

Kant's Philosophy of the Aesthetic and the Philosophy of Praxis

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Biography

Michael Wayne is a professor in Screen Media at Brunel University (UK). He has written widely on the media and Marxist cultural theory and is the author of *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends* (2003) He is currently working on a book that re-reads Kant's *Critique of Judgment* from a Marxist perspective.

This essay seeks to reconstruct the terms for a more productive engagement with Kant than is typical within contemporary academic cultural Marxism which sees him as the cornerstone of a bourgeois model of the aesthetic. The essay argues that in the 'Critique of Judgment' the aesthetic stands in as a substitute for the missing realm of human praxis. This argument is developed in relation to Kant's concept of reflective judgment that is in turn related to a methodological shift towards inductive and analogical procedures that help Kant overcome the dualisms of the first two Critiques. This reassessment of Kant's aesthetic is further clarified by comparing it with and offering a critique of Terry Eagleton's assessment of the Kantian aesthetic as synonymous with ideology.

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For bourgeois aesthetics, Kant remains a vital touchstone and ideological resource. But can Marxist cultural theory find (or perhaps recover) a more productive engagement with Kant other than casting him as a bourgeois elitist, formalist, dualist and idealist? Historically it has. That Benjamin, Kracauer and Adorno were all profoundly influenced by Kant is often repressed by contemporary cultural Marxism as Kaufman has noted (2000). More recently Slavoj Žižek has rediscovered what Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* once showed us, the fruitfulness of a productive engagement with Kant's antinomies, which resist any facile 'identity' between subject and object (2006). Žižek was inspired to write his book *The Parallax View* by Kojin Karatini's cross-fertilization between Marx and Kant in his book *Transcritique* (2005). But Kant's aesthetics, with the important exception of the work of Jacques Rancière, remain largely unredeemable for political radicals. Bourdieu's assault on middle class cultural capital was launched in the name of an anti-Kantian critique (1996). For Terry Eagleton, Kant's aesthetic, as we shall see later, is virtually synonymous with ideology (1997). For Lukács, Kant exemplifies the dualism of bourgeois consciousness in which an abstract formal rationalism must view the content of life, experience and the material substratum, as irrational, because even in the qualified rationalism of Kant, only form (separated from the messy historical contingency of content) could be truly lawful (1971). Against this Lukács argued:

...praxis can only be really established as a philosophical principle if, at the same time, a conception of form can be found whose basis and validity no longer rest on that pure rationality and that freedom from every definition of content. In so far as the principle of praxis is the prescription for changing reality, it must be tailored to the concrete material substratum of action if it is to impinge upon it to any effect (1971, 126).

In *Critique of Practical Reason*, ethical practical activity is locked up in the private individual subject, self-generated, inwardly orientated and uncoupled from 'external' institutional practices that must obey the a priori laws of nature mapped out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus the ethical act 'collapses as soon as the first concrete content is to be created' (Lukács 1971, 125). Lukács however has very little to say about the *Critique of Judgment* in *History and Class Consciousness* and seems not to register how the third critique marks a methodological break in some significant ways from the first two critiques.

I want to argue that in *Critique of Judgment*, the aesthetic anticipates the missing realm of human praxis in the absence of the historical conditions that would allow praxis to be articulated in social scientific terms. This of course could also be said of our own period, although for different historical reasons. In the aesthetic mode, Kant begins to sketch out an objectivity that is permeated with subjectivity and a subjectivity that is permeated with objectivity. I want to argue that the key concept by which Kant tentatively formulated an embryonic notion of praxis is that of *reflective judgment*. That this concept can

be related to the natural and social sciences is an indication of its potential for knowledge production, which then takes a particular form in the aesthetic mode. Kant seems to associate the concept of reflective judgment with a methodological shift in which induction and analogy come to play a key role in his attempts to overcome the divisions between form and content, lawfulness and material substratum, subject and object. Induction and analogy I argue help Kant to begin to sketch the outlines of the two key interrelated dimensions of materialism: physical materiality (and the sensuous perception of it) and social relations (which are not immediately given in their causal complexity to the senses).

Reflective Judgment

In the introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* Kant distinguishes between two types of judgment. Determinative judgment is the kind of judgment that the faculty of the understanding applies. Here the role of judgment is to subsume the particular under the general when the general is given (by the a priori laws of the understanding). The particular as it is received by the senses, is understood within the determinative laws of nature as projected by the faculty of the understanding. This is a fairly mechanical process, leaving only a limited range for the imagination (the reproductive imagination), inference and hypothesis. The task for critical theory is to disentangle genuine objectivity (necessary because of the properties of nature and the historical and social circumstances that condition the transformative powers available to human kind) and reification. We

should be wary of merely reading the faculty of the understanding as an allegory of reification because even reification must rest on a real objective basis. As with Marx, we might say that for Kant, in a less self-conscious way, nature is both a legitimate epistemological category and a category that denotes an ideological problem. This ambivalence can be detected in the gap between the pure a priori categories (quantity, quality, relation and modality) and all the various ways these pure laws can manifest themselves amongst diverse empirical phenomena. The very diversity of this phenomena suggests an analogy with the diversity of the phenomena we remake through our practices and this suggests both determination and freedom.

