

Tom Huhn, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Letters at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, draws on his expertise in aesthetics to discuss the role of the arts in culture with examples from the visual arts, music, film, and literature. Some of the more interesting topics covered include beauty and the sublime, the irrational in culture, art criticism, and the end of taste.

**MM:** Michael Malone

**TH:** Tom Huhn

**MM:** Let's start with some definitions. I'm really curious. Most people have a pretty good sense of what aesthetics is.

**TH:** They do?

**MM:** I think. Is there a formal definition of aesthetics?

**TH:** I'll tell you a big problem I've run into with the word aesthetics. Twice in my life, I've met people at parties, on two separate occasions. And each of them, before they knew what I did, each of them introduced themselves to me and said that they were aestheticians. I thought, oh, that's wonderful. How rare. They do the same thing I do, so I was like rubbing my hands. This is great. We can start talking about Kant and Schiller. But it turns out these two aestheticians wanted to talk about hair conditioners and nail extensions. So aesthetician also means beautician.

**MM:** So you have kind of a fallback career if this philosophy thing doesn't work out.

**TH:** Well, what I'd like to do—I mean, when language plays a trick like that on you, the best thing to do is just sort of reverse it. So what I like, the way I like to describe myself now is to say that I'm a beautician and not an aesthetician. But the difference between the kind of beautician I am and these other aestheticians is that I can't make anything prettier. I can't make anything more attractive. They're better at that than I am. But what I attempt to do as a beautician is to try to understand what kind of experience it is that people are having. What happens to use when we have an experience of something that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century people would call beauty. In the twentieth century, it doesn't matter so much what term you use. You might just say, oh, cool. But the term doesn't matter because it's a moment in which there's a rare experience that occurs unlike any other kind of experience. What I want to try to understand is what happens in that moment.

**MM:** Is there a boundary line between being an aesthete and being an aesthetician? We think of Oscar Wilde as an aesthete. But he obviously had an underlying aesthetic he was working from, didn't he?

**TH:** Yes he did. And there is some similarity. I mean as an aesthete, think about the kind of dynamic that is going on in someone like Wilde. And Warhol's another example of a great aesthete. What is the dynamic that Wilde and Warhol are cultivating?

**MM:** Are they manifesting their aesthetics in their persona?

**TH:** I think they are because they take any experience from the world and try to actually distance themselves from it. This is Warhol's great trick. This is why he wanted people afterwards, after a party or after seeing a painting, to call him on the phone and describe it. He didn't want the immediacy of experience, I mean, we talk so much these days about, oh, isn't experience wonderful? I had a great experience and all that. The aesthete has the opposite reaction to experience. The aesthete wants more distance between him or herself and experience and there is a continuity between that aesthete's desire and a certain tradition in aesthetics. The continuity is trying to disavow or distance oneself from certain kinds of experiences. From the immediacy of, if you will, sensuous experience. What the aesthete and, you might say, the aesthetician have in common is they don't want *just* sensation. They want a kind of reflection upon sensation.

**MM:** Is there a value judgment involved in the study of aesthetics? Are you just studying the process of aesthetics or are you actually rendering value judgments yourself? Can you say, this is good versus this is bad in the 1990s?

**TH:** Well, I'm like you probably. I make all sorts of judgments of taste. I do it all the time. We almost can't avoid doing it.

**MM:** Can you say this is good art?

**TH:** I can say it. It doesn't mean it has any validity. Anyone can say it. It's curious how few people actually listen to anyone who says that.

**MM:** But your judgment has no more weight than mine does as, you know, the man on the street?

**TH:** Certainly it doesn't.

**MM:** But this is your profession!

**TH:** But I'm not interested in designating certain objects as art or non-art. What I'm interested in as an aesthetician/beautician is trying to understand what happens during the moment when someone judges something to be art or to be beautiful. What happens then?

**MM:** It seems to me the line has disappeared between what is art and what is non-art. You're suggesting that that line still exists somewhere out there?

