

Aesthetics and Class Interests: Rethinking Kant

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Anglophone Marxism has very largely taken a disappointingly unproductive ‘orthodox’ position on Kant’s aesthetics and as a result has cut itself off from or disavowed its genealogical relationship to an important philosophical resource. Of course there is a basis to the interpretation of Kant as a bourgeois philosopher, something that Kantian Marxism, from Goldmann, through to Colletti and Karatani, tends to deny. This bourgeois dimension to Kant’s philosophical architecture may be discerned in its class conditioned formalism, dualism and elitism, while contemporary bourgeois criticism is constitutionally unable to interrogate the historical and class conditioned nature of Kant’s work or its own interpretations. Yet the bourgeois Kant is radically unstable, and an anti-bourgeois Kant is just as readily discernable within the third *Critique*.¹ This Kant can offer us a non-reductive philosophy of the aesthetic *and* its relations with social interests, especially class interests. This must sound paradoxical. After all, Kant is the author of these lines: ‘Everyone has to admit that if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste’.²

¹ The *Critique of Pure Reason* investigates the principles by which we can objectively know the world. The *Critique of Practical Reason* investigates the principles by which we can act morally in the world. The *Critique of Judgment*, investigates the principles by which we can respond in the register of the aesthetic, to the world.

² Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment*, Translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987, p.46.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Kant's philosophy for a Marxist re-construction of it that would release Kant from his entombment as a bourgeois philosopher, is his claim that a pure aesthetic judgment is not only non-conceptual, but also, because of that independence from instrumental cognition, 'disinterested'. Precisely what that means is however more open to interpretation than has been readily acknowledged. The Kant I am excavating here will be clarified by and differentiated from two contemporary theorists who take very opposing positions on Kant's aesthetic philosophy: Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Jacques Rancière. For Bourdieu of course Kant is the foundation of class discrimination in the field of taste and further, philosophy is one of the most privileged discourses by which the intellectual class disavow their own interests. For Jacques Rancière on the other hand, Kant is an important resource for rethinking the politics of aesthetics and both the aesthetic and philosophy are mobilized in his work against what he sees as the sociological fixing of subjects by the power of discursive classification. This battle between philosophy/aesthetics and the social sciences turns on the question of whether practices are identical to their immediate (social, institutional, temporal) conditions of existence. In turning to Kant to help us avoid some of the problems associated with Bourdieu's position, I will in turn differentiate my reading of Kant from Rancière's which in relation to the question of class interests, is close to conventional bourgeois interpretations of the Kantian aesthetic. The Kant that I am trying to exhume is unrecognized by orthodox Marxism or the bourgeois intelligentsia, left or right.

Not The Bourgeois Kant

Kant defines ‘interest’ as ‘the liking we connect with the presentation of an object’s existence’.³ An interested liking admits factors that are extraneous to the pure aesthetic judgment. Those factors concern the subject’s non-aesthetic judgments – namely judgments that pertain to the *existence* of the object and the subject’s attitudinal relationship to its existence. In response to the aesthetic dimension of a Palace, one might prefer ‘nothing better in Paris than the eating-houses’ or one might, Rousseau-like condemn the Palace as an object of vanity that expended ‘the people’s sweat’. But says Kant this ‘is not to the point’.⁴ For Kant, a judgment of taste is to be differentiated from the agreeable (the pleasures of the belly) or reason (Rousseau-like indignation), because it is *disinterested*. Where as the purely sensuous and purely moral/political both are shaped by *interests*, the aesthetic, Kant seems to be suggest, is not. The agreeable, because it is grounded only in the sensuous carries a liking that is ‘conditioned pathologically by stimuli’.⁵ The merely sensuous is thus un-free, because of this pathological response to stimulation. ‘Only when their need has been satisfied’ states Kant in materialist terms any historical materialist could agree with, ‘can we tell who in a multitude of people has taste’.⁶ The Good is free in one sense insofar as we must choose to recognize our moral duties. But it is un-free

³ Kant, *ibid*, p.45.