Diverse phenomena Kant argues must 'have a certain order in its particular rules' (1987, 24) so that nature is not chaotic, but patterned. If these 'rules' are to have some ultimate connection with the a priori necessary laws of the understanding, then judgment must presuppose that what looks contingent, local, and accidental, must by a web of laws that we are not aware of, connect up to a pattern of universal laws that are at least analogous with the laws of the understanding. Kant was no doubt thinking of how Newton's theory of gravity superseded and incorporated more local and specific explanations of gravity offered by Kepler and Galileo.

Although we do not know all the connections that link specific empirical local laws under the pure categories 'we must necessarily presuppose and assume this unity, since otherwise our empirical cognition could not thoroughly cohere to [form] a whole of

experience' (1987, 23). This *subjective* presupposition of a unity of laws in the absence of their scientific proof is characteristic of the reflective judgment:

...if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*.
(1987,18-19).

In contrast to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the movement is bottom up rather than top down. This, combined with the fact that its starting point is that there are gaps in what we know, reflective judgment is orientated to discovery and openness; it is an attempt to recover from experience the particularities of it that are denied by the abstractions of the understanding which subsumes the particular under 'universal' concepts that are taken to be given. One way of reading this is that it is an attempt by Kant, in part at least, to rescue experience from its imprisonment within the mechanical objectivity of concepts that are not really congruent with the many shades and dimensions of the particular (as Kant admitted with his distinction between how things appear to the understanding and the 'thing in itself'). In other words we can read the reflective judgment as a disguised project of ideological critique and even a proto-embryonic foundation for critical theory. Yet at the same time, it also has a clear application within the natural sciences that should not be conflated with ideological critique.

As Kant notes, scientific knowledge (and indeed everyday reason) can proceed by way of analogy. We often ‘use the principles by which we explain and understand one product in order to explain and grasp [*begreifen*] another as well, thereby making coherent experience out of material...’ (1987, 25). The basis of this analogical method is the assumption that nature is harmonizing (composed of relations) and that nature ultimately harmonizes with our own in built laws of the understanding. This in fact is the basis of pleasure, in both scientific investigation and, Kant suggests, by analogy, in the aesthetic itself. He argues that ‘we rejoice (actually we are relieved of a need)’ when scientific or we might also suggest, practical understanding, does discover ‘systematic unity among merely empirical laws’, because while they must be assumed in order to discover them in the first place, the assumption is subjective until it can be objectively proved in a given case (1987, 23-4).

A classic example of the role of analogy in the natural sciences can be found in Darwin. While Darwin’s method is widely taken to be of the hypothetical-deductive kind it has also been argued that however he presented his findings, he also made significant use of analogous comparisons between particulars to develop the key planks of his theory. For example Darwin compared inherited variations of plants and animals artificially introduced through horticulture and agriculture for advantage by humans, with inherited variations developed by organisms in the wild to demonstrate that hereditary variations that are useful for the species tend to be reproduced over those that are less useful for survival. The analogy between natural selection and domesticated selection allowed Darwin to formulate a

general principle by close observation of *concrete particulars* within the domesticated production of plants and animals (where favorable selection was artificially controlled).

Furthermore, Darwin's hypothetical-deductive law-like premise that there is in nature a struggle for existence, derived from an analogous comparison with Malthus's theories that a finite food resource ought to keep human population levels from infinitely expanding. Again, from the analogy, Darwin made an inductive generalization to all natural populations (Darden 1982). As Darwin himself noted: 'I came to the conclusion that selection was the principle of change from the study of domesticated productions; and then, reading Malthus, I saw at once how to apply this principle' (quoted by Evans 1984, 114).

There is a close relationship between analogy and induction but they are not the same thing. Analogy works by establishing relations of resemblance *and* difference between particulars. The inferential relation goes 'sideways' as it were, rather than from the particular to the general (induction) or the general to the particular (deduction). Yet induction is implied by the analogical correspondence that is established between two or more particulars. For the comparison suggests that there is a common derivation at some higher synthesis of the laws of nature that unites the particularities despite their differences (without which a comparison could not be made in the first place).

Reflective judgment, as we have seen, is a cognitive power that enables us to subjectively attribute a harmony or unity of laws or

principles between empirical parts as a guide for genuine scientific knowledge. Kant calls this *subjective* maxim of a priori unity, *formal purposiveness*.

...the purposiveness of nature is a special a priori concept that has its origins solely in reflective judgment. For we cannot attribute to natural products anything like nature's referring them to purposes, but can only use this concept in order to reflect on nature as regards that connection among nature's appearances which is given to us in terms of empirical laws. This concept is also quite distinct from practical purposiveness (in human art or morality), though we do think it by analogy with practical purposiveness (1987, 20).

