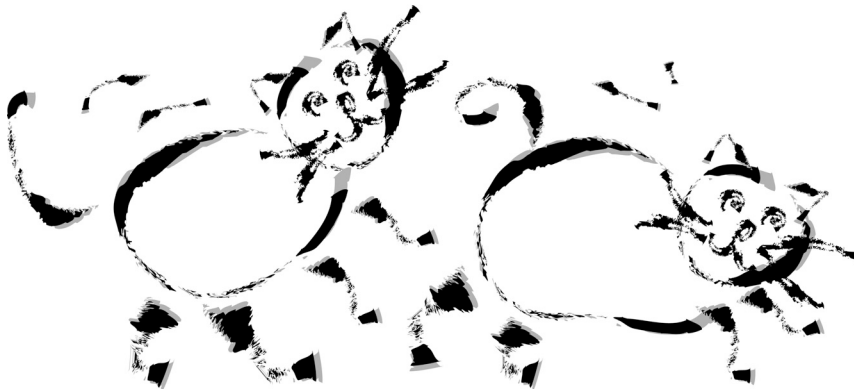


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aesthetics

Beneath Aesthetics: The Picture Book Stripped Bare

Perry Nodelman



An artist's impression of the kitten in Chris Raschka's Giant Steps

Here is a picture. Even if you gave it only the briefest of glances, I'm betting that you had a response to the picture, an awareness of your own pleasure or lack of pleasure in it, a desire either to look at it more closely or to dismiss it and never see it again.

I'm assuming these things in part because they seem to go with the territory of looking at pictures – at any kind of visual imagery. The theorist of pictorial perception E.H. Gombrich famously suggests 'that the visual image is supreme in its capacity for arousal' – that is, its ability to signal that a response is being called for, that our attention is being requested and that our emotions might be engaged. In the most literal sense of the word, pictures are attractive – they attract attention. If there are pictures in our environment, we find it hard not to look at them. Imagine the relative interest you might have in a painting on a wall and in the monochromatically painted wall surrounding it. Or consider what you look at first when you glance at a

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newspaper, or for that matter, a children's picture book. I'd wager it's likely to be a picture first, and then a glance at the words near it if it has aroused your interest enough to look for an explanation of what its significance might be.

As well as being attracted to pictures, we find it equally hard not to have some sort of immediate response to them – to have our emotions aroused by them, to have an immediate sense of like or dislike. My own first response to the picture I briefly showed you in the context of the children's book it appears in was a sort of sensuous pleasure in what I saw – a response I translated into the phrase, 'I like it. I enjoy looking at it, and I want to look at it some more.'

I did look at it some more. I read the words in the picture book it appeared in and looked at the other pictures in that book more closely. Having had my attention attracted and my pleasure aroused, I wanted to find out more about what I had so immediately and illogically found myself liking. And having found out more, I find myself still liking the picture and the book it's in – find myself liking, most of all, the pictures.

But here is what especially interests me: I don't like them in the same way. The difference between my response now and that first immediate one seems to be less in my response to the work than in the information I have available to me to base that response on, or perhaps more accurately, locate it in. I still feel a sensuous sort of pleasure in what I'm seeing, an awareness of what might be identified as the aesthetic quality of it, the aspects of it that make me think of it as pleasingly beautiful. But now I associate that beauty with a range of matters that make it meaningful – not just something to look at and be pleased by, but something to look at, make sense of, and be pleased by, in good part because it seems to be doing such a good job of making sense. That too, I suppose, is aesthetic--a response to something beautiful. But since the beauty emerges from how cleverly the sensuous information conveys other meanings, it's quite a different kind of beauty.

But let me tell you more exactly what I mean. Having looked at the picture and the book it's found in more closely, here's what I know more:

1. It represents a cat, walking.
2. It does so in terms of energetic black outlines against a background of swirling and at times somewhat greyish pastels.
3. It communicates by bringing into play a range of conventions of illustrational art that help to convey its specific meaning. Among many others, I can mention the following:
 - the predominating use of lines rather than enclosed shapes, which helps to create a sense of energetic action rather than stasis or rest.
 - the cat is pointed to the right, thus implying the movement from left to right
 conventional in pictorial narrative accompanied by an English text: in picture book art,

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time passes from left to right.

