

Kjerstin Aukrust (ed.)

# Assigning Cultural Values

# Introduction

The emergence of the microscope in Europe during the early seventeenth century marked the beginning of a scientific revolution whereby the world's smallest creatures, "microfaunae" such as the microbe, finally became visible. At the time, the microscope was employed to challenge a scalar anthropocentrism that placed inordinate value on the lives and bodies of larger animals at the expense of nature's minutiae. In his essay on the cultural history of microfaunae in seventeenth-century Europe, which opens this book, Adam Dodd argues that in less than 100 years after the invention of the microscope, what can be referred to as "the microscopic gaze" had seriously and permanently altered our perception of all nonhuman animals: The inherent "greatness" of the biggest creatures was no longer naturally given, nor was the "obvious" insignificance of the smallest creatures to be taken as a certainty. Thus, the very ways in which cultural value, and its attendant aesthetics, was assigned to microfaunae were significantly altered.

In this anthology, Dodd's analysis marks the first example of how cultural and aesthetic values are assigned within different humanities fields. Each of the thirteen essays in this volume, which is divided into five parts, represents a unique "microscopic gaze" into different cultural phenomena, all chosen to shed light on issues related to the assignment of values. Authors of chapters in part one discuss both the aesthetic and the cultural value of science: After Adam Dodd's introduction to the cultural history of microfaunae in seventeenth-century Europe, Anja Johansen takes us back to our own time and the Wellcome Image Awards, which recognise "the creators of the most informative, striking and technically excellent images among recent acquisitions to Wellcome Images", according to their own website. These images, chosen by a panel of judges, range from light and electron micrographs to illustrations and medical photography. Johansen shows how the Wellcome Image Awards serve as an interesting example of how scientific images have become objects of aesthetical appreciation, regarded as worthy of public display, and discusses how scientific images are conceived of, presented, and valued.

Chapters in part two of this volume challenge the aestheticization of sexuality and the value of gender roles, notably through analyses of contemporary literature and cinema. Jørgen Lorentzen and Wenche Mülheisen show how two Norwegian

contemporary novels link intimacy and sexuality with social and collective aspects in new and surprising ways: Vigdis Hjorth's *Hjulsikft* (*Wheel change*) and Geir Gulliksen's *Tjuendedagen* (*The twentieth day*) both challenge accepted and familiar "knowledge regimes" and articulate possibilities and impossibilities of intimacy in contemporary times, thus negotiating existing values and aesthetics related to sexuality. In his essay, Geir Uvsløkk shifts our attention from a Nordic to a French context. He proposes an original take on the aesthetics of Michel Houellebecq, the "enfant terrible" of French literature, by arguing that Houellebecq's aesthetics and his critique of contemporary society are closely intertwined. In Uvsløkk's opinion, Houellebecq deliberately creates works of art wherein traditional assignments of aesthetic value are questioned.

After these two analyses within the field of literary research, Anne Gjelsvik takes a look at the development of the male hero of modern American action films, showing how gender roles in action movies have changed – and with them the values expressed within the genre. Gjelsvik aims to show how film aesthetics play an important part in creating and challenging gender identity on a global scale, and discusses the cultural values promoted through the new action-hero aesthetic. Gender is also the main focal point of Gry Brandser's essay; she takes us back several hundred years as she examines how values assigned to the feminine and the masculine played a decisive role in eighteenth-century educational and philosophical discourses. In her analysis of Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Brandser discusses the use of gendered aesthetic categories in the making of a new, masculine scientific subject, arguing that the close connection between masculine identity and intellectual and aesthetic maturation was to determine women's contribution to the Enlightenment culture.

The third part of the book focuses on how aesthetic value is constructed, exemplified by three very different takes on the matter. First, Kjetil Fallan explores the processes by which aluminium products have been mediated and assigned cultural value through negotiations between technology, design, and market in Norway in the period 1930-1950. His analysis focuses primarily on the design and promotion of aluminium kitchenware; he shows how design becomes the interface through which kitchenware products acquire meaning for consumers and through which cultural value is mediated. From aluminium, Julie Holledge and Frode Heland take us once again back to the literary field, focusing on the construction of aesthetic value in different performances of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. By employing original methods of analysis, they focus on how the predominant tradition of performing the play has been constructed and sustained within its culture of origin. Their analysis of the establishment of the predominant Norwegian tradition of performing the play investigates the cultural and aesthetic values invested in the tradition, as well as the mechanisms that have maintained its

value. Finally, Søren Kjølrup draws our attention to the relationship between visual arts and crafts after “the modern divide” of the aesthetic field during the period 1500-1750. He discusses the values assigned to the modern Western concept of art and pays particular attention to the fact that crafts have traditionally been valued not only as “the minor arts” in the hierarchy of the modern system of the arts, but as what can be called the “Other” of the fine arts. Kjølrup’s perspective involves looking at the possibility of turning the hierarchy upside down and thereby seeing the fine arts as the Other of craft. He thus questions and renegotiates the aesthetic value assigned to both of these concepts.