On the one hand, Kant suggests that this transcendental principle 'merely reflects upon but does not determine objects' (1987, 35), which is to say it is merely subjective. However elsewhere, in the first introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, he gives an example that suggests how through an act of labor, this exercise of the imagination is transformed into a production of *new* nature that does imply precisely an objective (practical) determination of objects.

For example, if we say that the crystal lens in the eye has the *purpose* of bringing about by means of a second refraction of light rays [the result] that the light rays emanating from one point will be reunited in one point of the retina of the eye, all we are saying is that our thought

of the causality nature [exercised] in producing an eye includes the thought of the presentation of a purpose, because such an idea serves us as a principle by which we can guide our investigation of the eye as far as its lens is concerned, and also because thinking the presentation of a purpose here might [help] us devise means to further that effect [if the natural lens does not do so adequately] (1987, 425).

By the principle of formal purposiveness, we satisfy our need to subjectively regulate our relationship to empirical diversity and apparent contingency (why does the lens of the eye have the qualities it does?) by means of an assumption of a unity of purposes. In this example, formal purposiveness in fact has a dynamic relationship with practical purposes flowing into it and transforming itself from a merely subjective a priori maxim to guide the discovery of knowledge, into a *real objective force*. As Kant says, the presentation of a 'purpose' to the eye not only guides investigation but it also guides further technological *adaptation* of nature by humankind. Hence the presentation of a purpose enables us to 'devise means' to adapt nature (the production of artificial lenses, such as for glasses or magnifying instruments which Kant must have had in mind, but further down the historical line, the production of cameras for example). In such adaptations, a 'universal' comes into existence in the act of labor. A concept or assemblage of concepts, such as those that allow us to master the network of empirical laws that govern the human eye, determines the production of material nature (a magnifying glass for example). This ensemble of universal concepts

underpinned by determinative judgments, are only *provisionally universal* and only provisionally determinative (even in the natural sciences) and are constantly, through the historical process, being reworked in the course of modifying our practical and social relationships to nature. What brings Kant to the cusp of this materialist and even dialectical conception of the relationship between nature and culture, knowledge and productive forces, is the role analogy plays in comparing and contrasting nature's 'organized bodies' with our own cognitive powers (formal purposiveness) and material productions (practical purposiveness).

Marx and Reflective Judgment

One can detect something like Kant's thinking on determinative and reflective judgments in Marx's attempts to formulate the method of his dialectical political economy in the *Grundrisse*. There, Marx argued that a concept like 'population' has a misleading universality about it. No doubt with Malthus in mind, Marx argues that the category of population can only lead critical thinking towards 'ever thinner abstractions' (1993, 100). Beneath its apparent universality, its ability to collate an aggregate of inhabitants within a given spatial area, the concept succeeds in subsuming the particular under it but at the cost of really engaging with its messy, contradictory material reality. Despite appearances then, on its own, the category of population, vis-à-vis social scientific *critical* understanding, is precisely an example of a situation in need of reflective judgment, namely a situation when, as

Kant puts it, the universal is not given (despite appearances). Marx's solution to the problem of inadequate abstractions, is to propose the necessity of building up a network of interrelated concepts, none of which alone can stand in an adequate relation to the universal or general, but which can only attempt to do that as part of a complex whole.

The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole...(1993, 100).

In this conception, each category has only a provisional universality over the realities that each term denotes because each term depends on the network of other terms of which it is a part. Marx's position is distinct from bourgeois empirical realism that sees concepts as discrete, isolated mirror reflectors of reality 'out there'. Similarly Kant described *darstellung* as the necessary process of construction by which an aspect of reality can be made sensible in a concept (Helfer 1996, 24). There is however a difference between an uncritical or chaotic *darstellung* (what Marx terms above as *Vorstellung*) characterized by the determinative judgment and a critical *darstellung*, characterized by what Kant called the reflective judgment and what Marx describes as a process of 'working-up' (1993, 101) a network of concepts.

For Marx, conceptual form always has the real as its point of departure, whether in the form of a chaotic abstraction (a determinative judgment), or something closer to the reflective judgment. The conceptual point of departure that will be most productive cannot be arbitrarily selected of course, but requires a key moment of choice. There is a world of difference between the thin abstraction of 'population' on the one hand, and the commodity exchanges of C-M-C on the other. Marx chose the latter because the commodity is the 'economic cell form' of capital that requires the 'force of abstraction' as the critical social scientific equivalent of the microscope to understand. The task of exhibition is then to work up to that most dialectical of things, concrete abstractions (or for Kant, reflective judgments, for Marx praxis). In Marx's example, capital's stratified reality is now conceived at an ontologically deeper and more complex level than the original point of departure (those thin abstractions or even C-M-C, a promising starting point, but only that).

Marx's presentation takes the form of an inductive conceptual dialectical reasoning that deconstructs the antithesis between abstraction and concreteness (as does of course, the aesthetic). For Marx, the concreteness of commodity exchange in everyday life, turns out to be an impoverished abstraction (although the pathway towards transcending that impoverishment in a way that 'population' was not). If for Marx, a critical social science requires the presentation (*darstellung*) of a 'concrete abstraction', then this could be an important clue as to why the aesthetic ought to be an attractive and

interesting site of pedagogic possibilities for the left, where precisely just such a *darstellung* can often be found.

