seemingly no

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[95] On the face of it, the claim that the subversion of audience expectations is in this case good conflicts with my earlier claim that disturbing content is perceptually offensive when it cannot be reasonably expected. However, what is surprising about *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is not simply the types of disturbing acts it depicts; rather, it is that those depictions do not promote a conventional purpose. The surprise here is not unpleasant (unlike the shock from viewing the sexual assault scene in *Overlord*).

reason, it puts on display the norm that such displays ought to advance a moral point. So, it seems to me that the film actually reinforces my claim that disturbing content ought to serve a worthwhile purpose on pain of being a perceptual offense (which, again, is all-things-considered immoral or unjustified on my conception).

With all these kinds of value that disturbing content might realize, and the frequency with which content warnings and genre norms provide audiences with accurate and sufficiently thorough expectations, disturbing pieces are not commonly perceptual offenses. Nonetheless, I think there are instances, like the sexual assault scene in *Overlord*. Of course, one might disagree with my view of that particular scene. A more discerning viewer than I might point to a valuable purpose that it serves and that I missed. One might also think that, given current genre expectations for horror, viewers of the film who know that they are watching a horror movie should not be too shocked by the sexual assault scene. Even so, I think my account would shed light on the *source* of this disagreement and others like it. It provides a framework for disagreement.

The following upshot emerges from my discussion in the previous two sections:

2. Creators of disturbing art should consider whether the purposes of their works justify any costs. A corollary claim is that, in morally evaluating a disturbing work, critics should consider whether the purposes of the work justify any costs.

I take this to simply be an instance of cost-benefit analysis, but I think it is important to bear in mind in the case of disturbing art, given the ways in which it can be perceptually. Even if a type of disturbing content cannot have been reasonably expected in a particular case, does the

unexpectedness or shock play a role in promoting a worthwhile purpose, i.e., a purpose that justifies the unexpectedness? (Recall Banksy's mural "Slave Labour," which I mentioned above.) However, even if the *unexpectedness* does not play a valuable role, and, say, content warnings should have been provided, does the disturbing content possess any redeeming features?

VII. Disturbing Content and Artistic Value

I have argued that disturbing art can be immoral in virtue of being perceptually offensive but that the moral status of disturbing content can be influenced by the value of the purpose it serves. The more valuable its purpose, the stronger its claim to moral permissibility. So, worthwhile purposes are defeaters for perceptual offensiveness. I will argue in this section that the *artistic* value of a disturbing work is also influenced by the value of the purpose it serves.

According to Jonathan Gilmore's (2020) account of artistic criticism, which derives from the evaluation of artifacts in general, artworks have work-specific functions in addition to those they have in virtue of belonging to specific genres, styles, movements, and other categories subordinate to that of art (209).[96] Although there is no function of art *qua* art, comedies, say, might have the function of eliciting comic amusement. In the standard case, an artist confers a function onto their work by intending, perhaps unconsciously, that it have that function and the ability to fulfill it (214).[97]

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[96] These are *constitutive*, as opposed to *accidental*, functions. The constitutive function of an artifact is one without which it would not be the particular artifact it is. For example, if an iron lost its capacity to serve as a doorstop, then it would no longer possess the accidental function of holding doors open. On the other hand, an artifact might have a constitutive function without being able to fulfill it. An iron that does a poor job ironing clothes still has the constitutive function of ironing clothes (211-2). In what follows, I omit the qualifier "constitutive," although the reader should take it as implied.

[97] Gilmore describes some exceptions. First, "constraints of genre and medium" might confer unintended properties onto a work *qua* art. For example, "despite Jane Austen's skepticism toward conventional patterns of desire, the formal structure of the novel as a genre led her to convey an endorsement of such patterns in *Emma*" (214). Second,

A two-part account of artistic criticism falls out of this: First, if an artwork has a property that obstructs the realization of its function, then that property is an artistic defect in it (218).[98] (Likewise, a bread knife's dullness prevents it from slicing bread efficiently and, therefore, makes it a bad bread knife.) Gilmore also suggests that when a work fails to fulfill its functions, it is for that reason artistically flawed (even if it does not have properties that *obstruct* any of its functions). For example, "when a work of art is designed to express some content, but fails in that respect, that failure is an artistic fault: it is a failure of the work to achieve at least one of its artistic aims" (223-4). I propose a natural extension of Gilmore's view from whole artworks to their parts: if *part* of an artwork fails to fulfill its artistic functions, then it is for that reason an artistic defect.[99]