⁴ Kant, *ibid*, pp.45-6.

⁵ Kant, *ibid*, p.51.

⁶ Kant, *ibid*, p.52.

⁶ Kant, *ibid*, p.52.

insofar as we really *ought* to act on those duties. '[W]here the moral law speaks we are objectively no longer free to select what we must do' Kant argues.⁶ Duties are non-negotiable categorical imperatives to treat others as ends in themselves and not means to our ends. In this sense the Good is rational *and interested*, while the agreeable is merely sensuous and interested. Notice here how Kant's understanding of *interest* is closely associated with *compulsion*. We might then say that the agreeable is associated with immediate sensuous *need* and its satisfaction (economic scarcity) while the moral-political judgment is associated with the compulsion of what we *ought* to do. Thus Kant says:

Neither an object of inclination, nor one that a law of reason enjoins on us as an object of desire, leaves us the freedom to make an object of pleasure for ourselves out of something or other.⁷

Now, once we have recast the concept of *interest* as meaning something like compulsion, the following classic (and bourgeois) definition of the aesthetic becomes open to another kind of reading.

Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of interest*.⁸

⁷ IKant, ibid, p.52.

⁸ Kant, ibid, p.53.

Interest, now read as compulsion, recasts the aesthetic as relatively autonomous to need and politics. In terms of need the aesthetic operates at that level that is created by any (historically specific and developed) *surplus*; after we eat and satisfy our other vital reproductive needs (the merely agreeable) we may engage in the aesthetic in which sensuousness is enlarged and acquires a complexity through a formal arrangement that is appropriate to a society that has accumulated material and cultural surpluses. But it is also the place where the compulsions of the moral (read *political*) universe to defend and obey conceptions of the Good (the distribution and order of the sensuous) now become mediated by sensuous play and inter-subjective debate. The Rousseau-like response to the Palace must now subject itself to the specificity of the aesthetic play of forms which complicate and mediate the political condemnation of the immediate conditions and motives for building the palace. Judgment may now for example discern some utopian impulses for a generalisation of the very surplus which is the condition of the aesthetic in the first place. Thus the aesthetic operates in a new (for Kant) space, a space that was also historically (re)emerging in Europe but which had been absent since the times of the ancient Greeks. This space is one where sense without need and reason without a priori moral command can come together in a new configuration. The aesthetic opens up a space for reflecting *on* interests (compulsions) precisely because it is not a direct reflection *of* interests (compulsions).

Now, the aesthetic, as a space where the compulsion of need (economics) and politics (the struggle over the legitimacy of the

economic order) is slackened off means that the aesthetic is a practice where commonality and difference can be explored in ways that the more immediate imperatives of class and politics make difficult. The agreeable is a judgment wallowing in the ‘private conditions’ of the merely sensuous being. It has little or no social dimension about it given the structure of bourgeois civil society, while the beautiful for Kant is a code word for thinking about a more authentic social being than either the determinism of nature/civil society or the moral-political command articulates. Only the liking of the beautiful is ‘disinterested and *free*, since we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason.’⁹ Disinterestedness opens up a social being that is inter-subjective and based on communication. ‘Aesthetic disinterestedness has broadened interest beyond particularity’ argued Adorno in similar fashion with one eye obliquely on the third *Critique*.¹⁰ The aesthetic implies ‘a relation between interest and its renunciation’ and this means that the aesthetic may function as a critique of ‘the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service’.¹¹

Interpreting Kant’s aesthetic philosophy as a struggle against reification, rather than as a transcendence of the social, shifts it away from bourgeois apologetics and towards an exploration of the transcendental conditions of intersubjectivity where something analogous to (but different from) the moral good could emerge through a process of discussion, debate and dialogue. We accord the aesthetic judgment a certain universal validity as if it were a logical

⁹ Kant, *ibid*, p.52.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London 1997, p.14.