Reflective Judgment and the Aesthetic

Marx's critical social scientific research project refused to accept that the 'universal' was given within the language of political economy, or indeed other discourses such as the political, the ethical, etc. Similarly, Kant partially escapes his own tendency towards reifying the social by shifting from the philosophical equivalent of the hypothetical-deductive model of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to a method of induction and analogy in *Critique of Judgment*. Analogy and induction play a special role in the latter *Critique* because they are creative problem solving tools that admit the provisional nature of what we are discovering and even what we know. They work from the sensory or sensible to hypothesize about the supersensible (for us most importantly social relations that do not disclose themselves in immediate phenomenal forms) by inferential projection from what we do know or think we know (determinative judgments) to understand the meaning of things we do not know beyond or within what we thought we knew (reflective judgments).

The inductive method is evident in the role of sensuousness (starting with the concrete), feeling and the judgment of the individual subject in *Critique of Judgment*. It builds towards larger patterns of meaning through the question of aesthetic *form* that is the basis of intersubjective communication of a kind quite different from the

mechanical objectivity of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's methodology deploys and assumes analogy to explicate what is distinctive about the pure aesthetic judgment of the beautiful by a series of comparisons and contrasts with a lower level of taste (the agreeable) and with moral judgments (the good). The patterns of resemblances and differences are tabulated below:

The Agreeable	The Beautiful	The Good
Sensuous	Sensuous	Non-Sensuous
Individual Interest	Without Interest	General Interest
Subjective	Subjective Universality	Logical Universality
Without or Impure Form	Aesthetic Form	Conceptual Form
Gratification	Pure Liking	Esteem

In Kant's aesthetic philosophy, aesthetic form takes the role that critical conceptual form determination takes in Marx's project. In the determinate judgment, the imagination is subordinated to the faculty of the understanding, playing a 'reproductive' role in harnessing the manifold of sense-impressions before they are stamped with the universal determination of 'objective concepts' by the understanding. In the reflective judgment the relation between the 'presentational

powers [imagination and understanding]' (Kant 1987, 61-2) is quite different. In the aesthetic Kant argues:

the cognitive powers brought into play by this presentation are in free play, because no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition. Hence the mental state in this presentation must be a feeling, accompanying the given presentation, of a free play of the presentational powers directed to cognition in general (1987, 62).

Thus in the aesthetic, the presentation, or perhaps better the *darstellung* is quite different from the determinative judgment, because now imagination is in free play with the understanding, transforming at least some selection of its taken for granted determinative judgments, into reflective judgments in which what is important is not the givenness of particular nailed down cognitions but the open-endedness or indeterminate quality of flexing the cognitive powers in general. When we remember that the faculty of the understanding should have a dual role in a Marxist reading of Kant, as both an allegory of reification and as a legitimate attempt at formulating a philosophy of nature, then it is clear that the notion that the imagination is in 'free play' with the understanding, suggests that Kant formulates a proto-materialist and not idealist philosophy of the aesthetic. The imagination is 'in play', that is in a subjectively creative relationship with the categorical framework of quantity, quality, causality and modality. The imagination is *not* autonomous from the faculty of the understanding. Furthermore, the dynamic relationship

Kant sets up between the imagination and the understanding marks a contradiction within his own argument that the reflective judgment and by extension the aesthetic is purely subjective.

The supposed subjectivism of Kant's argument about the aesthetic appears most problematically in his insistence that aesthetic judgment is 'a liking unmediated by concepts' (1987, 60) and that it does *not* give rise to cognition. This may seem to drive a powerful wedge between the aesthetic and the socio-political possibilities of aesthetic cognition. But if we understand the very specific and narrow sense of 'concept' and cognition that Kant has in mind, we can see how it actually aids the analogy with Marx's critical social scientific project rather than frustrating it. For Kant is right, if the aesthetic is to behave aesthetically, *determinate* concepts and *determinate* cognitions should not form the basis of its special formal operations. Working according to its own principles, what should be possible within the aesthetic are the development of *critical* concepts and *critical* cognitions. Conversely, when determinate concepts and cognitions do enter the formal structure of the aesthetic, then it becomes yoked to stereotypes and rigid ideological value-formations. Here we must amend Kant's bald assertion that the aesthetic is uncoupled from social interests (1987, 45). Even when the aesthetic is working aesthetically and is not tied to reproducing value formations that correspond to reproducing broader social divisions, the aesthetic is always only able to open up a space for reflective judgment within for example, institutionally structured and class divided situations. Art cinema is a good example of this ambivalent position. Reflective judgment is judgment that can reflect on its own

material conditions of existence and it is this that makes it a principle close to Marx's notion of praxis. In that reflection it lays the basis for changing those conditions and yet it is also always marked in its reflective nature by those very conditions. Here my argument converges with Jacques Ranciere who argues that the aesthetic demonstrates a critique of the idea that consciousness is merely a mechanical reflection of social being (2009, 16).

