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*Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture*

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# Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture

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## Abstract

This special issue investigates the relationship between aesthetics and morality. How do the good and the beautiful, the bad and the ugly, happen in everyday life? How do these 'orders of worth' interact? Do they reinforce each other? What happens when they contradict one another? Does one order typically trump the other? Five contributions, from Israel, Italy and the Netherlands, scrutinize different sites where both aesthetics – the continuum of evaluations from beautiful to ugly – and morality – evaluations about good and evil, right and wrong – have a strong presence. The contributions zoom in on everyday cultural consumption, where people create, seek out and discuss 'good' food, clothing, films and architecture, and professional situations where people look for 'good' jobs, want to work in 'good' work spaces and aim to be a 'good' worker. Integrating insights from cultural studies, sociology, valuation studies and science and technology studies, this special issue shows, first, how judgments of aesthetic and moral value are central to the fabric of social life – from the smallest level of everyday interactions to the large scale of economic relations and power im/balances. Second, these valuations often clash, blend and blur. This blurring and blending enables the drawing of social boundaries, the

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consolidation of identities and the shaping of selves. But it also allows for seduction, manipulation and obfuscation of power dynamics. Third, the contributions show that in contemporary post-Fordist, meritocratic consumer societies, beauty and morality are increasingly entangled with economic and political logics, leading to new social struggles and new forms of alienation and exploitation.

### Keywords

Aesthetics, consumer culture, cultural sociology, cultural studies, material turn, morality, orders of worth, post-Fordism, valuation studies

## Introduction: the bad, the beautiful, the good and the ugly

Fashion models are at the center of contemporary imaginations of beauty. Young, slender, attractive and enviable, they gaze at us from the hundreds of images that we see every day. Their appearance aims to catch our attention and to give us visual pleasure. If one image is not to our taste, maybe another color, shape or smile appeals to our senses. The point is to capture and seduce us with the visual appeal of their beauty. However, sensual pleasure is not the only message that fashion models convey. As many have pointed out, such images contain moral messages: about how to look and how to treat your body, about what to wear, what to buy and how to live. They appeal to the widespread but untestable belief that ‘what is beautiful is good’.

In doing so, fashion modeling harks back to an age-old trope. In fairy tales, myths and religious narratives, beautiful princesses and (incidentally) princes, deities and saints are besieged by ugly witches, trolls, devils and demons (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003; Synnott, 1989, 2002). Contemporary marketeers and advertisers rely on the same logic: what is beautiful is good. Consequently, what is ugly is bad (Dion et al., 1972; Griffin and Langlois, 2006; Northup and Liebler, 2010). This is what the fashion world aims to do: seduce us to accept that these modern-day saints and princesses represent a good, the *right*, lifestyle.

A closer look at the practices of the fashion field shows that aesthetics and morality are not always aligned. Especially when more salubrious details of the modeling industry emerge, people may experience ‘the beautiful’ as going against ‘the good’. When campaign advertisements stretch boundaries by displaying extremely thin models (Kuipers et al., 2014), when people realize that the beautiful images are achieved by exploitative and harmful body practices (Holla, 2016, 2018b; Mears, 2015) or when fashion photographers take pictures of unlawfully young models in suggestive poses, audiences may refuse the aestheticization of human bodies on moral grounds.

In March 2018, for instance, Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* reported that a renowned photographer in the Amsterdam fashion world shot highly sexualized nude pictures of aspiring young models (Bouma and Stoffelen, 2018). The article was instigated by five models who considered his images immoral because they aestheticize and exploit underage girls. In the article, fashion models spoke out anonymously about the discomfort and disgust they experienced when these pictures were taken. The article also cited legal experts who noted that these images seemed rather close to child pornography, which

would make the photographer a criminal offender – the strongest social marker of overstepping moral boundaries. The photographer himself, however, refused to acknowledge these normative judgments. Instead, he insisted on the autonomy of beauty. The newspaper cites him saying ‘Some people have images of butterflies on their walls. This is what I find beautiful’ (our translation). For him, beauty was exempt from moral restrictions. The newspaper article quotes for various modeling agencies in the Dutch fashion field. Most modeling agencies support the photographer, prioritizing an aesthetic gaze over moral judgment. Others let moral objections prevail and stopped working with this photographer. All of them, however, emphasize how they try to strike a balance, negotiating on a case-by-case basis when the pursuit of beauty should be curbed by moral considerations. As one booker observe, there is often ‘a fine line’ between the purely aesthetic demands of fashion and the morally tainted categories of objectification or pornographic pleasure.