- While there appear to be two cats, I understand from the convention of what Josef Schwarcz calls 'continuous narrative' that it's really just one, caught in two consecutive moments of its move forward.
 - Some of the lines, especially those that make of the tail of the figure on the left, evoke the cartoon convention of action lines--a series of repetitions of lines of the same shape as an object moving outwards from the object in order to imply that movement is taking place.
 - The hues and intensities of the colours used in the picture evoke conventional associations. The light pastel tones create a sense of delicacy, fragility and gentleness that is at odds with the boldness and intensity of the black lines, and there's a grayness in the layering of the otherwise cheerily transparent pastels that hints at melancholy. The combination of these things implies a complex intermingling of differing moods that complicates the effect of each still separate element without submerging it into the new whole.
 - The style of the images hints of other conventions. The confident brushstrokes have the feeling of traditional Japanese calligraphy and screen paintings, while the layered blocks of colour look a little like the abstract expressionist paintings of mid twentieth-century America. Together, these two elements create an image that looks simple, even elementary – what some people might identify as childlike in its dependence on simplified outlines to represent figures and bold splashes of colour that defy ordinary perceptions of visible reality – but that also implies, for an experienced viewer like me, a large degree of sophistication. For those with knowledge of it, in other words, the picture evoke what Arthur Danto calls the 'artworld.' As Danto says, 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld' (431). In the context of the artworld, the elements of this image make it meaningful in terms of all the ways in which it represents a response to – a similarity to and a difference from – other works in the long history of painting. Among other things, the traditions evoked by the confidence of the brushstrokes and the energetic freedom of the blocks of colour both invite a focus on the physical act that created them – on the action of making art. These aspects of the picture then invite knowledgeable viewers to be aware of the physical gestures of their engendering.
4. As well as what I know about the picture implies in itself, I also now know that the picture it is part of a sequence of other pictures – one of a series of illustrations that make up a picture book narrative – and so I also read it in terms of the context established both in earlier pictures and in the texts that accompany them. Both give more specific meanings to the figures and colours and also, place this particular image in a framework of unfolding events. Equipped with knowledge of this context, I see, not just a cat walking, but a cat that I know will continue to move forward in later pictures – pictures I can read in terms of a repertoire of conventional signs for emotions that allow me to understand the cat's face and its body as expressing increasing discomfort and upset. I also see, not just indiscriminate swatches of colour but what the text has informed me are a series of raindrops, a box, and a snowflake, and understand that the image I'm looking

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at represents not just two moments in the walk of the cat, but also, four moments in an ongoing interaction between the raindrops, the box and the snowflakes, moving from left to right as they shift colours and create new ones in the process of intermingling. Furthermore, I know something else about what the text tells me – that the raindrops, box, snowflakes and kitten are performers, and that what they are performing is, as the text says, 'John Coltrane's marvellous and tricky composition, "Giant Steps".' In other words, the picture is a visual representation of a few moments in a musical sequence – an effort to show visually how the music operates aurally. The box is 'our base' – and probably the bass line in the music--the snowflake 'is taking the piano part,' and the kitten is 'the melody on top of everything.' The text says that the jazz saxophonist Coltrane 'wrote music which, in his hands, became swirling, leaping, tumbling 'sheets of sound.' The ways in which the elements of the image are layered and interact without losing their individual character represent the ways in which the instruments retain distinct lines in an overall performance, and the energy and action I noted in discussing the style of the picture earlier has the purpose of offering visual equivalents of the swirling, leaping and tumbling sheets of musical sounds.