In a mode of production as instrumentalized as capitalism, the aesthetic becomes attractive precisely because it is a potential space where the subject's judgment *matters* and where in both the production and reception of the object, imagination has a greater 'play'. While the real empirical subject has little active role in the operations of the faculty of the understanding, eclipsed as it is by the transcendental subject (Adorno 1995, 96) in the aesthetic mode, the subject develops a 'very special power of discriminating and judging' (Kant 1987, 44). For Kant this power of discriminating and judging is uncoupled from ordinary cognition. It involves a kind of flexing of the subject's judging and discriminating powers for their own sake ('cognition in general'). Once we understand this as a comment on the cultural level of a civilization, its capacity (or incapacity) to universalize these very special powers (and universalize them *outside* the aesthetic as well as within the aesthetic) the materialist and critical potential of Kant's philosophy of the aesthetic, becomes clearer. The special power that Kant refers to makes the aesthetic, at least potentially, a kind of training ground for critical thinking. The nature of the unexpected discovery of meaning within the aesthetic may well include the discovery of what we 'know' but have not had

the opportunity to admit into our knowledge *as sensuous experience*. The widespread phenomenon of disavowal in consumer capitalism depends on the separation of sensuous experience from knowing. The subsumption of sense-impressions under concepts in the faculty of the understanding opens up a rift between concepts and experience that reflects the division of society into those whose elite experiences are unjustifiably universalized and therefore dominate those whose mass experiences are prevented from achieving universal conceptual recognition. When minority class experiences are the basis for conceptualizing the world universally, then those concepts are typically emptied of sensuous content in order to masquerade as universal. Hence the tendency of bourgeois thought towards abstract formalism, composed of hollowed out concepts (freedom, democracy, etc.,) that can preserve their unity and non-contradictory status only on condition that they shield themselves from engaging with the real sensuous content of life. Conversely, the real sensuous content of life struggles to find adequate expression, recognition and self-recognition in a conceptual universe alien to it.

It is significant then, in this context of a class rift between knowledge and experience that Kant insists on the singularity of the aesthetic experience, as if Kant were symptomatically alluding to the class division and reification that exists outside the aesthetic. In the aesthetic there is no 'rule' that can persuade us that some thing is beautiful prior to its presentation to us, for 'we want to submit the object to our own eyes, just as if our liking of it depended on that sensation' (1987, 59). This insistence that judgment is grounded in the direct relationship between the experiencing subject and the

object of judgment is quite contrary to so much of our reified public sphere under late capitalism, where political, economic and military discourses circulate meanings that we are asked to assent to but which are uncoupled from the real experiences which those discourses imply or initiate. This uncoupling facilitates assent precisely because the human cost (of war or cuts in public services) is not really embodied in the 'knowledge' produced by these discourses. In the aesthetic mode, by contrast, judgment remains embodied in the sensuous experience itself.

That aesthetic experience gives rise to judgment is one of the characteristics that differentiate it from mere sensual gratification (what Kant calls the agreeable) Sensual gratification remains private and requires no debate with others, beyond the expression that the subject finds this or that agreeable or disagreeable. With the agreeable 'we allow everyone to be of a mind of his own, no one requiring...others to agree with his judgment of taste' (Kant 1987, 57). With the beautiful sensuous experience is combined with a rigorous *form*. Aesthetic form differentiates the beautiful from the agreeable (which has either no form or a compromised and weak sense of form that Kant associates with 'charms') and is the basis for inter-subjective discussion. The price that Kant pays for this inter-subjective discussion having a much freer basis than the objective judgments of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that it is purely subjective. Nevertheless, despite its subjective nature, Kant posits the pure aesthetic judgment as one in which 'we believe we have a universal voice, and lay claim to the agreement of everyone' (1987, 59-60). In short the aesthetic is a realm where we can discuss important

questions that we assume are of universal or social significance and not merely the expression of private capriciousness. Aesthetic form is also what differentiates the aesthetic judgment from the moral judgment. Moral judgments of 'the good' are based on concepts whose determinateness Kant would hope (vainly, given the dualistic structure of his philosophy) could be qualified by non-sensuous principles of reason. In the absence of precisely such qualification, Kant turns to the aesthetic.

Where as in the determinate judgments of the understanding, form is imposed from the outside as it were by conceptual determination, in the aesthetic mode form achieves a structuring of experience that is inextricably connected with the singularity of the experienced object, thus to some extent overcoming the dualism between form and content that Lukács argued typified bourgeois philosophy in this epoch. Aesthetic form constitutes 'lawfulness without a law' Kant argues (1987, 92), which is to say that it is analogous to a normative and political ideal in which the aesthetic object makes its own rules, generating it up from itself and instantiating it in its unified singularity. In this sense (generating the law or rule up from the particular) the aesthetic is a model of induction and Kant explicates it through a series of analogies between pure aesthetic judgments, empirical aesthetic judgments (of the agreeable, which have no universal possibilities) and moral judgments of the good, which do have universal scope but have no grounding in sensuous matter (which can only compromise it).