Fashion modeling is but one of the domains where aesthetic and moral judgments blend, blur and clash. This special issue investigates this relationship between these two ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). How do the good and the beautiful, the bad and the ugly, happen in everyday life? How do they interact? Do they reinforce each other? What happens when they contradict one another? Does one ‘order’ typically trump the other? Five contributions, from Israel, Italy and the Netherlands, scrutinize different sites where both aesthetics – the continuum of evaluations from beautiful to ugly – and morality – evaluations about good and evil, right and wrong – have a strong presence. The contributions zoom in on everyday cultural consumption, where people create, seek out and discuss ‘good’ food, clothing, films and architecture; and on professional situations where people look for ‘good’ jobs, want to work in ‘good’ work spaces and aim to be a ‘good’ worker. Using different theoretical lenses, the authors show how judgments of aesthetic value bleed into evaluations of moral worth and vice versa. This enables manipulation and seduction, produces clashes and confrontations and leads to the drawing of social boundaries and the consolidation of categories.

Tensions between aesthetics and morality are not the result of universal human ‘bias’, as psychologists typically argue. Instead, they are historically and culturally situated phenomena. Beauty and morality have acquired new and specific uses and meanings over the past decades. The authors in this special issue attribute this to recent cultural shifts: toward ‘post-Fordist’ ‘aesthetic economies’ (Arts and Van den Berg, 2019; van Dijk, 2019; cf. Elias et al., 2017; Entwistle, 2002; Lazzarato, 1996); to a more ‘informalized’, ‘egalitarian’ or ‘meritocratic’ social structures (Schwartz, 2019; Van den Haak and Wilterdink, 2019; cf. Littler, 2013; Warde, 2007) or to the logics of today’s commodified, neoliberal ‘consumer culture’ (Arfini, 2019; cf. Featherstone, 2007; Holla and Kuipers, 2015). Due to these societal shifts, both beauty and morality are becoming entangled with economic and political logics and processes in new ways. In careful empirical analyses of these new entanglements, the articles in this special issue move beyond catch-all phrases and fashionable sweeping statements about the dawn of a new neoliberal, post-Fordist, aesthetic, era or society. Instead, the authors argue that aesthetic and moral evaluations play a central role in social life – but in situated, context-specific ways. Such evaluations shape and are shaped by everyday interactions, social institutions and wider societal developments and trends. The good, the beautiful, the bad and the ugly are not

only reflections of such developments. They are the central categories making up the fabric of social life – from the smallest level of everyday interactions, to the large scale of economic relations and power im/balances.

## Clouded judgments: why aesthetics and morality clash, blend and blur

At first sight, the distinction between aesthetics and morality seems clear enough. Aesthetics is about what is pleasing to the senses: does something look, feel, smell, sound or taste good? This something may be animal, vegetable or mineral. Anything can be – and will be – aestheticized by the human senses. Many artists and philosophers have attempted to ‘rationalize’ aesthetics. The 18th-century Kantian disinterested aesthetics and the anti-beauty stance of 20th-century modernism both are attempts to redefine sensual judgments in more intellectual, disembodied terms (de la Fuente, 2000; Synnott, 2002). But ultimately aesthetics is located in our bodies: beauty is a form of truth that is validated by physical experience.

Morality also is about judgment: is something right or wrong, good or evil? Moral judgment, however, always concerns persons and their deeds (Ellemers, 2017). While objects may be the trigger of moral valuation, the blame or praise usually relates to a person. This particular object should not have been made, spread, condoned, worn, written, published, photographed and funded *by some person or organization*. Although moral evaluation can certainly be experienced bodily – think of disgust and pride (Turner and Stets, 2006; Tyler, 2008; Wood, 2017) – morality is based first and foremost in social relations.