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in choosing to include some property into their work, an artist might thereby take on unintended functions of the property. Gilmore gives the example of the catenary arch in early monumental Gothic cathedrals: "The Gothic shape redirects gravity's vertical forces into compressive forces that run through the arch's curves. Yet, even without such a discovery, creators of later cathedrals could unwittingly benefit from that design's function by merely copying the arch's shape and construction" (214-5). Third, nonstandard cases do not include only ones in which the artist's intentions are not necessary for their work to have the functions they do; in some exceptional cases, they also fail to be sufficient. This occurs when an artist produces a work that is incapable of realizing the functions they intend it to have and fulfill. To illustrate this, Gilmore mentions Barnett Newman's abstract paintings of the 1940s, which, according to the artist, "would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism" (215). Finally, if the intended function is not an *artistic* one, then a work will fail to have it as an artistic function. If a pop musician intends to make money with their songs, then, in the typical case, their songs will not thereby take on the function of making money (216). Though I agree, I do not quite understand the reason Gilmore gives for this. According to him, "we would tend to assume that the absence of such aims could have left the work unchanged" (216). However, the songs of a musician who aims only to make money with their songs will likely differ vastly from those of one who has other aims. The former will likely include trendier elements in their songs. I prefer Berys Gaut's (2007) criterion for aesthetic relevance instead, according to which a work's effect is aesthetically relevant when "it is deployed by the use of artistic means, not just by style or by how the artist treats her subject." These include "general artistic strategies" as well as strategies specific to particular media, genres, or forms. Examples of the former include "conveying general insights by means of the treatment of particular examples; getting us to *feel* the force of a particular claim or truth, to bring it home to us; and building up in the work a manifested personality, a *persona*, in which these attitudes prominently figure" (85, italics in original). An example of the latter is "[Rembrandt's] employment of light, the handling of brushstrokes and pictorial construction, in order to convey as certain attitude towards his subject" (85). In any case, I take my arguments to be compatible with different ways of determining aesthetic relevance.

[98] Although Gilmore does not explicitly endorse the corollary claim that the properties of an artwork that *help* it realize its function are artistic *merits*, I will take this to be part of his view.

[99] As Gilmore notes, sometimes artworks offer greater value when experienced in ways that deviate from how they were designed to be experienced (e.g., ironically). However, this makes sense only against a background in which *our* purposes for engaging with a work are best fulfilled when our engagement is guided by the *work's* purposes (204).

This, however, is only one perspective from which an artwork can be evaluated *qua* art under Gilmore's framework. We might also examine whether its realization of its function is itself worthwhile (219). Di Muzio, for example, maintains that "slasher films primarily aim to produce terror and powerful emotions in the spectators" (290). However, for Di Muzio, this is not a valuable enough aim to justify to the consumption, distribution, and creation of such films, which he thinks silence viewers' compassionate attitudes (285). Although, as I explained above, I think slasher films aim to do more than just produce powerful emotions in viewers, my point here is simply that Gilmore's framework can be used to make sense of Di Muzio's argument.

With respect to the value of disturbing content, there are four possible cases: i) the content has the function of furthering a worthwhile purpose that would justify its use and succeeds in doing so, ii) the content has the function of furthering a worthwhile purpose that would justify its use but fails to do so, iii) the content has the function of furthering a purpose that would not justify its use and succeeds in doing so, and iv) the content has the function of furthering a purpose that would not justify is use and fails to do so. The following table illustrates these four possibilities with examples:

Instance of Disturbing Content	Is Its Purpose Sufficiently Worthwhile?	Does the Disturbing Content Fulfill Its Purpose?
i) Disturbing scenes in *The Nightingale* (2018)	Yes	Yes
ii) Depictions of racialized violence in *Antebellum* (2020)	Yes	No
iii) Depictions of Sharon Tate's tragedy in *The Haunting of Sharon Tate* (2019)	No	Yes
iv) Sexual assault scene in *Overlord* (2018)	No	No