In the aesthetic we ask what are the principles of connection that unifies this object and makes sense of its parts, parts that in turn, have the precise significance that they do precisely because of the web of interrelationships in which the principles of connection are embodied. Kant grounds aesthetic pleasure in our common striving toward an aim, namely a meaningful connection – unity of purpose-between elements. As the aesthetic facilitates the development of such formal questions, so it may also facilitate the development of our cognitive powers with regard to social forms and relationships. Of course Kant's thinking here is similar to such organic and ideological conceptions of society as Rousseau's body politic. Yet the normative implications of the necessary inter-dependence of society in Rousseau and Kant do cut against the practical principles of atomization and separation typical of capitalism. Moreover, the dissolution of contradiction implied by the organic body metaphor is substantially modified by the subsequent development of cultural technologies like the moving image where editing, in a move analogous with industrial modernity itself, breaks down and reassembles matter in ways that develop the imagination's attunement to contradiction and dialectics in its 'free play' with the understanding (this 'free play' now understood as a historically and technologically mediated relationship to nature). The great modernist thinkers of early cinema, Kracauer, Eisenstein, Balász and Benjamin all knew this.

Eagleton and the Ideology of the Aesthetic

In contrast to my presentation of the Kantian aesthetic, which stresses its critical cognitive potential, Terry Eagleton has argued that the Kantian aesthetic is virtually synonymous with ideology. It will be useful to clarify further my argument about the Kantian aesthetic to explore this disagreement. Eagleton's broader critique of the ideology of the aesthetic is to cast what I have been presenting as a bottom up (inductive) sensuous exploration of 'laws', as a hegemonic project in which the concepts of the ruling order fashion a discourse which can make sense of the terrain of 'passion and perception' (Eagleton 1997, 14). This is the whole affective life of the subject which the ruling order needs to be able to speak to and orchestrate if a successful shift in the modality of domination, from the coercion of absolutism to consent, is to be made. Although Eagleton acknowledges in places that the aesthetic is 'a dangerous, ambiguous affair' (1997, 28) the thrust of his argument stresses its successful hegemonic function (perhaps because he is focusing on critical discourses of the aesthetic more than aesthetic cultural production). This emphasis closes off a more productive Marxist engagement with Kant's aesthetic philosophy.

I want to focus on two aspects of the aesthetic that loom large in Kant's discussion of the beautiful, the question of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, and the relationship between sensuousness and conceptual abstraction. Eagleton comes perilously

close in both of these aspects to suggesting that to establish some sort of reciprocal relationship between the paired terms in each case, is quintessentially an ideological move. I would suggest that because capitalism is characterized by the dualistic rupture between subject and object, sensuous particular and the abstract, that Marxists ought be extremely interested in theoretical and practical efforts to establish more productive relations between these terms.

In terms of a philosophy of praxis, if we transpose Kant's discussion of the aesthetic as a way of thinking about the constituent parts of our species being, namely that we are of nature, part of nature and immersed in the natural world and *yet* differentiated from nature by dint of *our* nature as social beings equipped with tremendous creative capacities, then Kant's discussion of the aesthetic, contradictory as it is, begins to look like he is prefiguring Marx in some important respects. We can see a proto-materialist formulation in parts of Kant's aesthetic not unlike Marx's discussion of our 'metabolic' relation to nature in *Capital*. Eagleton by contrast sees Kant's aesthetic almost wholly as a form of ideological consolation. The extent to which it can be seen as a register in which subject/object relations different to the dualities of the *Critique of Pure Reason* can be gropingly formulated, is underplayed and cast as bourgeois wish-fulfillment:

...in the aesthetic sphere, objects are uncovered which seem at once real yet wholly given for the subject, veritable bits of material Nature which are nevertheless delightfully pliant to the mind (1997, 78).

Eagleton however tends to blur –through style – the distinction between ontological categories such as subject and object, essential really to any philosophy of praxis, and ideological renditions of those categories. I would dispute Eagleton’s characterization that the Kantian aesthetic gives the object ‘wholly’ over to the subject, because the ‘play’ *between* the imagination and the understanding expressly contradicts this. But perhaps the reader’s hesitation here over ‘wholly’ is swept aside by that strategic use of ‘delightfully’ which in the fashion of Bakhtin’s dialogic class struggle, appropriates a key and recognizable word from the enemy (middle class taste) and inserts it here to rhetorically ramp up the critique of a bourgeois idealist over-inflation of subjectivity at the expense of the obdurate qualities of the object world. In so doing it is not clear whether Eagleton is critiquing Kant’s specific formulation of the aesthetic, or whether he sees any productive relationship between subject and object as essentially an ideological discourse.