The formal separation of aesthetics and morality is deeply anchored in modern thought. The classical analysis of this is Jürgen Habermas’ (1997 (1981) *Modernity, An Unfinished Project?*). Habermas defines modernization as a process where society is increasingly separated into autonomous domains, each with their own ‘rationality’. Thus, science is about truth (or rather, a specific version of truth), and therefore not about beauty or ethics. Art is about beauty, and therefore not about morality or truth. Morality is central to religion, law and politics. In all three domains, people try, with varying success and levels of ambition, to separate morals from truth and beauty. Academic specializations mirror these social developments. In philosophy, aesthetics and ethics are distinct fields. The natural, social and cultural sciences are not supposed to make political, moral or aesthetic judgments. This sets them apart from law and theology, the ‘normative’ sciences, who have their own faculties and schools. The beautiful appears not have a place in universities at all: arts, music and other aesthetic things are relegated to separate institutions like art schools, dance academies and conservatories.

In Habermas’ understanding, this separation of rationalities and the emergence of ‘fielded societies’ (Calhoun, 2013) is historically contingent and therefore not natural, universal or unchangeable. Habermas’s central concern is that the rationality of specific domains – especially the economic domain – would ‘colonize’ all the others. For a society to work well, Habermas argues, these different rationalities *should* be brought together in the ‘public sphere’ where they can be discussed, scrutinized and weighed

against one another (Habermas, 1989). Without such a public sphere, the logic of art for art's sake, beauty for beauty's sake, science for science's sake, law for law's sake and so on is bound to spiral into sterile, possibly immoral extremes. Moreover, different rationalities always come together in the 'lifeworld': the sphere of everyday life that is not touched by the 'system' and the centrifugal forces of modernity. In families and intimate relations, morality, truth, beauty, money and love are interconnected. Thus, for Habermas, the separation of aesthetics and morality is not only contingent but also partial. Moreover, it is double-edged: it has made possible new ways of understanding, balanced social institutions and productive specializations. However, a healthy society needs places and domains where separate rationalities come together (cf. Hermes, 2006).

Both in the social and cultural sciences, many authors have challenged this analytical separation between aesthetics and morality. In practice, these two orders of worth have much in common. Both are enacted through *valuations*, as they are referred to in the thriving new interdisciplinary field of valuation studies: socially constructed judgments of worth (Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013). Such valuations are usually fast, almost automatic, yet they are culturally shaped and socially embedded. As cultural scholars and sociologists have abundantly shown, both aesthetic and moral judgments inform social action (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992; McRobbie, 1994; Williams, 1976; see also Schwartz, 2019 this volume). Aesthetics and morality both make distinctions and hierarchies, draw boundaries and create bonds. They can be negotiated and contested, but the stakes are high: both aesthetic and moral judgments are close to the self, so contestations are taken personally. Aesthetics and morality provide distinct but related grammars of worth: two ways of being 'good'.

Moreover, as the example of fashion modeling above shows, aesthetic and moral valuations are often interwoven, not only in the lifeworld of everyday life or the public sphere but everywhere in society. We highlight four strands of research in sociology and cultural studies that have thematized these interconnections: British cultural studies; (Bourdieuian) field theory; (post-Bourdieuian) institutional/pragmatic sociology and science and technology studies (STS). These approaches have characterized aesthetics and morality as interwoven yet distinct social valuations, and all four, in different combinations, inform the contributions to this special issue.

Cultural studies is about the relation between everyday cultural practices and wider systems of power. In a radical move (for the 1970s and 1980s), cultural scholars turned their attention to everyday culture, and the lifestyles and cultural practices of marginalized groups such as soap fans (Ang, 1985), audiences of women's magazines (Hermes, 1995) and popular news programs (Morley, 1980). While these popular cultural forms are inscribed with ideologies and power relations, cultural scholars demonstrated that they also offer opportunities for cultural resistance and 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' readings. From the perspective of this special issue, two insights from cultural studies are especially important. First, cultural scholars highlight the interconnectedness of aesthetic and moral judgments in everyday culture. For instance, Ang describes how the 1980s soap opera *Dallas* simultaneously provided aesthetic enjoyment, vicarious thrills and moral lessons and reflections. Drawing on Habermas, Hermes (2006) argues that popular culture is closer to 'lifeworld' than to 'system'. Even when produced by cultural industries,

popular culture is deeply integrated into everyday life. It is relatively untouched by systemic separations of 'rationalities' compared with more prestigious cultural forms.