¹¹ Adorno, *ibid*.

objective judgment, when in fact it is merely a subjective one, but one which escapes private and individualistic subjectivity. It is ‘as if’ the aesthetic judgment is a universal judgment (it is made as if it were objective) but it is ‘as if’ it is not a universal judgment (it is a judgment which others can and do disagree with and it operates outside natural scientific type *proofs*). The as if principle here becomes not disavowal but instead activates the Kantian critical procedure of the parallax, as outlined by Kojin Karatani.¹² The alternation between an antithesis (universality and subjectivity) means that something *unlike the logical* universal might emerge in the oscillation. That something is clearly the social. It is this opening up to the social dimensions of being which the bourgeois interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics has largely repressed.

Taste, Kant argues cultivates our ‘*sociability*’.¹³ In this it struggles to release us from the prison of egotistical judgment. Our *sensus communis*, our universal and shared powers to reflectively judge, allows us:

as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones, an illusion that would have a prejudicial influence on judgment’¹⁴

¹² Kojin Karatani *Transcritique on Kant and Marx*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2005, pp.47-50.

¹³ Kant *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, p.163.

¹⁴ Kant, *ibid*, p.160.

This notion that *private* conditions (and interests) have a prejudicial influence on our judgments makes Kant a rather anti-bourgeois 'bourgeois' philosopher. In what Kant called the reflective judgment, where the universal is suspended, we may override 'the private subjective conditions of...judgment, into which so many others are locked' ¹⁵ and reflect on our own judgment 'from a *universal standpoint*' which we can do only 'by transferring...[ourselves] to the standpoint of others'. ¹⁶ This universal is not the logical universal that is given from the first *Critique*. It is at once subjective, dialogical and a utopian/potential universal ¹⁷ in the claim that it makes.

The movement from individual interest to some more universal interest is key, but in the first instance, the individual interest is merged with the *general* interests of a group or class. Thus the individual may be seen as a member of a genus or community (as in taxonomic classifications), a individual-general connection or circuit that is distinct from universality as such. Real universality would thus require an acknowledgment of the standpoint of others *across* substantive (and unequal) differences. Thus, and this is crucial, if the aesthetic is associated with an emerging sense of the social, it is also associated with an emerging sense of the failure of the social, the social as fractured by (class) division. Karatani's reading of Kant is helpful here. He is interested in the idea that inter-discourse across communities (generalities) represents the transcritical move (the parallax) from which we can perhaps glimpse the universal, which is

¹⁵ Kant, *ibid*, p.161.

¹⁶ Kant, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Kant, *ibid*, p.89.

characterized in the reflective judgment by the fact that it is not given.

Kant drew a keen distinction between universality and generality...While generality can be abstracted from experience, universality cannot be attained *if not for a certain leap*....the condition for a certain cognition to be universal is not necessarily that it be based on a priori rule, but that it be exposed to the judgment of others who follow a different set of rules.¹⁸

Universality emerges, or perhaps better, is glimpsed instead in a complex communication act *across* communities ‘who follow a different set of rules’ and it is the *singular* judgment which the aesthetic experience may prompt in the individual (ordinarily sunk in their membership of a particular community or group) that provides a route to a provisional universality. For Kant the aesthetic is the privileged nexus point between the non-logical universal and the singular.¹⁹ This ‘universal’ is best thought of in its aesthetic construction as a transient glimpse of structural conditions and interrelationships. In the aesthetic, the *certain leap* is achieved by the complexity of its communicative form across difference. Thus class-consciousness always requires the emergence of a consciousness of *other* classes, since classes by definition exist in relationships to one another. And emergence into consciousness of others at any level,

¹⁸ Kojin Karatani *Transcritique on Kant and Marx*, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2005,p.100

¹⁹ Kant, op.cit., p.144.

including classed others, opens up the possibility (but not the guarantee) of reflective powers in the aesthetic mode where immediate class interests can be temporally bracketed as direct imperatives and ‘the standpoint of others’ suddenly impinges into consciousness of the self in ways that are interesting, exploratory, critical and even anticipatory of changes implied by the unsustainability of those class relations.