5. As well as offering a cleverly literal layering, a transparent plastic sheets containing part of the image over the image on cardboard underneath, the cover tells me that John Coltrane's 'Giant Steps' has been 'remixed by Chris Raschka.' I have read a number of other books by Chris Raschka, so I have a specific context in which to place this book in addition to the general context of the artworld. I know that Raschka is a picture book writer and illustrator who bravely experiments with the conventions of his chosen form in a daringly simple but always deeply subtle and sophisticated way, in books like *Yo? Yes, Like Likes Like*, and the infamous, unsettling, and deeply hilarious *Arlene Sardine*. I also know that *Giant Steps* is not Raschka's first attempt at the visual depiction of a jazz composition. There are two others. *Charlie Parker Plays Bebop* also represents differing musical lines as a series of transforming figures, including lollipops and bus stop signs with legs to walk on and with a similarity of shape that allows them to act as musical lines and seem like variations of each other. *Mysterious Thelonious* offers a complex abstract depiction of shifting blocks of colour that represent individual notes, sometimes played singly and sometimes together. *Giant Steps* then represents an intermingling of the effects of the other two. I can understand and appreciate it not just for itself but as part of the evolution of an intriguing and groundbreaking artistic endeavour, an experiment in the visualization of music generally and the improvisational and variational forms of jazz more specifically.
6. I can appreciate the experiment as much as I do because of my familiarity with that music. I can listen to it, or remember listening to it, as I look at the book, and play the entertaining game of solving the puzzle of how the specific elements in the pictures relate to specific elements in the music.

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7. The author, the artworld, and the jazz world are not the only contexts that influence my understanding of the book. I also think of it as being a specific kind of book – a children's picture book – and more generally, as being children's literature, a specific kind of literature. I am aware of how it does and does not use the language, style, characters, themes, narrative techniques and structures conventional to those forms of literature. As an academic specialist I have a whole range of ways of thinking about how the story is like and unlike other specific picture books or picture books generally, other stories about cats and other animals, other stories about chaos and order and going on a journey and what it means to be childlike or successful in life or otherwise bad or happy, other stories that play variations on themes characteristic of children's literature or are themselves constructed around internal variations. I hardly even begin to have the time to go into all that here – so I won't. What I will do is point out just two especially important things.

- First, my knowledge of children's literature allows me an awareness of the myriad of subtle and not so subtle ways that Raschka reveals his awareness of his predecessors—that is, his knowledge of the picture book artworld, all the ways in which his book represents a schooling in, a response to, and an adept variation on a long history of other picture books. It represents what the sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu might identify as Raschka's *habitus* – his knowledge of both the spoken and unspoken principles that make for success within the field of children's literature, a feel for its particular game. The possession of a children's literature habitus allows successful writers and publishers to produce books that will attract the attention of others who matter – books that are likely to be noteworthy because, like *Giant Steps*, they both represent the established and therefore recognizably children's-literature-like conventions of the literature that make books palatable and also offer the sort of ingenious new twists on the conventions that make them interesting. Such books are evidence of what Bourdieu might identify as positions taken in the field of children's literature.

- Second, I need to note that children's literature is a form of writing produced in the faith that the relative inexperience of children in relation to adults requires a special sort of text both to speak to them where they are as children and to help them to learn how to be adults. It is therefore, inherently and always, a didactic literature – a way for those who know to speak to and inform those who do not yet know. Even when it purports just to offer pleasure it informs children as to what adults think they ought to be pleased by. Knowing that, I see and appreciate the picture of the cat walking in *Giant Steps* as part of an educational endeavour. It isn't just about who John Coltrane was and how 'Giant Steps' sounds and works as a jazz variation, it is actively teaching those things – and like most if not all picture books, likely to become part of libraries and classroom collections specifically as a teaching tool. Indeed, all the aspects of it I've been discussing – its use of pictorial conventions to convey meaning, its use of specific pre-existing styles, its generic characteristics and its relationships to other picture books, might easily become part of what it might help to teach. I'd like to keep that in mind and come back to it later.