As I argued above, the disturbing scenes in *The Nightingale* raise important questions on revenge and get audiences to empathize with a character who undergoes profoundly traumatic events. *Antebellum* attempts to present important themes on racism but does not seem to have anything novel or interesting to say. *The Haunting of Sharon Tate* depicts a fictionalized version of the events leading up to actress Sharon Tate's murder by the Manson family cult. It attempts to shock and, in my view, succeeds. Even so, its shock value does not justify its negative consequences. For example, it strengthens undesirable mental associations between Tate and her tragedy.[100] Finally, as I explained above, the sexual assault scene in *Overlord* attempts to be thrilling but was simply uncomfortable. Even if it were thrilling, however, this would likely not justify the inclusion of the scene. For it would still be congruent with, and reinforce, the real-life trivialization of sexual assault.

In cases *ii* and *iv*, the disturbing content fails to contribute to the realization of its purpose. In accordance with Gilmore's view, this content becomes an artistic flaw. This would be a case of content, disturbing or otherwise, that is artistically flawed because it does not further a worthwhile purpose. But, as I argued above, when disturbing content fails to serve a worthwhile purpose, it also becomes a perceptual offense (if it cannot be reasonably expected). So, in cases *ii* and *iv*, an artwork's moral and artistic flaws stem from the same source. In case *iii*, the disturbing content fulfills its purpose, but its fulfillment of that purpose is not valuable enough to justify its use. As per Gilmore's view, criticism that casts doubt on the value of an artwork's realization of its purpose is artistic criticism. And, as I argued above, even if some disturbing content fulfills its purpose, it is a perceptual offense if its realization of that purpose is not sufficiently worthwhile (and that content cannot be reasonably expected). So, again, an

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[100] The moral wrongness in this case is not that of a perceptual offense. I use this case only to illustrate Gilmore's framework.

artwork's moral and artistic flaws have the same source. (This means that the disturbing content in case *iv* is doubly flawed from an artistic point of view: its realization of its function is not worthwhile, and it fails to realize it anyway.[101]) Finally, in case *i*, the fact that some disturbing content succeeds in fulfilling a worthwhile purpose elevates both its moral and artistic value.

Even if a work's morally good-making features are themselves unintended, they might correlate with its realization of its function. For example, as mentioned above, Feagin maintains that audiences' unpleasant responses to tragic works remind them that they are the kind of people who appropriately care for others and abhor evil. This reminder, in turn, leads to a pleasurable meta-response. It seems unlikely, however, that authors of tragedies intend to elicit this meta-response in audiences. Still, an author of a tragedy might confer upon their work a function whose realization correlates with the elicitation of this meta-response. For example, Aaron Ridley (2003) argues that tragic works present painful truths: "By depicting worlds in which things go wrong—in which chance and necessity play prominent and often devastating roles in the shaping of human lives—tragedy shows us aspects of a world that is, in reality, our world, the world in which we must live as best we can" (408). This, it seems to me, will more likely be the goal of the author of a tragic work than the elicitation of a pleasurable meta-response. If this *is* their goal, however, then it will correlate with the elicitation of a pleasurable meta-response. This is because compassionate audiences will (in the typical case) experience unpleasant direct

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[101] Now, an artwork's failure to realize an unworthwhile purpose might result in a—from a certain point of view—better product. Imagine, for example, that an artist intends to create a very gruesome work. Were their art to realize this function, it would be perceptually offensive. Instead, however, they end up creating an unintentionally funny piece. (Thank you to Eduardo Martinez for this example.) Gilmore's view would have it that the piece is doubly flawed: it fails to have a worthwhile purpose and to fulfill that purpose. On the other hand, Clark Zumbach's (1984) *good consequences doctrine*, which I discuss below, considers only the artistically relevant consequences of a work, regardless of whether the artist intended for their work to have such consequences. On this alternative view, the unintentionally funny but otherwise perceptually offensive piece would be artistically better as a result of *not* fulfilling its purpose. Matthew Strohl (2022) says something similar in his discussion of movies that are "so bad they're good.".

responses in response to fictional characters who confront painful truths firsthand. If Feagin is

right, they will then take pleasure in knowing that they are the kind of people who respond

appropriately to tragic events. So, this feature will correlate with the work's realization of its

intended function.