Bourdieu: Against the Aesthetic

The war between philosophy – which accuses the social sciences of a reductionist fixing of what it studies – and the social sciences, which accuses philosophy of a lack of social and historical specificity, has been particularly fierce around the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu’s hostility towards philosophy, whose concepts are ‘half-baked, although well done enough to arouse delicious shudders of a bogus revolution’ is matched only by his fierce critique of aesthetics.

²⁰ Bourdieu’s sociology of culture provides both the theoretical tools and masses of empirical data, albeit specific to the French national context, for understanding some of the conditions of cultural production and reception and the class stratified nature of those conditions. At the same time, a philosophy of the aesthetic understands that the aesthetic is not identical with its immediate conditions of existence and that the historical and the social is

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, 1987, p.201.

operative at levels of abstraction which a more empirical sociology of culture often misses.

Bourdieu's critique of aesthetics begins conceptually by reminding it of its social conditions of possibility. His important concept of the habitus is the means by which he seeks to navigate his way between the twin traditions of the social sciences: objectivism and subjectivism, whose opposition has failed to integrate their respective truths into a single system. The habitus internalizes and orientates the subject to their objective environment providing 'schemes of perception, thought, and action' that guides their practices and their representations.²¹ Despite his anti-Kantianism, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus owes something to the first *Critique*, with its emphasis on the mental structures that allow cognitive mapping of the world. Of course, Bourdieu is not constructing a universal transcendental subject, but rather a differentiated, social and historically determined transcendental (that is determinate) subject. Bourdieu seeks to bring structures and the representations which social actors bring to their daily negotiation of their structures into some sort of dynamic relationship. The different habitus that differentially classed subjects develop mobilises the attitudinal dispositions and competences that are available to them according to the social space that they occupy. As the competences and dispositions that are acquired 'tend to be adjusted to position' in social space, social agents 'even the most disadvantaged ones, tend to perceive the world as natural and to

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu 'Social Space and Symbolic Power' *Sociological Theory*, No.1 1989, p.14.

accept it much more readily than one might imagine'.²² The habitus which agents have is shaped by the position which they occupy in social space and it in turn produces practices within that space which, within Bourdieu's conceptual architecture, can be conceived as at best, offering the line of least resistance to those conditions. Bourdieu tends to concentrate on and assume a 'quasi-perfect coincidence of objective structures and embodied structures'²³ and has no real basis to theorise under what circumstances that tight fit might be fractured. It is true that he allows for a degree of 'indeterminacy and fuzziness' between objective structures and perceptual representations, not least because in real history the meaning of things 'are subject to variations in time so that their meaning, insofar as it depends on the future, is itself in suspense, in waiting, dangling'.²⁴ But Bourdieu's sense of temporality does not rescue him from a tendential functionalism, not least because Bourdieu has a rather 'sociological' view of history. The elasticity between conditions and the practices they give rise to never really causes any fundamental problems or contradictions; it merely allows a degree of latitude that gives the system (or field) a historically evolving, but stable identity.

The artistic field internalizes the market logic that equates artificial (i.e. socially engineered) scarcity with a higher exchange value while at the same time developing a language and a field that scorns proximity to the commercial, the economic, the 'vulgar' world of

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *ibid*, p.18.