**TH:** No, I don't want to suggest that because this is the great thought that Kant comes to at the end of the eighteenth century. I mean, from a Kantian position you can never decide what objects ought to go into a museum because, although you may judge a

painting or found object today to be beautiful, there's no guarantee that tomorrow even the same person will find it beautiful. Therefore, how could you ever collect certain objects, put them in museums, and say not just the same person will find them beautiful, but everyone ought to find them beautiful?

**MM:** But what about reversing the process where I declare it a work of art? I take the urinal in 1927 or whenever it was and stick it in a museum and I say this is now art. Is that a permissible act? Is that an aesthetically proper move?

**TH:** It's not aesthetically proper at all. That's a kind of ontological claim. IT's a claim about the status of an object.

**MM:** Okay.

**TH:** Whereas aesthetics is much more concerned not with adjudicating, not with saying these are artworks and these are not. Aesthetics is much more concerned with what *happens* in aesthetic experience. I think you want to talk about the object and aestheticians for the most part, want to talk about the subject who makes the judgments, regardless of the object. I mean, the great counterexample to "this is an art object or this is not an art object" is that the great experience of beauty in the seventeenth and eighteenth century is not artworks at all, it's nature. So which parts of nature do you get to decree beautiful or not?

**MM:** Well, once again, take the point of view of the average guy walking into a museum. I expect a professor of aesthetics to say that aesthetics is value laden, that this is a good work of art, this is intrinsically good, this is intrinsically beautiful, this is intrinsically sublime, and that somehow it's invested with these characteristics. And this work of art over here is not beautiful. It is not sublime and it does not somewhere render the world a better place.

**TH:** Right. This is the great mistake that I think is the founding moment of aesthetics as a discipline. The great mistake is the mistake that we all make every time we make an aesthetic judgment. When I say "that thing is beautiful" or, "oh, wow, isn't it wonderful," I'm making the mistake of thinking that the object or feeding or believing that the object has certain characteristics that give rise to that feeling in me.

**MM:** So, in a sense, an aesthetician is not a critic.

**TH:** Not at all.

**MM:** They have distinct roles.

**TH:** They do. A critic is interested in talking about the qualities of the object that perhaps elicit certain responses in the viewer. The aesthetician is much more interested in, again, not the object, but the subject. But the really curious and I think wonderful

thing about all aesthetic judgments is that we always believe that the object really has the qualities that give rise to certain feelings in us.

**MM:** Let's get on then to the subject of beauty. First of all, are Kant's aesthetics more valuable today than ever before? You've certainly written that way ...

**TH:** I didn't think I would ever call myself a Kantian, but I think Kant really founds the modern discipline of aesthetics, and the great moment in the *Critique of Judgment*, which he writes in the 1790s, is the recognition of the difference between saying, "I like this" and the judgment, "it's beautiful." We all have likes and dislikes. For example, Kant's example, you take a sip from a glass of wine and you say, "I like it." Pretty straightforward. But think about it for a minute—who's speaking, "I like it?" In a funny way, you're giving a report of a certain affect on your palette. You're kind of literally the mouthpiece for your tongue, having gotten a very favorable sensation. You could think about that in terms of your five senses. The distinction Kant makes is between saying "I like it," "this feels good," "that looks pretty"—in other words, the distinction between pleasant stimulation and aesthetic judgment. When you say, according to Kant, "something is beautiful," you're not saying "my palette finds it agreeable" or, "oh, that's really pleasant to look at." You're making a judgment from a wholly different part of yourself than from one of your five senses. For Kant, any animal—a dog has likes and dislikes.