8. Meanwhile, and finally, I'm also aware of ways in which the picture of the cat walking teaches matters the author and many readers might not be very conscious or aware of – perhaps because they simply take them for granted. I'm speaking

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here of the ideological content of the picture. In addition to whatever it assumes about the significance of jazz and cats and raindrops, it affirms other more general ideas just in being a picture book. The implied reader/viewer of picture books knows, among other things, that adults provide the books for children with the best interests of children in mind. The mere existence of picture books then implies a world organized so that children need to know that they need and can depend on benevolent adult intervention in and supervision of all aspects of their lives-including their imaginative lives as influenced by the content of children's books. That a sumptuous, sensuously attractive, elaborate, and above all, expensive book (it cost me \$26 Canadian for just thirty-three pages and a very short text) exists primarily to offer readers pleasure also tells those readers that they deserve to be pleased, that pleasing them has been an aspiration of a whole range of writers, illustrators, publishers, librarians and parents. It establishes the existence of child reader/viewers as self-indulgent consumers of what pleases them. The view of childhood that engendered children's literature and still produces picture books like *Giant Steps* has always been an engine in the construction of a decidedly middle-class consumer child. Being aware of that does distress me a little – it seems a little sneaky and even corrupt that books should be doing this sort of cultural work. But I can't deny that, as a solidly middle-class consumer myself, part of what pleases me about the book is the way it confirms my right to indulge in the sort of pleasures it offers and the right of children to do so also – to be what I in my contemporary middle class wisdom understand to be childlike, i.e., worth the expense, especially in order to please someone as important as me, me, me.

All this, as I said, makes me like the book more. Not only does it let me have a richer and deeper and more profound experience of it, but it does so because I give me a richer sense of how and why it is less simple than it seems – itself deeper and more profound. In fact, my sense of the book after my closer look at it is entirely different from what my first quick glance revealed to me. But what most intrigues me about that is what it reveals about my original response – that it appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with all the aspects of meaning and function I later learned.

When I look at a picture – any picture, I'll postulate – and have the response that leads me to say to myself, 'I like it' or 'I don't like it,' then what I'm responding to seems to have little if anything at all to do with its meaning or function. It seems in fact to exist prior to and outside of meaning and function. Furthermore, I suspect that original response of liking or not liking might even be capable of surviving intact even after one develops a knowledge of the picture's meaning and function that ought to invite a contradictory attitude towards it – for I find myself with the suspicion that my original pleasure in just absorbing the sensation offered by the picture still survives, somehow separate from and alongside my knowledge of it. I still enjoy the colours and lines in addition to and outside of my pleasure in the cat, the raindrops and what I now know they mean. It's something like my childhood memory of first tasting cold

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liver oil and knowing immediately that I was not fond of what was happening inside my mouth. No matter how much my parents told me about how good it was for me and why, not matter how much I had to agree they were right, that horrible fishy stuff still tasted horrible. I suspect it still would – I am definitely not about to try it and find out.

The kind of response I'm talking about here – the kind that precedes knowledge of meaning and function – appears to have three main qualities. First, it is sensual and irrational – somehow connected to bodily pleasure or pain and beyond and outside of reason. Second, it is personal – something I sense as being connected to what makes me distinct as an individual, not something tied to my being as a social person interconnected with others and with the range of meanings, attitudes and values that my agreement or disagreement with connects me with others. While there may be other people that equally dislike cod liver oil, that represents a purely personal taste in each of us, not a moral or intellectual or political position or membership in a group of any social significance. There is no Cod Liver Oil Abolitionist Party – although perhaps there ought to be. And third, therefore, as I've been suggesting, the kind of response I'm talking about seems to have nothing to do with purpose or function – it might be the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicinal cod liver oil go down or the pleasing shapes and colours that end up teaching people about jazz – but it still remains separate from the medicine, not an integral part of what's medicinal about it.