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups' *Theory and Society* vol.14, no.6, 1985, p731.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *ibid*, p.728

routine everyday capitalism and of course above all, to the masses. The ‘pure aesthetic’ of the Kantian type is founded on a disavowal of its privileged social basis. Typically the competences and dispositions for successful entry and navigation of the artistic field that have been acquired under exclusive social conditions, appear to the subject as the product of personal taste, intelligence and individual brilliance. The autonomy of the artistic field, which Bourdieu sees as a product of capitalist modernization, is merely the institutional basis of this individual perception, writ large. ‘The invention of the pure gaze is realized in the very movement of the field toward autonomy’. ²⁵ Against this autonomization, which is real but also blind to its real conditions, Bourdieu insists on the importance of excavating the *history* of the artistic field, by which he means the genealogy of the special language and concepts which have been developed in order to disavow its economic and social basis. Yet, as with the tight fit between objective structures and the practical mastery of those structures through the acquired habitus, Bourdieu’s historicisation of the field reinforces the sense of its more or less seamless *reproduction*. There is very little in Bourdieu’s work of the social and historical world *beyond* the relatively autonomous field and therefore very little sense that the aesthetic is embedded in the tumult of its times.

The political economy or sociology of the immediate conditions for the aesthetic are always embedded in a wider series of differences which disrupt the smooth reproduction of those conditions. In Bourdieu’s work there is little conceptual understanding of a

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic’ op.cit., p.207.

communicative relation that involves awareness of difference and the *inscription of the other inside the field as a disruptive force*. Aesthetic form is the compressed and compacted inscription of wider social relations in the peculiar language of a given medium and its multiple genres. And since social relations are never – no matter how exclusive the aesthetic in question – just a matter of the internal life of a given social group, but are always about a group or a class's relationship with others, those others, even if only ever disavowed, are always inscribed as part of the communicative structure of aesthetic form. These social differences (of class, race or gender) produce the characteristic 'dialogic' quality of the aesthetic, as well as its internal contradictions and tensions.

From Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) to Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2005) art cinema has demonstrated that despite its material constitution as a cinema of the middle class, by the middle class, it inscribes into its very communicative architecture or form, the disruptive presence of the other (the unconscious, the classed and racial other and so forth). In Haneke's *Hidden*, what is hidden is above all the invisible omniscient gaze of the camera – the disinterested gaze in the classic bourgeois Kantian sense – that tells the story but which is periodically unmasked as not so disinterested by the integration into the film of the 'illegitimate' *video* surveillance of the bourgeois family. Although *this* illegitimate camera is hidden from the family within the story world (and it is this that marks it as a source of threat from some *interested* other), the camera that is typically hidden from our consciousness as viewers by the denial of its presence and thus the camera which structures our point of entry

into the story worlds of mass culture, our navigation of those story worlds, our sense of who and what these stories are about, in short our focalization, is the institutional camera gaze that normalizes the middle class world view. The critique which *Hidden* directs at the erasure of *that* omniscient camera telling the story, pivots precisely on the inscription of the other into the form of the film in the form of the hidden video camera. Nor is this just aimed at the media in general or popular cinema. The film is also reflecting on the implications of the middle class focalisation that is institutionalised by art cinema. Video is the form and the medium by which the uncomfortable gaze of some other literally enters the lives of the bourgeois family. Video turns the tables and empowers the marginalized against those who have access to the means of representation. Georges, the central character, is a well-known host on a television discussion programme focusing on high culture where he is happy to be the object of the official camera-gaze of consecrated institutions.

It is precisely this acknowledgment by the film of its institutional, social and class limits that counts as an example of reflective judgment. The reflective judgment is one which subjectively acknowledges that the ‘universal’ is *not given*, that it is a fiction or ideological construct. This awareness emerges in the painful registering of the other in the form of the film, a registering that acknowledges the broken lines of communication across the divided social terrain. The parallax the film constructs between the gaze of the official camera and the gaze of the plebian video camera can do no more than glimpse, by negating the current conditions of

communication, a more authentic universal condition. Implicitly, to do that the film must allude to some utopian standpoint to make its critique. Perhaps this is one way of reading the film's final image – that enigmatic meeting between Georges son and Majid's son, which might betoken an overcoming of the divisions that structured the relationship between their respective fathers.