When some disturbing content clashes in virtue of its excess with other elements of the

work of which it is a part, the work picks up other artistic flaws. Following Monroe Beardsley

(1981), I hold that unity is usually a merit, while lack of unity is usually a demerit, where "unity"

refers to coherence and completeness. I argue that any feature of a work that fails to contribute to

the artistic goals which other features of the work promote *ipso facto* detract from its unity.[102]

With excessive disturbing content, there is also a possibility of a lack of balance, which makes

other elements of the work disproportionately less salient.

Finally, if one holds the plausible—but not uncontested—assumption that lack of

originality is an artistic defect, then lack of originality in disturbing works can be a source of

both immorality and artistic deficiency. This would be the case with works like *Antebellum* and

Them, which do not seem to offer any *novel* insights on anti-Black racism. This, I think, would

be another instance of the influence of excess on both moral and artistic value.[103]

I have been using Gilmore's intention-based account of artistic criticism to show how

excessive disturbing content can be both a moral and artistic flaw. However, I think this can be

demonstrated using other accounts as well. Clark Zumbach (1984) mentions a theory of artistic

functions that does not appeal to intentions. An artifact's *design function* is the effect it was

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[102] Unlike Beardsley, I do not want to commit to the thesis that unity is *always* a good-making feature. For instance, Peter Shiu-Hwa Tsu (2019) observes that an abrupt ending in a postmodern deconstructionist drama that aims to deconstruct unity would not be an artistic flaw (37). I am inclined towards Frank Sibley's (2007) view that unity is an inherently-valenced feature not insofar it is an invariantly good-making feature, but because it is a primitive fact in need of no explanation that unity has a positive valence (when it does in fact have a positive valence).

[103] See Harold Osborne (1979) for an argument against the relevance of originality to artistic value.

designed to have (150). So, for Gilmore, artistic functions are design functions. Alternatively, artistic functions might be understood as what Zumbach calls *use functions*. He gives the example of a railroad spike that is used as a coat hook: "We might say that this effect of the railroad spike (one of its natural functions) is its *use function*, if it is our view that this effect of the spike is the best effect of the spike so far as human interests are concerned" (150, italics in original). I take it that the view that artistic functions are use functions is what Zumbach (borrowing the name from philosopher of science Peter Achinstein (1977)) calls "the good consequence doctrine" (148).

So, on the good consequence doctrine, some disturbing content is artistically valuable insofar as it confers some goods that may or may not have been intended by the artist. But, again, its provocation of extreme anxiety, anger, or disgust will be *morally* redeemable to the extent that this is required for the realization of these goods. So, as above, these goods are, or coincide with, moral ones. On the good consequence doctrine, the moral and artistic value of disturbing content can still rise and fall together.

This is so—at least to a large extent— even if only the *intended* goods conferred by some disturbing content increase the work's moral value. If only the intended goods realized by some disturbing content elevate the work's moral status, then, on the good consequence doctrine, these will be the ones that are both morally and artistically relevant.

The following upshot on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics emerges from my discussion in this section:

3. One and the same fact can correspond to both moral and artistic goods, or to both moral and artistic flaws.

112

This holds because having good consequences and fulfilling worthwhile purposes are often both moral and artistic goods. Conversely, a disturbing work's absence of good consequences and failure to fulfill worthwhile purposes can render it artistically flawed and, if it has *bad* consequences that are not outweighed, morally problematic. This can be the case with perceptually offensive disturbing works. In these cases, one and the same fact corresponds to both moral and artistic goods (or flaws). I think it would be productive for future work on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics to examine other cases (other than disturbing art) in which this holds true. A similar but different upshot is the following:

4. Artistically good-making features can cancel the immorality of a work.

In other words, good, artistically relevant consequences can render morally permissible an otherwise immoral work. In Section VI, I argued that good consequences can render morally permissible an otherwise perceptually offensive (or, more generally, immoral) work. In this section, I argued that some of these good consequences are artistically relevant. It follows from this that artistically good-making features can cancel the immorality of a work. An interesting practical implication of this is that the development of artistic skill and virtue can aid in performing morally good or at least permissible actions. For example, I argued above that, in subverting expectations about the role of violence in narrative (an artistically interesting feature), the disturbing content in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* becomes morally permissible. Insofar as the subversiveness of the film requires artistic skill, artistic skill was employed to create a

morally permissible work. Creators of disturbing content concerned about the moral status of their works can handle this concern by developing their artistic skills.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

Employing (a slightly revised version of) Feinberg's concept of perceptual offense, I have argued that disturbing works can, *qua* disturbing works, be perceptually offensive. I then argued that, in such cases, there can be a coincidence between moral and artistic disvalue. I also argued that what morally *vindicates* an otherwise morally problematic work can also boost its artistic status.