The qualities I've just listed – being personal, irrational and separate from meaning or function – would seem to identify this kind of response as what is usually called aesthetic – an adjective the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'Of or pertaining to the appreciation or criticism of the beautiful.' The quotes the *OED* offers as examples confirm these qualities:

1821 COLERIDGE in *Blackw. Mag.* X. 254, I wish I could find a more familiar word than æsthetic, for works of taste and criticism [that is, what we like or don't like]. . . .

1872 H. SPENCER *Psychol.* (ed. 2) II. . . . The aesthetic character of a feeling is habitually associated with separateness from life-serving function.

That separateness is what Emmanuel Kant, a key foundational figure in the history of aesthetics, identified as disinterest. According to Kant, 'if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or could be at stake, for us or any one else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection)' (90). In other words, it's our own response of like or dislike to an aesthetic object that is central, not the way in which what we're responding to represents or comments on what it represents. What matters in an aesthetic response to Raschka's cat is not anything the picture makes me feel about the cat, but rather, the pleasing lines and shapes.

Nevertheless, Kant goes on to suggest two qualities of aesthetic response that diverge from my first response to the cat picture. While the aesthetic response is subjective,

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it's not merely personal – personal responses are agreeable or pleasant, but not aesthetic responses to beauty: 'For one cannot judge that about which he is aware that the satisfaction in it is without any interest in his own case in any way except that it must contain a ground of satisfaction for everyone' (96). Aesthetic judgements are universally true. There is such a thing as good taste, and there are right ways of liking or not liking aesthetic objects. Furthermore, an aesthetic response turns out to actually have an important function: 'Beauty is the form of purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end' (120). It offers a sense of having a purpose of significance exactly because, paradoxically, it is without a specific purpose, and thus reveals the form of purposiveness and its connections to other transcendent qualities. Finally, Kant argues, 'The beautiful is the symbol of the morally good' (227). While I'm certainly no philosopher, I understand this as meaning that having a disinterested aesthetic response gives us access to something beyond sensuality, beyond emotion, beyond mere logic, beyond ourselves – and makes us part of a community wishing to move beyond those things.

But here's the thing: looking at Raschka's cat picture doesn't do any of that for me. I am pleased, but I am not elevated by it. Perhaps unfortunately, I am still the same insensitive and untranscended sensuous oaf I was before I looked at it. Kant would probably say I find the picture merely agreeable, and that either it or I lack the depth necessary for a truly aesthetic response. Well, as an insensitive sensuous oaf and an unregenerate fan of sensuality, reason, emotions and being myself, I'm happy to admit that possibility. Indeed, I think I want to celebrate it – something I'll come back to later.

Meanwhile, what really interests me here is how Kant's move to prove that which is subjective impersonal, and to provide that which is without purpose with purposiveness and that which is disinterested with an interest in making us better people and part of a community of better people – those with a taste for the beautiful – exemplifies a feature of most discussions of aesthetics generally, and discussions of the aesthetics of children's picture books in particular. There is an equal insistence on both the subjectivity of response and of taste and the importance of learning to have the right kind of response and the right kind of taste; on the separateness of aesthetic pleasure from any interest or practical purpose and its immensely important, indeed, life-defining, significance – its deeply interested purpose. As I suggested earlier, *Giant Steps* offers its visual representations of music specifically in order to teach, not just what jazz is, but how to listen to it and what to like about it. It can also be used to teach how visual representations communicate and what specific kinds of pleasure they offer – but always in the context that both the pleasures in the jazz and the pleasure in the pictures are disinterested and personal – matters of taste.

Michèle Anstey and Geoff Bull's discussion of 'Aesthetic Perspective' in *Reading the Visual* is a good example of this contradiction:

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... an aesthetic approach emphasizes the affective viewpoint of personal response; firstly in the creative act of the illustrator and secondly in the response of the viewer to the illustration Essentially an aesthetic perspective asks questions about how the illustrator has created mood or feelings and what personal responses are engendered by the illustrators' combination of the elements in balance and layout.