Eagleton’s stylistic strategies that obfuscate such distinctions are compounded by his conceptual underpinnings that are hard to square with the classical Marxist tradition. Kant’s aesthetic he argues offers a consoling account of a centered human subject ‘in an imaginary relation to a pliable, purposive reality, thereby granting it a delightful sense of its own inner coherence and confirming its status as an ethical agent’ (1997, 98). According to Eagleton the notion of the human subject having a purposive relation to a relatively ordered external reality such that it can make some aspects of it ‘pliable’, which in turn raises ethical questions over the choices

we make, is thoroughly ideological (note that word 'delightful' again). Yet some version of this model – discredited as it is within the Lacanian discourse Eagleton here invokes to critique the 'centered' subject – is necessary if we are to have any rational discussion about history and society. If Eagleton believes that it is merely a consoling fantasy that the material world might be regarded as recoverable as the product of the active subject (collective and individual) then the trajectory of the argument is clearly outside the orbit of Marxism. Further, it is not even clear that the middle class taste formation that he has in mind is an accurate barometer of what Kant actually argues.

Aesthetic judgment is then a kind of pleasurable free-wheeling of our faculties, a kind of parody of conceptual understanding, a non-referential pseudo-cognition which does not nail down the object to an identifiable thing, and so is agreeably free of a certain material constraint (1997, 85).

This is rather a mis-characterization of Kant's aesthetic which is presented as a somewhat irresponsible suspension of material reality that only the middle class could luxuriate in. In contrast I would argue that the dialectic that Kant explores in the free play between understanding and imagination hints at the way that reflective judgment might shift from formal purposiveness to practical purposiveness, at the possibility that is of the aesthetic mode functioning as a model, stimulus and guide for real practical activity. Note that Eagleton accepts unquestioningly the idea that Kant's aesthetic is without conceptual and therefore without cognitive

content or implications. But when we remember that the aesthetic shares with both natural scientific methods and critical social scientific methods, an interest in induction and analogy, it becomes very hard to sustain the notion that the Kantian aesthetic is 'conceptless'. Instead, as I have argued, the aesthetic, if it is properly working aesthetically, sets to work on *determinate* concepts and de-reifies them.

However for Eagleton, the mediating work of the aesthetic as 'concrete thought or sensuous analogue of the concept (1988, 328) is dangerously close to the essence of bourgeois ideology and its hegemonic project. For Eagleton, the aesthetic is a rather more effective means of winning the battle of ideas than either civil society – which is too competitive, egoistical and materialistic – or the state – which is too obviously about coercion and power. The aesthetic provides a means whereby abstract doctrines and ideologies can interpellate subjects in ways that hit their guts, so to speak, combining a powerful affective dimension to those abstract doctrines that avoids the need for reflexive rationalization ('that's just the way I feel') while providing such feelings with a universal righteousness that transcends mere subjective whim and particularity.

In ideology and the aesthetic we stay with the thing itself, which is preserved in all its concrete materiality rather than dissolved to its abstract conditions; yet this very materiality, this uniquely unrepeatable form or body, comes mysteriously to assume all the compelling logic of a global decree (1997, 95).

Eagleton brilliantly articulates the manner in which the ideological stirs people up while insulating them from really reflecting on the assumptions behind their deeply felt concerns. But is this in fact *also* a description of the aesthetic? To say that the aesthetic can be a vehicle for ideology goes without saying, but to say that the aesthetic is inherently ideological because it unites abstraction with the perceptible/sensual as Eagleton does, really closes off an important resource for the left. Indeed, given the way capitalism's tendency towards abstraction massively increases the disjunctive relations between concept world and experience in any class divided mode of production, then the aesthetic is a crucial pedagogic resource. This ability to relativize concepts and make abstractions from experience, as well as the ability to see alterations in the physical appearance of things as a register of social relations (through a close up or editing for example in film) has been central to what has attracted generations of Marxist cultural theorists and practitioners (from Eisenstein to Jameson) to the aesthetic mode (and film in particular). Unlike Kant's reason, the aesthetic combines free (but not autonomous) deliberation with a sensuous manifestation thus overcoming the divide between the sensible and the supersensible, or as Brecht put it: 'making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it' (1988, 82).

Where abstract doctrines such as sexism and racism acquire a felt, lived power through aesthetics, ideology is *hijacking* the aesthetic and negating some of the characteristics that make the aesthetic, aesthetic. Engagement with the particularity of lived experience for

example becomes highly selective and narrow. From Gaye Tuchman's 'symbolic annihilation' of women to Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, the narrow social basis on which representation is founded reveals itself in the aesthetic as a pseudo-engagement with the particular and is the pseudo-sensuous counterpart to the emptying out of discursive language of any real substantive content in favor of formalism. A film like *The Mummy* (1999) conforms to the racial Othering which Said analyzed in *Orientalism*. The white British and American characters are presented as daring, adventurous, brave, ingenious and resourceful, exactly the sort of people in whose hands the treasures they seek and find should belong, while *their* presence in Egypt is only ever cast in terms of the threat which others (the natives) pose to them, not what threat they pose to the native. The native by contrast, when they come out of the background of the *mise-en-scene*, are sneaky, cunning, cowardly, threatening and power hungry, exactly the sort of people who need to be kept in line by civilized and knowledgeable white westerners. The film was a Universal Pictures production and as well as film sequels, video games on Playstation 2 and other platforms were released off the back of its success. Universal Pictures is a subsidiary of General Electric, the energy corporation that signed a \$3 billion dollar contract with the Iraqi government to provide power generation equipment and services in 2009. Needless to say, GE did not have a market in Iraq before the 2003 invasion by the US and the UK. Clearly then the yoking of the aesthetic to ideology involves us in economic, political and military power that must win consent to the exercise of those powers and at least passive tolerance to its goals and methods. Yet the occlusion of the real Arab subject is a sure sign that *The*