Second, cultural studies explicitly identifies culture – typically defined as 'meaning making' – as a site of struggle and contestation. Aesthetic and moral evaluations are central elements of such meaning-making. Both are therefore deeply implicated in societal power dynamics and in the creation of (oppositional) ethnic, class, gender and racial identities (McRobbie, 1994). The critical approach to everyday culture pioneered by cultural studies still inspires many empirical studies today, including the article in this volume by Arts and Van den Berg who ask 'Who can wear flip flops to work?' Their analysis of the divergent meanings of flip-flops for tech entrepreneurs and Dutch precarious workers subjected to disciplining in the employment office shows leisurely footwear as a site of struggle, identity formation and social control. The article also is a fine example of the merger of insights of cultural studies with recent critical approaches to 21st-century post-Fordist labor and aesthetic economies.

Bourdieuian field theory, like cultural studies, originates in the 1970s and 1980s and identifies culture as central arena for social struggle and aesthetic and morality as central elements of this cultural struggle. Throughout his work, but especially in *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu combined a Marx-inspired understanding that social life is about struggle, particularly class struggle, with the Durkheimian insight that both aesthetics and morality are products of the social (cf. Schwartz, 2019 this volume). In contrast with cultural studies, Bourdieu looks at power 'from above' rather than 'from below': he wanted to understand how culture supports rather than contests power. However, when he takes a bottom-up approach, for instance, in the sections of *Distinction* on working-class taste (Bourdieu, 1984: chapter 7) and his work on French peasants (Bourdieu, 2008), his analyses are surprisingly reminiscent of cultural studies. The shared roots of cultural sociology and cultural studies are often forgotten. We hope that this special issue will not only serve as a reminder of shared origins, but will also highlight the affinities between these two fields up to the present day.

For the present discussion, two insights from field theory are important. First, Bourdieu argues that in France (and Europe) during the 19th and 20th centuries, a 'disinterested' aesthetic disposition emerged as a central marker of social status. It became widely accepted that some aesthetic judgments, particularly those of the higher classes, are more legitimate and 'better' than others. Crucially, this also means that the people who possess this legitimate taste are somehow 'better'. Since judgments of aesthetic quality can be presented as disinterested and natural, they are more effective in covering up power positions than overt expressions of wealth or power. This insight sparked thousands of studies showing how aesthetic judgments in a range of fields contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. Today it is a truism, also for non-academics (see Schwartz, 2019 this volume), that aesthetic judgment serves as cultural capital, and therefore is a source of power.

However, a second key point for *Distinction* is less known: this disinterested understanding of aesthetic quality dissociates itself both from popular or everyday aesthetics and from morality. 'Legitimate taste' establishes not only a hierarchy of types of beauty but also a hierarchy of orders of worth. With the establishment of the aesthetic as the central battlefield of class struggle, morality became construed as petty bourgeois narrow-mindedness, or 'moralism'. Indeed, cultural specialists and artists like the Dutch

photographer cited above often dismiss moral criticism of artistic work as narrow-minded and shallow. In retrospect, this superiority of cultural over moral judgment was probably less widely accepted than cultural elites and sociologists assumed. Today, it is increasingly contested. Schwartz, in this volume, shows how the Israeli discourse on elite 'farterism' provides a forceful moral critique of the legitimacy of 'disinterested' aesthetic evaluations. Van den Haak and Wilterdink, in this volume, show how their Dutch informants struggle with the moral implications of their own aesthetic judgments, as they realize that hierarchical evaluations of aesthetic taste clash with the moral imperative of egalitarianism.

Field theory has been criticized for its insistence on culture as struggle and its simplified binary of class-based 'cultural' versus 'economic' capital, which disregards other forms of evaluation like morality. In cultural studies, the focus remained on struggle, power and conflict, but gradually widened from class analysis to intersectional approaches looking at class, gender, ethnicity and age (Skeggs et al., 2008). In sociology, so-called post-Bourdieuian institutional and pragmatic sociologists went on to explore social forces other than power and conflict, in evaluations beyond the simply binary of economy versus culture. In her comparative studies in France and the United States, Lamont (1992, 2000) argued that people drew on cultural, moral and economic 'repertoires of evaluation' to assess social worth and draw social boundaries. Moreover, she showed that the content and relative weight of such repertoires varied between and within countries. In France, Boltanski and Thévenot distinguish as many as six 'orders of worth'. Both approaches share the Bourdieusian assumption that judgments are central to the re/production of social categories and relations. However, they stress that people draw on various repertoires or orders of worth, even in the course of one situation, and that hierarchies between types of evaluations are not fixed. Moreover, cultural evaluations are not only about struggle and domination but also about finding common ground with others, and about enacting a sound and coherently felt self (Dunn, 2017; Ezzy, 1997; Holla, 2018a; Sennett, 2011). These latter insights especially resonate across the contributions in this volume. Van Dijk shows, for instance, that in the creation of a co-working space, young 'creatives' from Amsterdam mix aesthetic judgments, public ('civic') morality, private ('domestic') morality and market and business-oriented considerations. Appeals to such orders of worth may obfuscate power relations, as Van Dijk shows, but they also create a sense of identity and community and foster an inspiring working environment.