Rancière: The Aesthetic vs the Social Sciences

Bourdieu's sociology of culture offers us a sobering reminder of the classed conditions of possibility for the aesthetic. However Bourdieu's impoverished conceptualization of aesthetic form reduces aesthetic practices to their conditions (in this case, the field). By contrast, Rancière's work offers us a much more suggestive, attractive and complex account of what he calls the aesthetic experience, that recognizes that practices are not identical to immediate conditions. However, Rancière rescues aesthetic practices from their reduction to conditions at the expense of very largely bracketing off social and historical conditions entirely. Rancière's work has very little to say about class and class interests in relation to the aesthetic.

Rancière's discourse is in a kind of philosophic-mythic mode where Plato is his negative touchstone. For Plato prescribes the template of contemporary social scientific thought that affirms a 'relationship of

reciprocal confirmation between a condition and a thought'.²⁶

Contemporary social scientific discourses fix people in their place, in specific spatio-temporal locations and thus reproduce the system of power that they are ostensibly trying to critique. Rancière's own method rationalises itself as a liberation from such academic disciplines and his philosophic-mythic discourse is inspired by the aesthetic and is conceived as effecting a strategic shift in the 'discursive register' of an object, 'its universe of reference, or its temporal designations'.²⁷ Socio-historical enquiry thus becomes, for Rancière, the reproduction of a disciplinary prison for both the writer and object of that enquiry. In Bourdieu's deterministic sociology for example 'an abode must determine a way of being that in turn determines a way of thinking'.²⁸ The social sciences thus pacify and 'establish stable relations between bodily states and the modes of perception and signification that corresponds to them'.²⁹

The division which Rancière sets up between the *political* dimension of the aesthetic and a social-scientific understanding of it is deeply structured into his view. For Rancière, the utopian power of the aesthetic must be conceived in terms that reject 'the consistency of coherent social groups'³⁰ since a group is by definition, for him, an entity that is already fixed in place and unable to disturb what he calls the 'distribution of the sensible'. This concept refers in part to

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36.No.1, 2009, p.17.

²⁷ Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia 'A Conversation with Jacques Rancière', *Diacritics*, vol. 30, no.2, 2000, p. 120.

²⁸ Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Dimension' op.cit., p.16.

²⁹ Rancière, *ibid*, p.17.

³⁰ Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia 'A Conversation with Jacques Rancière', *Diacritics*, vol. 30, no.2, 2000,p.124.

the divisions of labour that assign sensual beings their place within the social order, their visibility and invisibility and the evaluations that are put on their visibility and invisibility. Note how this dimension of the distribution of the sensible effectively renders into philosophical language the kind of sociological commonplace that philosophers censure sociologists for making, much to Bourdieu's annoyance.³¹

But the other dimension of the distribution of the sensible refers to that peculiar (re)distribution of the sensible that is the aesthetic experience and which on Rancière's reading of Kant, disrupts the socially determined relationship between concept and sense.

The aesthetic experience is the experience of a specific sensorium cancelling oppositions of understanding and sensibility, form and matter, activity and passivity.³²

The specificity of the aesthetic lies in two contradictory movements – one which asserts its autonomy and one which reconnects it with 'the art of living'. The aesthetic experience is linked to both the beautiful in art *and* an engagement with the art of living. The relationship between the two is what constitutes the aesthetic experience, which is 'effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*'.³³ That experience can only be embodied in a living subject that comes into contact with the aesthetic product. It is the experience itself, not the

³¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic' op.cit., p.201.

³² Jacques Rancière, 'The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller, Two Readings of Kant and their political significance' *Radical Philosophy*, 126, 2004, p.12.

³³ Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes' *New Left Review* 14, 2002, p.134.

'artwork' that achieves a degree of autonomy. This autonomy though is relative because the aesthetic experience opens up the possibility of transferring what is discovered in the contact with the aesthetic product, back into life and discharging something of its transformational powers into life (although not in any simple cause and effect manner). Here we are reminded of what Kant refers, in the third *Critique*, to the aesthetic power to develop 'material for the understanding which the latter disregarded in its concept'.³⁴ We only have to give Kant a modest accentuation, i.e. that the 'understanding' disregarded material for reasons pertaining to socially determined interests, to make his philosophy useful for critique proper.