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On the one hand the response is 'personal' to a viewer, but on the other, the viewer needs to think about how the illustrator made the picture mean what it does – and thus, shaped response to it. As a result, aesthetic response is a teachable subject. Anstey and Bull refer to Donna Norton's insistence in her textbook intended for children's literature courses on the need of educators to develop 'programs that encourage informed aesthetic responses' (192). Despite the title of her book, *Through the Eyes of a Child*, Norton's insistence on informed responses actually requires children to be taught to see with the eyes of informed adults. She refers to what Hallowell Judson calls 'aesthetic scanning,' which 'consists of locating and identifying properties of an artwork while looking at it. It is a pedagogical version . . . of what connoisseurs do when contemplating it [art]' (quoted in Norton 193).

Writers about children's aesthetic response to picture books often repeat similar contradictions. In two succeeding paragraphs, Rosemary Johnston says that picture books 'leave gaps for readers to fill in their own images, to read and write their own story' (337) and then, that 'literacy is a social activity, and reading worlds are socially constructed' (337) – and therefore, presumably, in need of being taught and learned. Barbara Kiefer speaks of 'the very personal way' (64) in which a child responds to a picture book, then ends the very next paragraph by saying, 'The important thing is to recognize the teacher's important role in helping children make the choices that will deepen response' (64). In a section called 'Use illustrations in children's picture books to teach aesthetics,' *The Reading is Fundamental* website recommends that adults not only 'encourage children to describe why they like or don't like particular illustrations' – share a personal response – ', but also, 'teach children the traditional design components of line, color, and shape' and 'have children evaluate illustrations for strength, mood, and feeling.' Similarly, in an article posted on the website of the Department of Education and Training of the Government of Western Australia, Rita Blackburn speaks of how 'students can be helped to think about the author's and illustrator's implied and literal meanings, make reasoned value judgements on a range of issues and recognise that aspects of construction can affect their responses to a text,' then adds, 'Don't overlook however, the value of sharing a picture book for the sheer pleasure of the experience,' then undercuts the sheerness of the pleasure by adding that it involves 'taking the opportunity to marvel at the consummate skill of the author and illustrator' (21).

According to these and many other adult experts, then, the beauty of picture books is both personal and communal, both utterly disinterested and highly implicated in educational process and social content. That writers express these two contradictory

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ideas in ways that paper over their contradictions reveals just how central they are to our ideologies of childhood and education. On the one hand, we often claim to believe that everyone is entitled to a personal response to and opinion about a literary text; that education is a process of bringing something out of an individual, not putting something in; that any effort of educators to impose specific reading practices or interpretations or ideas about excellence or good taste is wrongheaded and inherently repressive. On the other hand, we engender books and curricula with the specific intent of making children more environmentally aware or multiculturally tolerant – in an effect to shape their opinions and thus, who they personally are; or we praise ourselves for allowing them free choices of books from classroom collections we have carefully selected to leave out information and values we are determined to keep them ignorant of. On the one hand, we claim to privilege the sanctity of the individual personality. On the other we are determined to shape that individual personality into something as much as possible like our own ideas about what it ought to be.

An awareness of the contradictory nature of all that, and of the ways in which discussions of picture book aesthetics mirror the contradictions, raises some important questions. If responding to the art of picture books is such a personal thing, why do we need to teach it to children? If it does in fact need to be taught, is it really so personal after all?

The only logical answer to those questions is that an awareness of picture book aesthetics can be both personal and teachable only if the kind of personality we're talking about is one we are taught to have. The process of teaching children how to look at pictures is a process of teaching them how to be personal – who to be, how to be themselves in terms of coming to have and thus being the selves they need to be in order to fit into the social world they share with us. The individual who know the elements of pictures and how to properly respond to them is not a separate person inherently and unalterably unique but rather, a social subject, a being constructed according to the wishes and needs of others.