The framework I have defended can be extended beyond perceptual offense. Consider, for example, charges that a piece is voyeuristic. Voyeuristic, or otherwise voyeuristic, features of a work can be justified when they are required for sufficiently worthwhile purposes.[104] The drama film *A Marriage Story* (2019) includes intimate and poignant scenes of a recently divorced couple fighting. Arguably, however, those scenes are required to adequately show how stressful and combative the aftermath of divorce can be.[105] The same goes for exploitative, or otherwise exploitative, works. Above, I mentioned *The Haunting of Sharon Tate*, which one might argue wrongfully exploits Tate's tragedy for insufficiently weighty reasons. The film does not, say, convey any novel insights about her tragedy.

To determine the moral status of an arguably excessively disturbing, voyeuristic, or exploitative work, we should figure out whether its features that make it disturbing or (potentially) voyeuristic or exploitative serve valuable artistic functions. I have argued that in cases both in which such features serve valuable artistic functions and in which they do not,

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[104] I add "*otherwise* voyeuristic features" in case the term "voyeuristic" is taken to imply or suggest wrongness.
[105] That said, perhaps (otherwise) voyeuristic scenes can reasonably be regarded as disturbing after all. For witnessing a scene that one is, so to speak, not supposed to witness can be disconcerting.

moral and artistic status will rise and fall *together*. This, I argued, offers creators of potentially

morally problematic artworks a heuristic for managing the moral status of their works and critics

a heuristic for morally evaluating such works.

Conclusion: General Observations about the Relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics

From my examination of three issues in the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, I draw six conclusions about the general relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

Positive and negative ethics. I conclude that art and the objects of aesthetic judgments can serve morally desirable ends: managing one's aesthetic attractiveness, conveying disturbing truths, etc. There is, however, a morally problematic flipside to art and aesthetics. Aesthetic practices can also, for example, reflect and reinforce interlocking systems of oppression or cause undesirable mental states in unwitting audiences. In my view, one important source of this problematic flipside is the non-ideal conditions in which these practices take place. Background conditions often influence the meanings, in addition to the actual and likely consequences, of aesthetic practices. Something like this claim is often endorsed in the philosophy of fiction and philosophy of humor. For example, Adriana Clavel-Vázquez (2020: 148) argues that the real-life prevalence of immoral attitudes can modulate the moral status of fictions, while David Lewis (1978: 44) considers sympathetically the view that we interpret fictions by looking at their "communities of origin." John Moreall (2009: 110) argues that the stereotypes put forward by a joke are morally worse "when they are about people who lack social status and power, and when those stereotypes are part of the social system that marginalizes them and 'keeps them in their place.'" Put crudely, art and the objects of aesthetic judgments are neither produced nor consumed in a vacuum. In the case of disturbing art, whether a disturbing piece is perceptually offensive will depend on the standards of attractiveness in effect when it is consumed. This will influence whether the piece is likely to cause undesirable mental states in consumers. The social meaning of a garment or look, and its consequences, will also depend on the social context. As I argued in Chapter 2, for example, the celebration of straight hair in women becomes morally

116

problematic when other hairstyles in women, particularly those associated with Black women, are not equally prized.

Experimenting with identities, perspectives, and attitudes through art and the objects of aesthetic judgments. Through beautification and disturbing art, we can temporarily adopt various identities, perspectives, and attitudes. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Iris Marion Young (1994: 185) holds that fashion allows us to, so to speak, try on different identities. Similarly, experimenting with immoral, even evil, perspectives through engagements with disturbing works can be pleasurable and interesting (Bloom 2021: 114), or possess non-hedonic, cognitive value (Smuts 2013: 113). There is again, however, a negative flipside. Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear (2022) argue, for example, that in the absence of any harmful consequences or even endorsements of immoral attitudes, certain imaginings can "realize" (14-21), "normalize" (21-5), or "license" (26-31) oppression.