Finally, a strong critique of the analytic separation of aesthetics, morality and other rationalities emerged in STS, also in the 1970s and 1980s. This field takes scientific enquiry as object of sociological analysis (Bloor, 1976; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Latour and Woolgar, 1986), which resulted in a stream of studies showing that scientific practice is not organized through a single order of worth or rationality (Jasanoff, 2004; Law and Mol, 2002). Rather, the organization of scientific knowledge production is itself shaped through conflicting orders of worth. These orders may contrast, for instance, research that is patient relevant with research that is considered academically excellent (Rushforth et al., 2018). Scholars have demonstrated the interwovenness in regimes and practices of scientific knowledge production and orders of worth like the ethical (Pickersgill, 2012), political (Elzinga, 1993; Frickel and Moore, 2005) and the aesthetic (M'charek, 2014;



Pols, 2013). In focusing on everyday scientific practices, STS has highlighted not only the co-presence of various orders of worth, but the productivity of clashes between such orders (Law, 2017). Moreover, it has foregrounded the role of non-human actors in shaping social interaction. Recently, these insights have escaped the field of STS to inform other domains of social science, leading to a 'material turn' in the study of cultural consumption and production (Beljean et al., 2015). In this volume, the contributions by Van Dijk on the co-working space and by Arfini on Bolognese tortellini cultures, at two extremes of the social spectrum, are strongly informed by this material turn.

These strands of research inform all contributions in this special issue. All articles start from the assumption that the social and analytical separation of moral and aesthetic spheres does not hold up. Aesthetics and moral judgments are always 'clouded' by other types of judgment. Aesthetic, moral and other valuations blend and blur, and in this blending and blurring, they create social distinctions, categorizations and relations. Over the past decade, a similar confluence of research traditions happened in valuation studies, a transdisciplinary field that explores value and valuation from a perspective inspired by cultural and economic sociology, STS and organizational studies (Beckert and Aspers, 2011; Callon et al., 2007; Doganova et al., 2018; Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013; Hutter and Stark, 2015). Valuation studies share many of the assumptions of this special issue: orders of worth are interconnected; judgments are embedded in everyday practices; judgments create social categories and relations; they are embedded in wider societal power dynamics. However, this field overwhelmingly focuses on market valuations: how are economic and monetary valuations related to other forms of worth? And how do valuations work in contexts of increasing 'marketization' or 'capitalization'? (however, see Hennion, 2007, 2017; Heuts and Mol, 2013).

In this special issue, we hope to redress the balance by bringing to the fore the relation between different non-monetary valuations: the aesthetic and the moral. In order to do so, we draw on cultural sociology and on cultural studies, the two fields that have most extensively documented everyday moral and aesthetic judgments and their social consequences. Obviously, these 'cultural' valuations are informed by market relations. Yet at the same time, they shape such market relations (Cochoy et al., 2017). And quite often, cultural valuations operate independently from markets. As cultural studies and cultural sociology have always argued: aesthetics and morality are distinct 'orders of worth' with their own logics that cannot be reduced to economics or market relations alone.

## **Grounded practices: aesthetics and morality in contemporary society**

So how do aesthetics and morality blend, blur and clash in contemporary social life? We will now turn to the five contributions directly, to identify the common themes and the implications we can draw from them. All articles highlight the importance of institutions in articulating aesthetics and morality. The term is used here in the sociological sense: sets of relations, conventions and implicit and explicit rules that continue to exist even when the people inhabiting these institutions change and none of the original people are