That's not an inherently bad thing. If we're able to divest ourselves of the huge investment out culture invites us to make in the inherent sanctity of individual taste and character, we might become more aware of the advantages of membership in a community, of the ways in which the shaping of our selves by the culture that surrounds us offers us contact with others and escape from the isolated prison house that seems to be implied by the concept of a permanent and permanently unchangeable self, apparently unaffected by experience or interaction with others. At the same time, we might also become more aware of cultural efforts to shape us, and thus, develop means of resisting aspects of the shaping that make us uncomfortable – as active participants in the shaping of our selves, become, in fact, more truly individual.

Part of the resistance I'm talking about might be an awareness of the ways in which

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the various aesthetic theories I've been discussing claim the kind of original subjective response of pleasure that I had to the cat picture in *Giant Steps* – co-opt that response for purposes beyond itself that in fact make it not personal at all. As I suggested earlier, indeed, the picture itself, in putting pleasurable colours and shapes to use in the depiction of a specific object, a cat, represents an attempt to do that, as does the book the picture appears in and the entire field of economic and educational endeavour that produces and distributes such books and makes them available to child readers and those with an interest in teaching them.

The late Victorian art critic Walter Pater once said, 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' (129). In trying to make visual images that represent what a piece of music does, *Giant Steps* seems literally to express that aspiration. Or does it? Pater goes on to explain what he believes the condition of music to be:

For while in all other works of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance – its subject, its given incidents or situation; that the mere matter of a picture – the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape – should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: – this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees. (129)

Considered in these terms, *Giant Steps* seems in fact as if it is aspiring in the opposite direction. It attaches organized sounds that represent nothing outside of themselves to specific objects – boxes, raindrops, snowflakes and kittens. In other words, it locates something beyond mere circumstances in specific circumstances. It takes the condition of music – form without content – and provides it with content.

But then, and contrary to what Pater wants to argue, music always already has content. For of course, there is a musicworld just as there is an artworld. For knowledgeable listeners, the specific notes of 'Giant Steps' evoke a specific kind of music – jazz – with a specific place in history and culture, including connections to African American history and downmarket nightlife, to anti-conservative exuberance and New York sophistication. They also evoke a specific moment in that music – Coltrane's move from hard bop into his own forms of personal experimentation, his taking of a position in relation to the positions taken by his predecessors and contemporaries.

In doing so, furthermore, they represent one particular form of the eternal condition of music – a shaping of sounds that inevitably represents a culture's sense of its own central forms and structure. According to the theorist Jacques Attali, music, as a form without content, a system of signifiers with no specific signifieds, nevertheless and inevitably signifies the shape and structure of societal power, the organizing patterns we give to all aspects of our lives from political systems to gender relationships: 'listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control

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is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political' (6). All art can aspire to the condition of music only because that condition is already political – as Coltrane's 'Giant Steps' is political, and Chris Raschka's *Giant Steps* is political – and as the ways in which art pedagogy claims and constructs the subjectivity of child viewers are deeply political. All these things inevitably co-opt the sensations of sound and light and colour, absorb them into cultural systems of meaning and value and divisions of power based on those meanings and values.

And yet . . .

And yet, I'm still left with my divided response. It is, in fact doubly divided. First, even while being aware of the ideological and potentially repressive weight of it all, the way it invites me to think specific thoughts about the cat and the music and myself, I like the cat picture for its politics – the way it becomes so intriguingly meaningful in the light of the art and music worlds it evokes, the culture that it resonates with so intricately and so delightfully helps to sustain. But then, second, I also still like the sensuous pleasures of shape and colour the pictures evokes, outside of meaning, beneath and yet still some separate from and thus beyond cats and jazz, beyond aesthetics. I am still pleased by the blue and the yellow and the shapes and the lines in and for themselves.

Logic would seem to suggest that I ought not to be able to do that – that the politics ought to be not only co-opting the sensory information but utterly absorbing it into its own systems and purposes. Indeed, the theorist Frederic Jameson argues that 'as sight becomes a separate activity in its own right, it acquires new objects that are themselves the product of a process of abstraction and rationalization which strips the experience of the concrete of such attributes as color, spatial depth, texture and the like . . . ' (63). To understand sensuous information in the context of the meanings it evokes is to deflect attention from it as purely sensuous experience.