Varying ways in which ethics and aesthetics interact. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2000) caution against what they call the *moralistic fallacy*, which involves inferring, from the moral wrongness of experiencing a particular emotion, that the emotion is not *fitting* (75-6). An emotion is fitting when it tracks certain evaluative properties (72). Envy, for example, is fitting when it tracks enviable objects. "Very roughly, one's envy portrays a rival as having a desirable possession that one lacks, and it casts this circumstance in a specific negative light" (66). Moral and prudential considerations against feeling envy in a particular instance are, as such, irrelevant whether the object of one's envy is enviable (86). For example, even if feeling envy would distract one from important concerns, it might still track an enviable object. I think D'Arms and Jacobson's objection to the general inference from moral wrongness to lack of fittingness is compelling. However, even if this inference is fallacious, the moral wrongness of an emotion is

117

sometimes relevant to its fittingness in *other* ways. Specifically, I contend that the moral value of an artwork or object of aesthetic experience can influence its aesthetic value *diachronically* (as per the discussion in Chapter 2) and *coincide with* its aesthetic value (as per the discussion in Chapter 3). I argued in Chapter 2 that moral considerations can influence what we find aesthetically attractive and unattractive through a mechanism of social approval and disapproval. So even if, as per D'Arms and Jacobson, we should not infer, from the moral flaws of a particular look, that the experience of it as aesthetically attractive is unfitting, the fittingness conditions of this experience incorporate (perhaps among other things) social approval and disapproval, which moral considerations can in turn influence. The fittingness conditions of this experience can thus change over time to reflect moral considerations.

However, this mechanism of social approval and disapproval need not occur in aesthetic domains other than aesthetic attractiveness. The way in which ethics and aesthetics interact in the case of aesthetic attractiveness, therefore, does not necessarily hold across aesthetic domains. I think a similar point holds for the way in which ethics and aesthetics interact in disturbing works. Following D'Arms and Jacobson, I contend that the moral flaws of a disturbing work do not *automatically* make affective responses whose fittingness conditions incorporate artistically valuable features (e.g., awe) unfitting. Still, the upshot of Chapter 3 is that the fittingness of such responses often coincides with moral value, while the lack of fittingness often coincides with moral disvalue. Again, however, the ways in which ethics and aesthetics interact in these cases need not hold in others.

More generally, I argue that we can determine the particular ways in which ethics and aesthetics interact, and should interact, on a case-by-case basis. The types of interaction will vary across artistic mediums, genres, and medium-genre combinations. Similarly, Shen-yi Liao (2013)

118

argues that a particular fictional work's capacity for moral persuasion depends on its genre. Expanding this point beyond fiction and moral persuasion, I think that a work or aesthetic object's moral status depends on its genre. For instance, because disturbing works tend to produce strong negative emotions, they can be immoral when they do not serve worthwhile ends. Other works and aesthetic objects, however, often do not produce such emotions. In that case, their failure to promote worthwhile ends may not be a moral one—even if they are artistically flawed.

Getting the best of both worlds. In this dissertation, I suggested that morally problematic aspects of artworks and objects of aesthetic experiences can often be removed without sacrificing aesthetic goodness. In the case of beautification, this involves patterns of social disapproval diachronically altering standards of attractiveness. In the case of disturbing art, this involves removing perceptually offensive excessive content. In the latter case, however, removing unexpected features of a work that cause unpleasurable mental states might result in a less artistically good work. This, however, does not demonstrate immoralism—the view that a work's moral defects can sometimes improve it aesthetically—to be true because those unexpected features that cause unpleasant mental states need *not* be morally bad-making ones. As I argued in the chapter on disturbing art, artistically good-making features can cancel immorality. (I make a similar claim in Chapter 2, in which I argued that the prudential modulates the moral.) This, as I will now argue, poses a challenge—though perhaps not an unsurmountable one—for attempts to establish immoralism.