Yet Ranciére's version of the aesthetic experience is indeed in important respects, despite its political radicalism, indistinguishable from the standard bourgeois reading of Kant. The aesthetic 'strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres'.³⁵ This is a common misreading within the bourgeois intelligentsia of Kant's concept of singularity, but Kant very explicitly insists in his comments on genius, that the artist works in relation to aesthetic constraints.³⁶ And to Ranciére we must ask: *any hierarchy? Any rule?* What has happened here to the medium, the genre, the technology, the institutions, in short the conditions of existence? Rather than pose a mediated relation with what exists, which I would suggest is posited by Kant in his best moments, we have here a reproduction of Kantian compartmentalization. There are rules and hierarchies, and

³⁴ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, p.185.

³⁵ Jacques Ranciére, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London 2007, p.23

³⁶ Kant, op.cit., p.171.

there is that which escapes rules and hierarchies. A simple division. This is the nub of the problem. The aesthetic experience is viewed as a compartmentalization from not a mediation with life and its conditions. What happens within the aesthetic experience can and does cross back over into life (and vice-versa) but in this formulation the experience itself is radically non-identical with its wider conditions. For Rancière the beautiful marks a space that is free from cognition and desire (either the interested desire of the agreeable or the interested desire of the moral Good). This is the basis of the ‘free play’ of the faculties for Rancière.³⁷ Yet this conception, which can be legitimately derived from Kant, is also in contradiction with the overall architecture of Kant’s philosophy in the third *Critique*, since the ‘free play’ of the faculties is precisely a play between the imagination and the understanding. With cognitive judgments the imagination is reproductive, assisting the understanding in its task of synthesizing the manifold of experience into intuitions that can be stamped with universal concepts.³⁸ With the aesthetic, the imagination appears to be more productive, that is have some significant autonomy from the empirical world of the senses as evidenced by its play with forms. However the imagination is still *in play* with the understanding. It is never an unconditional freedom. Taste is a point of mediation between the empirical and reason.

It is however a fairly unreconstructed bourgeois Kant that Rancière resurrects to underpin the aesthetic experience. Instead of thinking of the aesthetic experience as a reconfiguration of cognition (the

³⁷ Jacques Rancière, ‘The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller’ op.cit., p.9.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hackett Publishing Company, Cambridge Indianapolis, 1996.

understanding) and interest (sensuous desire and the moral desire of reason) Rancière sees the aesthetic as *neither* cognition nor desire. ‘The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension’.³⁹ What Rancière calls the ‘neutralisation’ of the established distribution of the senses, means that he associates the aesthetic with *dissensus* rather than the consensus of the socially sanctioned distribution of the senses. This is an interesting proposition and certainly a useful corrective against a version of Gramscian cultural criticism that has emphasised the role of culture in winning the consent of the dominated to their domination. If instead we at least contemplate that the aesthetic, like the political, begins with *dissensus*, begins with the breakdown, the gap and disturbance in the social order, it can usefully reorient us towards the aesthetic as constituted at least in part by its sensitivity towards division and disagreement. However Rancière very explicitly rules out the idea that his concept of dissensus involves conflicting interests. To posit dissensus in terms of conflicting interests is for him to be still trapped within the terms of the hierarchical distribution of the senses that establishes the basis of the conflict in the first place. ‘A dissensus is not a conflict... There is a dissensus only when the opposition itself is neutralized.’⁴⁰

This is a very strange kind of dissensus indeed and one that stands outside the class struggle as it has been structured by the distribution of the senses. It is surely possible to grant that the aesthetic is a site of struggle around ‘sense’ (in both the conceptual and sensuous ‘sense’ of that word) which is a continuation of what is

³⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London 2007, p.24.