**MM:** Sure.

**TH:** It licks certain things and likes them or doesn't like them. But, for Kant, it's only human beings who make aesthetic judgments and that means that we all recognize this. If you and I go into an art gallery together and I know that yellow is your favorite color and you point out this large painting to me full of yellow and you say to me, "oh, that is a beautiful painting," I say to you, "you just like yellow. Yellow is pleasing to you. That's not beautiful. You just like that color." The distinction for Kant, when you say "something's beautiful," you're not saying "my senses like it." You're not saying that I, as the repository of the sensations from these five capacities, like it. You are liking it in a total way. Your whole being likes something. That's why for Kant we make the distinction in language between "I like something" and "it's beautiful."

**MM:** Is it possible to stand in front of a Gilbert and George excrement painting and say "that's beautiful"? Or can we only say "that's important" or "that's a major work of art" or "that épate la bourgeoisie" or something like that. Can we say "that's beautiful"?

**TH:** Of course, why can't we? And on Kantian grounds it's a wonderful capacity we have because it means that I'm not subject to just the sensations I get. I can step back. This brings us back to the question about the aesthete and aestheticians. I can step back from the immediacy of sensation and this is why the term reflection is so important in aesthetics and reflective judgment. I can reflect, distanced from my sensations, and make a judgment based on some wholly other grounds than sensory input. For Kant, that's the

moment we actually raise ourselves above nature. This is why being an aesthete is sort of pushing that dynamic to an extreme. Because what the aesthete does is to say, “oh, I can transform any unpleasant experience into a moment of beauty.” That’s a great capacity to distanciate all sensation and transform it into something pleasurable. I mean, for Kant that’s one of the great achievements of civilization. You have a lousy experience, but, guess what—take that as an opportunity to have a wonderful experience.

**MM:** But can’t you take being an aesthete too far? I mean, we sort of look upon the dandy as somebody who is so detached from the vagaries and the ugliness and the sordidness of getting through life that they’re almost inhuman, they’re almost hothouse flowers.

**TH:** This is why I think so often people bring in ideas like the innocent eye. We want to believe that what we find beautiful is natural to find beautiful. This is why we are so often in our culture of people want to assert things like, well, why would I need any special education to appreciate the beauty of that work of art? If it is really beautiful, I don’t have to cultivate its beauty; it ought to be present to me as a sensuous being.

**MM:** What’s the difference between beautiful and sublime?

**TH:** For whom?

**MM:** For Kant. Let’s start with Kant and then Adorno, who I guess you see as a sort of spiritual, intellectual descendant of Kant.

**TH:** I do.

**MM:** What does sublime mean?

**TH:** Well, in the tradition of Burke and Kant, sublime … it’s a moment when … well, think about how Burke puts it, just a few years before Kant was writing. Kant read Burke, Burke writes his inquiry in 1757. For Burke, the sublime—and Kant takes much from him—the sublime is, I mean he’s an empiricist. There’s this really interesting question for empiricists. Empiricists believe that all of our ideas are copies of our impressions, okay? Now someone says, gee whiz, I have certain ideas in my head that I can’t find the impression from which it supposedly arose. The sublime is an example of that. What is the experience of the sublime? It’s a moment of great fear usually and recovery from fear. So the examples of the sublime are raging seas, overwhelming cliffs, storms, and so on. The distinction that Burke and Kant want to make between beauty and the sublime is to say that the sublime is when we come to a kind of precipice in ourselves. You get a sensation, this is how Burke puts it, your mind races ahead. What does your mind race ahead toward if you can’t see something, you can’t discern it clearly? What’s the thing our mind’s always raced toward? Fear of death, right?

**MM:** So this is that moment when the earth seems to give way beneath you? This is that scene in Proust where the painter is looking at the little square of yellow in a painting and the natural world seems to melt away around him. It's Vermeer's view of death and he sees it and he dies looking at it ...

**TH:** Yes, it's sublime because there's a kind of losing of oneself. And you lose yourself ...

**MM:** With a transcendental moment?

**TH:** Yes, because you transcend your capacity as a natural being and you become, for Kant anyway, a different sort of being at that moment. I mean, Burke has these wonderful examples of the sublime. He says at one point in the *Inquiry*, a clear idea is a very small idea. What are they really inspiring experiences? The things that we see that are obscure. Look into a dark case. What happens? Oh, my God. Your mind is filled, not with darkness, but with all the portents of fear and so on. So the sublime is, you have an initial sensation that makes your mind race forward and then when you are nonetheless safe, there's a feeling of relief and, hence, pleasure.