Chapters in the fourth part deal with the aesthetics of places, seen through two Norwegian case studies. Mari Hvattum, Brita Brenna, Torild Gjesvik, and Janike Kampeveld Larsen collaborate on an essay that discusses a shift in the perception of the Norwegian landscape, from a domain for the symbolic representation of power into an object of mass consumption. With Jacob Munch’s landscape paintings as a point of departure, the authors look at the aestheticization of the modern Norwegian landscape. Their analysis focuses on landscape paintings and maps ordered by kings; they argue that this material shows a changed conception of the landscape, from the eighteenth century to our own, with Norway’s new Tourist Road as a relevant example. Staying within the frame of the aesthetics of places, Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe turn our attention from the landscape to the border, using the Norwegian artist Morten Traavik’s artistic installation *Borderlines* as a point of departure for discussing the on-going changes in the border concept. This installation consists of two double lines of border posts, one in Oslo and one in the town of Kirkenes, near the Russian border. The authors use this artwork to question how we assign values related to cultural identity.

In the fifth and final part, the authors pay attention to how cultural value is in play in modern museums. In his essay, Stefan Krankenhagen touches upon some urgent museological questions, participating in an on-going debate on interconnections between the collecting strategies and the processes of Europeanisation. Many museum curators see their collections as part of a European heritage, although there are no collecting strategies with a European perspective per se; Krankenhagen discusses how cultural value is created, recognised, and challenged in collecting in the museum-specific context. We close our series of “microscopic gazes” with Anne Britt Ylvisåker’s essay on augmented reality. Her point of departure is a case study involving an experiment that uses digital virtual reality technology for exhibition purposes as a substitute for the “real” museum object or artwork. Ylvisåker discusses whether using a three-dimensional digital representation intended for augmented reality is an apt method for museums to collect and exhibit “uncollectable” objects. She explores how value is assigned to digital representations of museum objects in exhibitions and sheds light on the

consequences that the assigned value might have for the reception of the digitally augmented museum object.

## **The KULVER programme**

The originality of this volume, and the unifying thread of its thirteen essays, lies in the analysis of cultural value in light of aestheticization or aesthetic practices. This is not to be understood in a narrow sense as research on aesthetic objects and on understanding of categories, but rather as research on those processes in which aesthetic and cultural values are created, recognised, or challenged. The concept of aestheticization presented in this book goes beyond the distinction between product and object on the one hand, and action and event on the other.

This understanding of aestheticization is in line with the principles directing the Research Programme on Assigning Cultural Values (KULVER), the Research Council of Norway's programme for cultural research for the period 2008-2012. The present anthology marks the end of KULVER's programme period and its purpose is in that respect to sum up the programme's main themes and research areas. The prioritised areas of research have been the artistic fields, everyday life, different forms of knowledge, cultural heritage and politics of memory, the construction of identities, and the interaction between artistic fields and other fields of practice. Themes covered in this volume, such as the aesthetic judgement of the border, the valorisation of objects in contemporary European exhibitions, the values at stake in transforming the American action hero, the cultural valuation of aluminium products, the reception of 3D digital representation of artworks, and the valuation and aesthetic function of experiences of intimacy and sexuality in contemporary novels, are all topics representing one or more of KULVER's prioritised research areas.

The purpose of the KULVER programme has been to generate knowledge about how cultural value is changed, displaced, transferred, and acquired. This anthology presents examples of this knowledge through a series of cases studies, which all emphasise the process-oriented, the historically changeable, and that which is complex and controversial in different forms of cultural phenomena, their reciprocal relationships and their connection to social contexts and power in a general sense. The fact that cultural phenomena are assigned value implies that hierarchisation occurs within various sign systems, discourses, and practices, which entails passing judgement on quality and taste. In a process-oriented and multidisciplinary approach like the one offered here, cultural phenomena are not viewed as static dimensions, but rather as factors involved in negotiations and exchanges. By focusing on processes in which aestheticization is prominent, we

hope to show how the experience-based, relational, and perceptual aspects of assigning cultural values come into focus.

This book presents essays embodying the diversity of the different KULVER-programme research projects, each with its own perspective on the theme of assigning cultural values while focusing on aestheticization and aesthetic practices. An overview of all the KULVER research projects is given at the end of this book, along with a presentation of the nine members of the KULVER programme board which, acting on behalf of the Research Council of Norway, has been in charge of coordinating the programme. The board has been chaired by Professor Kjersti Bale from the University of Oslo, who has also been a member of the book committee, alongside Professor Erik Hedling from Lund University and Hans Dam Christensen, Dean of Research at the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen. On behalf of the book committee, I wish to thank all the contributors, the participants in the KULVER programme, and all those involved in making this book possible.

Kjerstin Aukrust, editor