there anymore. Simone van Dijk, in her ethnography of a co-working space of young, educated Amsterdammers, analyzes how both aesthetic and moral repertoires are mobilized in founding a new institution. She shows how a professional community cultivates a homey communal atmosphere, with the ultimate goal of creating productive workers in the new economy. Elisa AG Arfini analyzes how the making of the same round piece of pasta – tortellini, the typical pasta of the Italian city of Bologna – acquires completely different moral and aesthetic meanings in two very different institutions: the workshops where mostly migrant women hand-roll them, and the all-male ‘brotherhoods’ where Italian gentlemen prepare them with considerable pomp and circumstance. Josien Arts and Marguerite Van den Berg look at the employment office as crucial site where Dutch unemployed are trained to dress and present themselves in a proper way for entering the post-Fordist labor market. Marcel Van den Haak and Nico Wilterdink, in their article on Dutch interviewees’ ‘struggles with distinction’, analyze how the educational system influences people’s repertoires for evaluating cultural worth. Finally, Ori Schwartz, shows how various media outlets – magazines, websites – spread a particular Israeli moral/cultural critique of ‘farterism’. This institutional focus betrays the sociological background of all authors. As Ori Schwartz notes in his article, there is a long tradition in sociology of seeing culture as mediator of the social. From this vantage point, ethics and aesthetics are two sides of the same coin: two central ways for groups to express their unity and boundedness through collective evaluations. In other words: both aesthetic and moral logics are grounded first and foremost in durable social relations.

The contributions also highlight a second layer of groundedness: the importance of materiality or things in articulating both aesthetics and morality. Building on the material turn in the cultural and social sciences, several contributions in this special issue identify the material as the site where the struggle between moral repertoires and aesthetic regimes plays out. The article by Arts and Van den Berg does so most explicitly. They ask ‘Who can wear flipflops to work?’, stressing the strong contrast between the Dutch unemployed who cannot, and tech billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg who can, and does. Similarly, in Arfini’s paper, tortelli emerges as the key symbolic site for the articulation and performance of two moral and aesthetic communities at the two extremes of Italian society. Finally, a Christmas decoration exposes the central contradictions of the workplace culture studied by Van Dijk. Overall, these contributions take a moderate position in the materialities debate: while things mediate social relationships and express the contradictions between aesthetic and moral valuations, they only play a modest part as actor in such relationship and logics (Battentier and Kuipers, in press). Instead, the meanings attributed to these things are derived first and foremost from social interactions and wider cultural repertoires.

Third, all contributions build on the central insight from cultural studies and the (post) Bourdieusian sociology that aesthetics and morality recreate social categorizations, in particular social class, gender, age, race and the intersections between these four. Indeed, the tensions between aesthetics and morality play out most clearly at the moments and sites when tensions between unequal social groups come to the fore. For instance, the Christmas decoration in the co-working space described by Van Dijk is a gift from the cleaning staff. However, it so offends the aesthetic sensibilities of the young, educated cosmopolitan co-workers that the limits of their moral community, which presupposes

inclusivity and egalitarianism, are painfully exposed. Similarly, the highly educated Dutch interviewees find themselves torn between their moral egalitarian beliefs, and their aesthetic distaste for some forms of lowbrow culture. However, this process becomes most starkly visible in the Dutch employment office, where the less educated are instructed to 'adapt' their aesthetics appearance to middle class conventions, in order to increase their employability in line with the moral regime of the post-Fordist welfare state. However, these tensions do not always neatly follow social hierarchies: the Israeli anti-elitist critique of highbrow 'farterism' exposes highbrow aesthetics as morally suspicious as well as inauthentic. This critique opposes rather than confirms hierarchies.

Fourth, all five articles argue that aesthetics and morality are central to the reproduction of social inequalities. In all papers, the cultural – aesthetic and moral – domain emerges as an important field where the rising inequalities of the 21st century play out. This may happen explicitly, as in the cultural boundary-drawing analyzed by Van den Haak and Wilterdink and by Schwartz, which supports primarily class boundaries. However, it also works in more subtle ways. The sentimental aestheticization of authentic pasta-making by Bolognese female workers erases class, gender, as well as ethnic disadvantage. In the aesthetic 'cover-up' of post-Fordist economic-driven moralities in employment offices and co-working spaces, economic logics are obfuscated by seemingly disinterested cultural repertoires. In an interesting reversal of classical Bourdieusian insights, we find that class boundaries are most explicitly marked, whereas other dimensions of inequality – gender, age, ethnicity – are naturalized or clouded.