**MM:** Was romanticism kind of a cult of the sublime then?

**TH:** It was indeed, yes.

**MM:** You have a wonderful line in something you wrote that "the sublime, like natural beauty, is hope." Hope's a little different from fear.

**TH:** Yes, I think it's connected to that moment of recovery, that what happens in the sublime is you actually return to yourself. But the self you return to you is not the return to that sensuous self who can have impressions of the world. The self you would turn to, for Kant actually, the self that you make in that moment of a sublime experience is a moral being, is a being above nature, a being who can make judgments based not solely upon sensuous impressions.

**MM:** Does the hope derive from the fact that you survived that fear? That you made it through to the other side?

**TH:** Yes.

**MM:** And, therefore, you're hopeful that you can survive.

**TH:** It's not just survival because you survive as a sensuous being. What's important for Kant—he even uses those terms in the passage—is not just survival as a sensuous being. It's rising up and surviving—you would survive even if your sensuous self was destroyed because your true self is generated in that momentary experience of the sublime. Your true self is not the one that's locked in to these five senses. Not even locked into nature. Your true self rises above that.

**MM:** Now tell me about Adorno—where has he taken aesthetics?

**TH:** That's a big question.

**MM:** Demanding a very simple answer.

**TH:** How does Adorno take aesthetics? The short answer to that would be something like, there is no short answer to that. Let me try anyway. He's a Kantian; what he wants to understand is the way in which Kant formulated judgment at the end of the eighteenth century, aesthetic judgment, as a capacity for human subjects. Adorno *sees*—he follows Hegel to some extent in this—the whole history of art after the end of the eighteenth century as a kind of making art objects in something like kinds of human subjectivity. That the capacity to rise above nature is one that human beings lose because it wasn't realized. The French Revolution didn't provide freedom for everyone and so on and so there's a kind of hibernation of that possibility. The hibernation occurs within artworks. So for Adorno, as a twentieth century aesthetician, the place to look for the possibility of human freedom, or sublime hope, is *within* those artworks. So you asked earlier about the relationship between art critics and aestheticians. Here is a moment of overlap between the two. That there's a certain kind of aesthetics that might be done in the twentieth century in which what one tries to do—this is Adorno's idea—is to read off from the artwork the embedded possibilities for human freedom and what social fulfillment there is exists not so much in the subjects any more, but in these hibernating objects. I mean, this is, I think, the great message modernism.

**MM:** You've written that Adorno believe that “nature should free itself from imperious subjectivity by an art aligned in opposition to use.”

**TH:** Yes.

**MM:** Art and nature conspire? Modern art is nature's revenge?

**TH:** It is, it is indeed. I think, I mean, gee whiz, think about our relationship to nature in general. It's not a very friendly one. We dominate it. Right. The possibility of an aesthetic relationship to nature which Kant first discerns is the possibility of extracting some pleasure from nature without having a dominant nature. In Kant's description of the sublime, this is his great example of the difference between the supposedly savage person and the supposedly civilized person. The savage person is in the midst of a huge storm. What does the savage person do? Well, just like all those old movies that we've seen, the savage person hurls his spear at the heavens, or something like that. It's a relationship, you know, that's based on mastery and domination. What does the civilized person do in the midst of a storm? Oh, the civilized person conquers the storm internally. What's the internal storm? My fear of the storm. The great moment of civilization is not only do I no longer need to conquer nature externally, I conquer it internally. And, guess what, I get pleasure from it.