Immoralism. Immoralism says that a work's moral flaws can elevate its aesthetic value (Stear 2022: 615). If a work's *prima facie* moral defects elevate its aesthetic status, which cancels the immorality of those only *prima facie* moral defects, then this would not be a case that

shows immoralism to be true. For example, Zhen Li (2021) has argued that some *transgressive* works are cases in which the moral defects of a work elevate its artistic value directly. As Li explains, "The act of transgression is not only the artistic intention of transgressive art but also the manifestation of [Nietzschean] freedom" (484). For transgressive pieces that aim to manifest *ultimate* freedom, the transgression of moral norms is necessary (493). Thus, insofar as a transgressive piece successfully fulfills the artistic intention to manifest ultimate freedom by transgressing moral norms, its immorality contributes to its artistic success (487). Li discusses the film *Two Small Bodies* (1993), a piece of transgressive art that violates moral norms by endorsing immoral perspectives (487).

However, to the extent that the manifestation of Nietzschean freedom is an artistic good, one might question whether the endorsement of immoral perspectives in *Two Small Bodies* is in fact immoral (or, alternatively, whether the perspectives are in fact immoral). According to Li, in contrast to a hypothetical genre of art, mutilation art, that aims only to mutilate people, transgressive art involves "the pursuit of intrinsically valuable goals of liberty, happiness, etc." (493). This is what makes transgressive art, unlike, mutilation art, artistically valuable (493). However, insofar as morality is other-regarding and *Two Small Bodies* leads *viewers* to pursue Nietzschean liberty and happiness, one might question whether the film is in fact immoral. And if, as I argued in Chapter 2, the prudential modulates the moral, then even if *Two Small Bodies* contributes to only the director's Nietzschean liberty and happiness, then, again, perhaps the film is not actually immoral. I think a more clear-cut case that supports immoralism would be one in

which an *extremely* immoral feature results in a *slight* artistic gain.[106] In such a case, it would be less plausible that the artistic-good making feature cancels the immorality.[107]

　　Loosening the terms of the debate. In none of my chapters have I tried to show that moral goods or defects *directly* influence aesthetic value or influence it *as such* or *qua* moral goods or defects. It might thus seem that I have offered only uninteresting indirect ways in which the moral and aesthetic relate to one another.[108] Although my discussion will not satisfy those looking for a direct connection between the moral and aesthetic, I think the conclusions in my chapters are interesting insofar as they have practical upshots. In Chapters 1 and 2, I argued that standards of aesthetic attractiveness can shift towards being more inclusive and empowering through the mechanisms of social approval and disapproval. This offers a way to push back against problematic aesthetic norms. In Chapter 3, I argued that artistic good-making features of a work can cancel its immorality. This offers guidance for creators of disturbing works who are concerned that they might be doing something immoral. If the putatively immoral content serves a sufficiently worthwhile artistic goal, then they are in the moral clear. Otherwise, the work should, from the moral point of view, be removed on pain of immorality. However, whether it should be removed *all things considered* (as opposed to simply from the moral point of view) is

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[106] I suspect that part of the reason why the immorality in *Two Small Bodies* can be canceled is that the perspectives it endorses are directed towards only *fictional* characters and events, but not real ones as well. In Tamar Gendler's (2000) language, the perspectives it endorses are not *licensed for export* to the actual world.

[107] While I have argued that artistic good-making features can cancel immorality, they might also make a work more immoral in some cases. Regarding pro-Nazi film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), María José Alcaraz Léon (2018: 24) argues that "the alleged beauty of Leni Riefenstahl's fascist cinematic propaganda purportedly increases its malevolent effect".

[108] See Hanson (2020) and Stear (2022) on the alleged inadequacy of indirect strategies for demonstrating direct connections between the moral and aesthetic.

a question I leave open. Moreover, whether the fulfillment of a particular goal is *sufficiently*

valuable will depend on one's theory of well-being.[109][110]

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[109] See Derek Parfit's (1984) appendix "What Makes Someone's Life Go Best" from his *Reasons and Persons* for various accounts of well-being. See Aaron Smuts' (2013) "Painful Art and the Limits of Well-Being" for what I think is an excellent discussion of the role painful art can play in promoting the well-being of consumers.
[110] Thank you to Peter Langland-Hassan for pushing me on this point.

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