A final common thread of these articles therefore: they all situate their analysis of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful in the specific historical context of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, an era characterized by eroding boundaries between aesthetics, morality and other domains. Over the past fifty years, the clear Habermasian boundaries have become increasingly contested, in a shift for which social theorists have coined endless new terms: late modern, neoliberal, post-Fordist societies; informalized, meritocratic, egalitarian, consumer cultures; aesthetic, post-industrial, consumerist, service economies, all shaped by the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Littler, 2013). These labels all have one thing in common: they point to blurring boundaries between aesthetics, morality, economy and society, and an encroachment of economics logics into all domains of life.

One important element of this boundary blurring is the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone, 2007), leading to a conjunction of aesthetic and moral criteria that is expressed most forcefully in a new ethos of 'authenticity' – a cultural category that straddles the moral and the aesthetic. Many authors, including Van Dijk and Arts and Van den Berg, see this as the consequence of an economic shift: the cooptation of aesthetics and moralities in the post-Fordist economy. Other authors, such as Van den Haak and Wilterdink and Schwartz, see it primarily as a symptom of the erosion of formalized cultural and social hierarchies, which in turn is associated with a wider process of meritocratization. Thus, the entanglements of aesthetics, morality and social divides, as already documented by cultural studies and the Bourdieusians and post-Bourdieusians of the 20th century, have acquired a new edge because of the awkward combination of rising social inequalities, egalitarian ideologies and post-Fordist economic rationalities.

## Clashing, blending and blurring valuations: aesthetic and moral evaluations in everyday life

So how do aesthetics and moralities blend, blur and clash in everyday life? We have five papers with shared assumptions: aesthetic and moral categorizations are grounded in the social, with durable social effects on social divides and inequalities. In their careful analysis of everyday valuations, these contributions map the range of possible relations between aesthetics and morality: they clash, they blend or they blur.

First, there is the outright clash, discussed most directly in the contributions by Schwartz, and Van den Haak and Wilterdink. This happens when aesthetic valuations or pretensions cross moral lines. This is the example that we started with – beautiful pictures, but morally questionable. As Schwartz observes, the relation between aesthetics and morality is often conceptualized as surface versus depth. This conceptualization not only marks a hierarchy but also distinguishes various levels of reality or truth. Consequently, there is a tendency to prioritize moral considerations above ‘superficial’ or ‘frivolous’ aesthetic sensations. Schwartz’s own analysis is a good example of this: highbrow tastes in architecture, film and food are dismissed by critics as sterile and fake. Such ‘cultured’ tastes are countered in two ways: by more ‘earthy’ or ‘grounded’ and ‘authentic’ tastes and by moral repertoires where pure aesthetics is moralized as bad and even ‘sinful’. Similarly, Arts and Van den Berg show how the aesthetic preferences of the Dutch unemployed are easily cast aside to facilitate the more ‘real’ needs of the labor market and the moral duty to contribute to this labor market rather than depend on other people or the State.

The asymmetrical relation between these two regimes of valuation becomes clear when we try to imagine the reverse: aesthetic objections that trump moral considerations. What happens when something good is rejected because it is ugly, something bad embraced because it is beautiful? This is the decadent logic of high romanticism, the amoral shock effects of Bohemian avant gardes from Baudelaire to Bowie (cf. Bell, 1976). However, throughout this special issue, we find examples of the tenacity and autonomy of aesthetic judgments. There is no indication that Schwartz’s farterists are revising their tastes, and indeed, these arty-farty tastes follow a well-established modernist convention of ‘art for art’s sake’. And even though Van den Haak and Wilterdink’s interviewees find their own rejection of other people’s tastes morally problematic, they remain convinced of their disdain for some cultural products. So, while morality is expected to trump aesthetics, the outcome is often more ambivalent. Aesthetic judgments may be easy to reject in theory, but they have deeply felt reality that makes them sticky, hard to cast aside and quite impervious to criticism. In the clash between aesthetics and morality, this volume gives little reason to expect that morality will automatically emerge victorious.