**MM:** It's when that sense of the sublime arises within us.

**TH:** That is his description of the sublime, exactly. Which means I no longer need to dominate nature externally. I dominate it internally. Now you could take that argument a step further and ask, well, why don't we go beyond domination altogether? For Adorno, I think the artwork, at least in the twentieth century, is an attempt to give an inkling of what it would be like to have a non-dominating relationship, not just between oneself and nature, but between oneself and other people, or, even better, between part of oneself and some other part of oneself. Why do I need to control, why is one part of me waging war with another part of me? In some regard, the artwork as the place where aesthetic experience occurs might be the possibility of having a kind of non-dominating relationship.

**MM:** Let's talk about a moment in your life, of when the sublime appears, full of fear, and the ground giving way in which nature asserts its dominance over everything. You just became a dad.

**TH:** I did.

**MM:** What does that do to a man who studies aesthetics?

**TH:** I don't think there's anything special about studying aesthetics that makes it happen, but I would be happy to share with you what the moment was like and I think it's somewhat philosophical reflection, but I think it's also a fairly common one given the anecdotes I've heard.

**MM:** I think we all get philosophical that moment.

**TH:** We do. It's just the funniest thing. Because you go into a room, you have a kind of project. You go in with the doctor and the nurse and the pregnant woman and, in effect, the principle is, you're not coming out of here until there's one more of you. IT's this mad kind of math. Well, how do you get one extra person? So, I mean obviously, I know where children come from. I've read about it, I've seen films about it, and so on; it's pretty obvious.

**MM:** Not until you're there.

**TH:** Not until you're there because this is, I mean, my wife Nancy it so wonderfully. She said "I knew we were pushing something out of me. I didn't know it was a person." And for me watching the person come out, the thing that shocked me so much was the moment the baby was halfway out. The doctor turned it and it had a face. It's the last thing in the world I expected: a face? I mean, I didn't know. A person emerges from another person. It's astounding.

**MM:** Both of whom you have an infinite stake in, unlike watching a movie or a filmstrip or ...

**TH:** I don't know. I mean, it's such a foreign thing. And I'm not sure I had a stake in it. I'll see.

**MM:** You do now, dad.

**TH:** I suppose so, I suppose so.

**MM:** You quoted Stendahl as saying "beauty is the promise of happiness."

**TH:** Yes.

**MM:** What do you mean by that? What does he mean by that?

**TH:** It's a line that Adorno was very fond of as well. I think it's a wonderful expression because it means that the great moment of pleasure that we have in beauty, which is better than any sensuous pleasure, is still itself not happiness. It's the *promise* of happiness—it's the vision of what happiness would be like. The beautiful painting, let's say, is a picture of happiness.

**MM:** So it's a map to happiness.

**TH:** It is. It is not happiness itself, and I think this is one of the reasons why people sometimes get turned off by contemporary art is that they see the promise and then they realize, damn it, it doesn't cash out. It doesn't deliver the happiness. That's the really crucial moment for reflection for an aesthetician. Why is there promise which is then withdrawn?

**MM:** Now, I'll take an entirely different tactic. I look out there and I see ugly, ugly art—art of cruelty, art of eviscerated animals.

**TH:** Damien Hirst, for example.

**MM:** Exactly. Art of violence, bloodletting, self-mutilation. And I think—this doesn't seem to me to be a path to happiness. I look at popular culture. Now I'm as good a consumer of pop culture as anybody else. I go to all the big budget action films in the multiplex with everybody else and eat my popcorn and enjoy the cheap thrills. I don't see a lot of beauty there.

**TH:** I think we have to go back to the distinction we made a little while ago of the difference between stimulation and an aesthetic experience in which there's the possibility of being freed, of freeing oneself from pure stimulation. A Hollywood film is, for the most part—and I like stimulation myself, I'm a sensuous being, I love that stuff

sometimes—but the problem is, does that entertainment, does that stimulation ever allow you the space to withdraw from it in order to have a different sort of experience, a nonmanipulated experience?