⁴⁰ Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Dimension’ op.cit., p3.

happening in the art of the living, while granting that this struggle takes place according to different rules (not the absence of rules) from the political domain? One can begin now to see where the tendential rejection of socio-cultural contextualisation and rejection of group interest as having a determining relationship to the political dimension of the aesthetic, is leading. It leads in short back to a rather traditional reading of the Kantian aesthetic as some kind of transcendence of social interests, albeit now cast in the terms of a radical utopianism of the individual. This is why Rancière conceives the aesthetic effect as one of ‘dis-identification’, where the individual achieves withdrawal from their membership of the genus: ‘The aesthetic community is a community of dis-identified persons’.⁴¹ This is why the utopian vision of the ‘aesthetic community’ in Rancière’s vision does not seem to require a confrontation with privilege and power. One could argue in a discourse that Rancière no doubt would find old-fashioned, that the political efficacy of the aesthetic resides at one level in precisely achieving an *identification* (suppressed within the dominant universe of concepts) with a group existing in antagonistic relations with other groups. If there is any ‘dis-identification’ it is with the inequities of that arrangement, not with group identities, memberships and affiliations per se.

Conclusion

There is then a bourgeois Kant in the third *Critique*. We cannot deny it. Bourdieu takes this Kant as the model of the ideology of the

⁴¹ Jacques Rancière *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso 2011.

aesthetic today. But his vision of aesthetic form is desperately impoverished, reducing it to strategies of exclusion and playing the game for individual/class social advantage. The aesthetic as a complex communicative-imaginative structure that has a lightning-rod capacity to register our social being and its relationships with others within broader social contexts has no place in his model. Like the aesthetic, philosophy, against which Bourdieu was equally opposed, typically and implicitly speaks from a position that is other to its immediate conditions of existence and it is this that allows Marxist philosophy to insist on the reality of potentialities germinating within the present even when all the dominant empirical arrangements are so organised as to resist the development of those potentialities. Similarly, the utopian dimension is ineliminable as a tacit critical standpoint for the aesthetic.

Unlike Bourdieu, Ranciére is alive to this utopian dimension of the aesthetic. But what is largely invisible to Ranciére is the possibility of a genuinely anti-bourgeois Kant from which to launch a critique of the reduction of practices to their conditions. His suggestive concepts of the distribution of the sensible, the aesthetic experience and dissensus are problematised by his argument that the aesthetic is not a site of mediation that is difficult to realize elsewhere, but a pure suspension of the social conditions of existence. By contrast Kant writes of the aesthetic as ‘the *free lawfulness* of the imagination’⁴²

⁴² Kant, op.cit., p.91.

Against both Bourdieu and Rancière I have argued that there is anti-bourgeois Kant available to us. Here the aesthetic offers a experience of the universal which is inherently provisional, glimpsed in the dawning awareness of conflicting interests represented by the presence of others. Awareness of the presence of others is constructed in the communicative architecture (form) of the aesthetic. As awareness of the other is inscribed in the form of the communication itself, so grows the possibility of enlarging our capacity for reflective judgment, for judgment to not only reflect its material conditions, but for judgment to reflect *on* its material conditions. The capacity for reflective judgment expands as our provisional awareness of the social totality is offered in the aesthetic experience and it contracts accordingly as our awareness of the other *from their standpoint* recedes from our consciousness. The aesthetic is therefore necessary to offer us the possibility of exploration and discovery beyond immediate individual interests and immediate interests of the class or group which politics defends. It is the pressure of social antagonisms that makes aesthetic practices non-identical with their conditions. Kantian ‘disinterest’ identifies the specificity of the aesthetic to be receptive to this in a way that the agreeable and moral reason are not. Reflective judgment in the aesthetic can be read as an imaginative exploration that takes the modes of representation beyond the (class) experience of the individual subject, situating both individual and class experience in the context of the network or relations that form the ‘whole’ of experience that is the essential prerequisite for the ability to reflect *on* and not be simply a reflection *of* material conditions. Reflection *on* requires coming into a peculiar kind of consciousness raising contact

with the (classed) other. This painful consciousness is the open wound of the aesthetic.