In most cases, however, aesthetics and morality are not directly opposed. Instead, they operate in tandem, blending aesthetic and moral valuations and thus creating an ‘ethos’ that sustains a specific social order. This is the typical logic of fairy tales – the beautiful and the good are one. This logic also drives fashion modeling, and despite incidental objections and scandals, we succumb to this logic. Van Dijk and Arfini, in this issue, most forcefully show the effectivity of the fusion of these orders of worth. In Van Dijk’s case, the co-working community draws on the imagery of home, family and intimacy to create a sense of belonging that subsumes moral goodness and aesthetic enjoyment – while excluding others from

this closed cultural universe. The article by Arfini beautifully illustrates how an appeal to tradition has the same effect: both the precarious female labor of making tortellini and elite consumption practices of the all-male tortellini brotherhood are cast as ‘beautiful’ and ‘rightful’ cultural heritage. In both cases, this blending of morality and aesthetics conjures up the logics of the lifeworld: private, traditional, homey and intimate. This particular form of (rather sentimental) ‘cultural politics’ obfuscates processes of exclusion and inequality. It is easy to imagine that everybody is happy, contented and at home in these organic and integrated cultural spheres. In addition, it hides from view the economic logics at work here: while both the production and consumption of tortellini and the flexible work of the young creative Amsterdammers are obviously about work and money, the appeal to moral and aesthetic categories suggests that what happens here is outside of the economic world.

Finally, the contributions in this special issue highlight increasing blurring of aesthetics and morality after a long period of increasing – though incomplete – separation of aesthetic and moral ‘rationalities’. As the second half of the 20th century brought the erosion of traditional institutions and identities, people increasingly organized their selves around lifestyles anchored in consumption and aesthetic preferences. Consumption patterns are no longer a reflection of necessity, social standing or other traditional sources of identity. Instead they are supposed to show one’s authentic self (Featherstone, 2007; De Keere, 2014, 2017; Holla and Kuipers, 2015). This aestheticization of social life led to new entanglements of aesthetics and morality.

First, as aesthetic styles came to stand for worldviews, aesthetics itself became a moral imperative. One *has* to have a taste, for instance, for music or for clothing. One *has* to have a lifestyle. One *has* to think of one’s looks. Second, a new morality of authenticity emerged: the belief that everything should express its ‘true self’ in an effortless, spontaneous or natural manner. This new ethos is an interesting hybrid: mostly moral, but with distinct aesthetic undertones: expressions of the true self are also expected to be beautiful and effortless, whereas fakeness becomes a hallmark of ugliness (Holla, 2016; Holliday and Taylor, 2006; Perry, 2015). Also, authenticity, as a hybrid of aesthetic and moral modes of valuations, is an increasingly central criterion for evaluating various forms of worth. Its slippery character – is it moral? Is it aesthetic? Is it political? – gives it a unique new dimension. On one hand, it renders the concept very broadly applicable, while on the other hand it has become an increasingly difficult imperative to meet. As Schwartz’ contribution shows in particular, this repertoire can be used to attack and exclude others. The reproach of inauthenticity is almost impossible to counter. Yet, authenticity is not available to all. Arts and Van den Berg observe that it is fine for tech billionaires to express their authentic selves in their hoodies and Adidas flip-flops. However, the unemployed cannot afford such authenticity: they need to adapt their selves – morally and aesthetically – to conform to the demands of the labor market.

This new aesthetic/moral entanglement therefore is intimately connected with economics. This is the central argument of the most critical contribution to this special issue, by Arts and Van den Berg. First, and obviously, the aestheticization of culture is based in consumption society. Things are made beautiful in order to commodify them. Aestheticization, in other words, is implicated in the creation and expansion of markets. Crucially, the post-Fordist logics of consumer societies see both morality and aesthetic as something to be instrumentalized and thus changed and molded. In this process, not only things, but also feelings, thoughts, bodies and even moralities are aestheticized and


commodified. As Van Dijk shows, even the aesthetic/moral experience of the home and the domestic are subjected to commodification. All people working in the service-oriented post-Fordist economies add value not only through production, but also the moral investment of creative, aesthetic and emotional labor (see Arts and Berg, 2019 this volume; Baker and Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Maguire and Matthews, 2012; Oejo, 2012). Thus, their most central valuations – what they find beautiful and just, ugly and wrong – become products traded and sold on markets. As such, the blurring of boundaries between aesthetics, morality, economy and society can ultimately cause alienation. It alienates people from the product they create and consume and thus from themselves.


This brings us to the central tenet of the special issue. Ultimately, aesthetics and morality are the strongest expression of people's sense of self – as individuals embedded in communities, institutions, societies and economic systems. However, it is precisely this seductiveness of moral and aesthetic valuations that makes possible its social effects: exclusion, manipulation and the obfuscation of power imbalances and economic exploitation. In making and *feeling* aesthetic and moral sentiments, people can experience the strongest possible sense of coherence and integration, leading to a deeply felt, embodied sense of truth.


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