**MM:** So it's sort of a nickel-and-dime sublime.

**TH:** It is. The roller coast is a great, sublime-like experience.

**MM:** But not the sublime itself. It gives us only the *sensation* of being sublime.

**TH:** Hurting your body through space—it's thrilling. So is the blockbuster Hollywood film thrilling. The difference between those experiences, on the one hand, and the way aesthetic experience has been theorized is that aesthetic experience or the true sublime allows you to recover yourself, gives you an occasion, an opportunity, to make yourself other than just this sensuously stimulated being. I don't want in any way to discredit stimulation. It's wonderful.

**MM:** But it's addictive.

**TH:** It may be; it depends on your personality.

**MM:** But is it sufficiently addictive that it supplants the desire for the sublime? You're the monkey that keeps hitting that lever to get that stimulation.

**TH:** I think this is one of the best explanations of how television works. I mean, television is just a certain low level stimulation that we all get used to. I mean, this is, for me I turn the television on a certain hour in the evening and turn it off and hour or two later and inevitably there's less of me and I feel worse at the end of it. And I ask myself, why? It's because it's a kind of stimulation that didn't allow me the space to recollect myself.

**MM:** And you're not left with any map to happiness.

**TH:** No, I mean, this is what's so fascinating. Television and Hollywood entertainment don't even strive to promise happiness. It's as if we've become satisfied with the promise of stimulation. Oh, do you want, you know, a bloody horror movie or do you want to be stimulated by a romance comedy? The promise has been withdrawn by the 'culture industry' as it's been termed. But I think that's related to your question about contemporary art and about how ugly it is. That's another way to withdraw the promise. If art can't fulfill that promised happiness, one of the strategies that artists might then employ is, let's make art that itself denies making any promise whatsoever. But that still is an aesthetic mood because it's still hopeful that space must be created for human freedom apart from stimulation and manipulation.

**MM:** Or is it just surrender from responsibility? You became an artist and in a sense your responsibility as an artist is to help provide that road map and now you're saying, "I don't want that job. I'm going to do artwork that talks about the lack of a pathway to happiness." Isn't that abandoning your responsibilities?

**TH:** What responsibilities should artists have?

**MM:** I don't know—you're the aesthetician.

**TH:** I'm not sure they should have any responsibilities except to work on whatever they find most engaging. Just as I think our responsibility as human beings is to try to have an experience *other* than the one that's programmed for us.

**MM:** The sublime does appear in popular culture though, doesn't it?

**TH:** I would say that the effects of the sublime appear in popular culture.

**MM:** Okay.

**TH:** The film *Godzilla*, for example. The kind of decibel level in that film—I mean, we're sensuous creatures.

**MM:** Sure.

**TH:** So if you give us a certain level, literally, of stimulation, we're going to respond. There's a wonderful line of Adorno about film where he says, no matter how vigilant I am, when I leave the movie theatre, I find myself stupider. What happens in the cinema is that we are, in effect, defenseless from that kind of barrage.

**MM:** But even going to see *Rules of the Game* or *Seven Samurai*, you still come out of the movie stupid—or do those things cross over into something that approaches beauty in the sublime?

**TH:** That's a good question. I think one might want to then say, those art films are closer to intellectual stimulation.

**MM:** Okay.

**TH:** I don't want to describe any object.

**MM:** Can we learn how to distinguish between the cheap thrills and the real sublime?

**TH:** I don't think it's so much a matter of learning how to discern them. I think it's what things in this world we now occupy, this cultural world we now occupy, which things provide an opportunity for us to not be manipulated. You might have a wonderful way of

going to a film like *Godzilla* and in the mist of the film doing a brilliant critique of it. Of finding the space for reflection, having great thoughts in the midst of it. You might do that. I think it's hard to do it. But there's nothing saying that you absolutely can't do it. So it's nothing against stimulation at all. It's that I'm against ... I don't want to be against anything. I want to be *for* something. I want to be for more possibilities for opportunities to create and find human freedom. I think artworks should be an attempt to do that.

**MM:** Thank you.

**TH:** Thank you.