Mummy is a vehicle for ideology rather than an example of the inherently ideological nature of the aesthetic. In violation of the working up of 'universals' from the concrete particular, here we have the precise opposite, where the a priori determinative judgment ('we whites are superior') masquerades as an inductive process. This in no way correlates with Kant's reflective judgment. Instead it is motivated by a preexisting and rigidly a priori value system closed to experiential learning (including *mediated* experiential learning). It is very far from the 'indeterminate' quality Kant finds characteristic of the aesthetic. Eagleton interprets Kant's concept of the 'indeterminate' as a complacent middle class refusal to engage with the real world and as symptomatic of a resistance to theoretical and conceptual language that cognitively 'determines' the nature of things. But again, Eagleton has missed the precise sense and meaning by which Kant is contrasting 'determinate' judgments with critical and provisional 'indeterminate' ones, and therefore missing the de-reifying potential of the indeterminate.

In the determinative judgment, the universal remains disjunctive with the particular or simply assimilates it and in either case refuses to allow the particular to impact on and shape the universal. In short contact with the Arab other is not going to lead to a reassessment of white western preconceptions in a film like *The Mummy*. The relationship between particular and universal, the experiential and the abstract, is radically different in the two kinds of judgment. Eagleton however does not distinguish between the two. For him, the 'universal voice' that the subject finds in the aesthetic is one that is analogous to the way 'gut feelings' are given the status of universal

and incontrovertible truth so typical of ideology. Yet the analogy is inexact in crucial ways. For what Kant is suggesting is that the 'universal voice' with which we speak is precisely our capacity for discussion, precisely our capacity *not* to just accept what is given (those a priori judgments), precisely a universal that retains its material ground and is therefore always provisional, precisely the capacity for us to *imagine* nature and social relations differently from the way they have been constituted for us previously and by historical conditions.

Conclusion

The *Critique of Judgment* represents an incomplete and unfinished methodological break in Kant's philosophy, one that involves prioritizing induction and analogy. This methodological shift is legitimated by the topic, namely the aesthetic, which becomes a kind of model for the realm of human praxis that is missing from Kant's earlier philosophy. Because its method is inductive the aesthetic retains a vital link to what is happening on the material ground of social life. Kant's critical discourse on the aesthetic uses analogy to try and overcome the compartmentalization of social practices that otherwise structures his philosophy. Through analogy and induction Kant is able to formulate the concepts of reflective judgment and purposiveness that break with or allow for the de-reification of the determinative judgment that dominates the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The reflective judgment assumes a unity of laws which it cannot prove but which guides its mode of enquiry. It is therefore subjective, orientated towards discovery and the solving of problems and a

stimulant to the imagination as an aid in doing that. The aesthetic works, when it is genuinely working aesthetically, in a way similar to Marx's *darstellung*, inductively up, *not* from concepts but from sensuous experience (which however are shot through with concepts, just as Marx's concepts are shot through with everyday sensuous experience). The aesthetic, when it is working aesthetically (that is not hijacked by ideology) works up that sensuous content according to the principles of reflective judgment that de-reify the determinate concepts impregnated within the sensuous experience. In this the aesthetic is similar to the critical social science of Marx's project, except aesthetic form determination has much greater scope, much greater 'play' in relation to the categorical framework of the understanding than Marx's critical social science project or the natural sciences (and this is what makes it imaginative rather than scientific).

Reflective judgment is precisely what the aesthetic facilitates as well as embodies, reconnecting the cognitive and emotional/sensuous circuits broken by the more instrumental discourses of politics and economics and the damage which they initiate. In this sense we need to think about the aesthetic as *reparative* in a way that is not captured by the Marxist notion of the aesthetic as performing imaginary resolutions of real contradictions. The aesthetic opens up a different public sphere – its subjective dimension is precisely what we may say allows it the scope and space denied by those practices closer to the economic and political reproduction of the system; at the same time this 'subjective' dimension is not to be conflated with individual subjectivity – the aesthetic has a collective and public

profile and objectivity that goes beyond what Kant calls the merely private taste of the agreeable. This public sphere, this reparative dimension means that paradoxically, the aesthetic is characterized by what Ranciere calls dissensus, since it undoes the hierarchies and divisions that customarily endure (2009, 3). Cultural Marxism must retain its ideology critique but an engagement with Kant can help it to discover that the aesthetic is not synonymous with ideology.

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