Nevertheless, and as my double and divided response suggests, the sensuous information which contains and conveys abstracted and rationalized cultural knowledge remains, and continues to convey itself. Whatever else they represent, Raschka's luscious patches of yellow and blue are still patches of yellow and blue, still luscious – and indeed, viewers must retain knowledge of their lush yellowness and blueness in order to understand what they have come to mean. According to the psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva, that remaining presence represents a path to liberation from the constraint of being constructed as a specific kind of subject placed within specific cultural values: 'it is through color-colors-that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic and so forth) that it, as a conscious subject, accepts The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm in language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of difference' (221). So, too, it seems, do lines and shapes and textures shatter meanings merely by insisting on still being themselves, beneath and beyond and along with meaning. And so, too, according to Attali, might the noises that get organized into

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music:

the very absence of meaning in pure noise . . . , by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination. The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity, a construction outside meaning. The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization, of a new code in another network.

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The very act of observing or listening that which contains and conveys meanings – colour or sound – therefore undermines the meanings, just as the meanings undermine the pure sensations of the containers in and for themselves. The sensuous pleasure in meaningless sounds and shapes that sustains the meanings those sounds and shapes inevitably take on in art and music offers a liberating potential for resistance.

Finally, then, I am not only left with my basic response of pleasure in Raschka's picture outside of all my understandings of it and all my perceptions of its value in terms of conventional aesthetic understandings. I am delighted to be left with it. Yes, pictures like this one have pleasurable complex and socially resonant meanings. And yes, because they do, visual literacy is a significant skill. Yes, teaching children how to look at and understand pictures and enjoy what they come to understand is a meaningful and admirable process. But in the process of working to raise consciousness of these matters, let's not forget the pleasures of unmeaning and unknowing, of the visceral sensations art and music arouse before and beneath and beyond what they signify. Yes, let's happily claim those visceral sensations for the riches and pleasures of culture, but let's try to remain aware and invite children to remain aware of how these sensations remains triumphantly intact, triumphantly still there outside the claiming. Let's look at the picture and enjoy, not just the evocation of jazz, not just the depiction of a cat, but the patches of blue and yellow, the pleasing bold and curvaceous black lines. Let us celebrate what we see beyond and beneath our efforts to describe it in a shared language of shared meanings that claims it as a disembodied intellectual and cultural and even or especially as an uplifting aesthetic experience. Let's hear and see and feel for the sheer pleasure of hearing and seeing and feeling – and for the liberating news that such pleasures bring of the continuing existence of a world of sensation outside language, a world not completely co-opted by the shared social meanings that turns its sensations into signs for something else, something inevitably repressive of the sensual.

I realize, of course, that I have just claimed the visceral as part of my own political project – given it cultural meaning and significance – just as Attali does when he says that the presence of noise 'makes sense, makes meaning.' Attali wants to celebrate the liberating possibilities of being able to make one's own meanings rather than just absorbing already made ones. While I appreciate and applaud the liberating potential of that, I'm interested in something a little more basic – the liberating potential of

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awareness that not everything is or needs to be entirely meaningful or understood, that some sensations remain just that, and pleasurable as just that, in spite of what we otherwise make of them. Nevertheless, I *am* writing here. I *am* using language, counting on and confirming the power of shared meanings as the inevitable result of my effort to communicate my celebration of the meaningless to others. It's inevitable that what I can convey by these means itself represents a cooption by language, a claiming and misrepresentation of what it is I mean to say about what goes on outside language.

Finally, then, all I can do to make the point of my essay meaningful in as meaningless a way as possible – that is, a way outside meaning – is invite you to stop listening and to stop thinking, to step outside language yourself for a moment and just look. Look at the cat picture in *Giant Steps*. Look at blue. Look at yellow. Look at joyous, daring curbs and swirls of black. Hear, not 'Giant Step', but just plain noise. Absorb sensations. As annoying waiters in restaurants so mindlessly say: Enjoy.

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