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Review of Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*.

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Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 208 pp. ISBN 0674955617.

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Philip Fisher's *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* is an argument for pleasure. It is pitched away from the jaded, anachronistic category of the sublime, which Fisher sees as driven by fear and nostalgia, and toward the category of wonder, which he resuscitates as the original, joyful, innocent, always modern moment at the root of human experience and reason. Wonder and the sublime, Fisher explains in the first paragraph, "are both experiences tied to the visual taken in a deeply intellectual way; they both lead us back to reflection on ourselves and on our human powers; and they both have deep connections to mathematics, as Kant showed in the case of what he called the mathematical sublime, and to whatever link there might be between mathematics and the most essential details of thinking itself." Fisher argues that it is the possibility of knowledge, which he locates in the drive to scientific and specifically mathematical understanding, rather than the "sublime" impossibility of knowledge, that drives human thought and the pleasures of thinking itself.

The book's center of balance lies, delightfully, in Fisher's exploration of human wonder in the face of the phenomenon of the rainbow, and his telling of the story of how rainbows came to be scientifically understood and yet remain always new, unexpected and *wonderful* in the moment of their being perceived and experienced. Rainbows are particular to the experience of thought and reason because they are literally summoned by the physiology of sight; they exist only in the particular interaction of human biology and the earth's weather systems with light. Because of the position and structure of human eyes, we alone "see" that rare interplay of light and water as rainbows. Rainbows, and human intellectual endeavor in the face of wonder, Fisher argues, exist on "the border between sensation and thought," inspiring a process of discovery in which each step includes its own moment of wonder and the rebirth of intellect. Wonder is the "horizon-effect of the known, the unknown and the unknowable" and is therefore like rainbows, dependent upon both an observer and that observer's subjectivity, which the rainbow and the wonder it inspires produce: "Two viewers see two different rainbows," Fisher explains. And

without human observers (or animal observers whose eyes work roughly similar to human eyes), there are no rainbows. They are part of the human world. On an uninhabited planet there would continue to be sun and rain, stars, and snow, but there would be no rainbow and no horizon. . . . In its requirement of a human observer to exist at all, rainbows and horizon lines are closer to music or geometry: had there been no human world there never would have been any such thing.

Fisher's is an inspiring call to the potential purity of human experience and intellectual engagement, and he bolsters his argument by treating us to an eclectic collection of equally well turned histories that resolve into readings: of the famous problem of doubling the area of a square; of two paintings by Cy Twombly; of various examples of modern architecture; of the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats.

But if his archive is eclectic, Fisher's argument firmly takes up the question that has preoccupied aesthetic theory for generations: what is it we experience when we experience art? And of course the many questions depending from and perhaps organizing that initial question: How do we know art when we see it? How do we explain or narrate or categorize the experience of art to ourselves? How do we judge art as object and experience? How do we judge the art as object and experience of others who are not ourselves? Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime has tended to structure this debate. The beautiful is that object which is immediately comprehensible and pleasant to human cognition and therefore neither threatens nor makes demands of the imagination. The sublime enters when the object's incomprehensibility staggers human imagination and triggers human reason, which then works to digest and represent the object as an *idea*—art. Kant's sublime has been an extremely seductive category for theorists of aesthetics essentially because it allows us to have our cake and eat it too; we get to have the inexplicability and mystery of, if not a god per se, then something very like a god, *and* we get to have reason and human transcendence through intellectual mastery over that which appears god-like. "The sublime secularized religious feelings of the infinite and of the relative insignificance of human powers in an attractive way," Fisher writes, "[allow] the modern intellectual to hold onto covertly religious feelings under an aesthetic disguise." In its very first pages, Fisher's book pits itself against this version of the sublime, hoping to substitute—or rather, subtend—wonder as the operative engine behind "the aesthetics of rare experiences."

Our adherence to the sublime as a means of understanding how we experience experience itself is, according to Fisher, a form of necromancy, a morbid insistence on and conjuring up of an artistic genealogy that doesn't entirely—or even nearly—account for modernity's aesthetic inheritance. He connects the sublime to the death drive and to fear: "In the sublime, fear and surprise, power and danger occur in a rich blend. The sublime could be called the aestheticization of fear. Wonder, the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity, involves the aestheticization of delight, or of the pleasure principle rather than the death principle, whose agent within aesthetic experience is the sublime." Our intellectual attraction to the category of the sublime, he argues, is foolish in the extreme because "with the sublime we have for two hundred years built up a more and more intricate theory for a type of art that we do not actually have and would not care for if we did have it." Rather, he claims, the art forms that we value today—largely, for Fisher, architecture and industrial design—appeal far more directly to wonder—to pleasure, to joy, to innocence: he describes the wonder of twentieth century design as "the spatial thrill of these chaste forms." It is not surprising that he ropes in the language of purity and innocence to describe the art that he claims we *do* care for. A return to a certain brand of innocence in the face of experience is Fisher's goal. To bolster his argument against the sublime he turns away from Kant to Socrates and Descartes, both of whom argue that wonder, surprise and newness lie at the root of human cognition and reason.

Fisher's argument is adventurous and, in its very appeal to pleasure, wonder-full and refreshing. His celebration of immediacy, which he attaches to mathematics and to the instantaneous experience of visual pleasure, is a useful and timely circumvention of the reiterations and sublimations of the sublime in criticism. My reservations about the book arise at the places where Fisher begins to trace the boundaries of where wonder as he defines it can exist—most obviously, he draws the line at the pleasures of contemplation, narrative and memory. Fisher's hard-hitting reading of the way in which the Noah story is designed, by narrating the invention of

the rainbow and its attachment to a consciousness that God will destroy the world with fire (“God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, fire next time,” as Fisher quotes the hymn) is masterful, and makes his point about the death-drive into quite a sobering one. This argument goes a long way to support his thesis that narration and memory stand against wonder. But doesn’t the alchemy of human memory, reiteration and alteration open the possibility that narrative’s disciplinary hold can be undone? Isn’t there a way to recognize in the deconstructive and reiterative possibilities inherent in narrative something wonderful in Fisher’s sense (though, I would argue, never chaste or pure)? Fisher’s language of purity and innocence becomes problematic for me at this point, because, in its rarification it begins to sound like disciplinary *virtue*. Fisher, who believes in high art, summarily dismisses what he calls the “kitsch” aspect of bad art that must rely on the sublime to hide its mediocrity. But Fisher, I suspect, is too wedded to cultural rarification in his pursuit of the aesthetics of rare experiences; his is a misunderstanding of kitsch and its role in making wonderful—and, I would argue, rare in the sense of queer or other—the bathetic through humor, reference and unmaking. I wonder if the narrowness of Fisher’s argument would not be alleviated were he able to make room for the tastelessness, in the face of high art, of narrative and memory, to theorize kitsch as a necessary and useful *doppelgänger* to the aesthetics of the rare. The basic kitschiness of memory and narrative (their reiterations, exaggerations and referentiality) that we bring to our experiences of wonder, rather than supporting the sublime, may go a long way to dismantling it in an impure dialectic with Fisher’s aesthetic wonder. Fisher needs to entertain a serious consideration of the anti-innocent pleasures of kitsch and camp—the extremes of cultural re-production that make us laugh at ourselves—as equally if oppositely antithetical death-driven tyrannies of the sublime as his pure wonders.