Aesthetics and the Good Society, Francis Halsall[1]
[Dec. 2009]

> *To abandon the utopian impulse in thinking is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is*
> *and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible, however small,*
> *fleeting and compromised such a world might be. In the political circumstances that presently*
> *surround us in the West, to abandon the utopian impulse in political thinking is to resign*
> *oneself to liberal democracy which, as we showed above, is the rule of the rule, the reign of law*
> *which renders impotent anything that would break with law: the miraculous, the moment of the*
> *event, the break with the situation in the name of the common.*

> Simon Critchley**,** Gradcam (Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, NCAD), 2009

1 – Introduction

It's a popular and important myth that aesthetics will play a role in making a society better. In the midst of financial crisis and at the end of a year when Ireland faced possible bankruptcy and severe flooding, Martin Cullen TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism was still able to sound upbeat about the role of the arts in contemporary Irish society. They should continue to receive generous funding, he argued because they are: "important to the social fabric of communities".[2] In the UK, a recent report published by the Culture and Learning Consortium (comprised of stakeholders in the arts) included 10 key recommendations for the promotion of culture in schools. One participant, Sir Nicolas Serota, director of Tate, was quoted in the report as saying: "Art should be the fourth 'r' alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. Cultural learning feeds every part of our being – our minds, our imagination and our values."[3]

Art and culture are clearly taken seriously by policy makers and politicians. In this paper I discuss the role of aesthetics in establishing conditions under which discussions about the "good society" can take place.

---

[1] This is a work in progress. Versions have been presented as: 'Aesthetics as a Cross-Disciplinary Discipline,' *22nd World Congress for Philosophy*, Seoul, Korea, (July 30th-Aug. 5th. 2008); 'Aesthetics and the Good Society,' *Arts Research, Publics and Processes*, Gradcam, Dublin, (17th Feb. 2010).

[2] Cullen said: "At the Global Irish Economic Forum held in Farmleigh in September there was wide acknowledgement of the importance of culture in promoting Ireland abroad and developing a unique brand for the country in new markets. Most participants agreed that our unique and strong cultural identity provides the Government and the private sector with a strong competitive advantage abroad. Internationally, the creative economy is moving centre stage and creativity is seen as a crucial bedrock, underpinning our knowledge economy. I am pleased that significant funding to support the arts is secured for 2010. The overall allocation for the arts, culture and film area in 2010 is €166m as compared to €178m for 2009 - a 6% adjustment. Even in more stringent times, overall funding for the arts is up 14% on 2005 levels." *News Release, Wednesday 9 December 2009.* Available at: www.arts-sport-tourism.gov.ie/publications/release.asp?ID=100729 (accessed 9 Dec. 2009).

[3] Culture and Learning Consortium, 'Get It: The Power of Cultural Learning,' (2009), available at: http://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/ (Dec. 2009)

2 – Flourishing and the Good Society

A central problem in discourses about the good society lies in identifying exactly what 'good' and 'society' mean.[4] For the purposes of this essay I will bracket definitions of society (as there is not the space here to take on this discussion) and take 'good', in a social context, to mean what Maeve Cooke calls "individual human flourishing."[5] I use 'flourishing' here because it seems to register in both Applied Social Science and Critical Social Theory. For example, 'flourishing' is used by Fahey as a descriptor to asses societal progress that is richer and thicker than happiness:

> "The alternative view [to using happiness as a 'yardstick of progress'] is that welfare is a much broader concept than happiness, and that improvements in welfare are worth achieving because they enable us to *flourish* as human beings, whether or not they make us happier. Thus, it is better to be educated rather than illiterate, to be fit and healthy rather than be cramped by disease and disability, to have a job rather than be unemployed, to have the prosperity that gives us options in life, however badly or well we may use those options, rather than to be hemmed in by material privation"[6]

In Critical Social Theory flourishing also is a key term as White observes, for example, in Habermas' account of the good society:

> "In fact, Habermas usually does not refer simply to 'needs' but rather to 'need interpretation', a locution which expresses their cultural variability. If I interpret him correctly here, what he is implying is that what is taken to be a 'need' in a given society will be a function of what that culture defines as necessary to the *flourishing* of human life."[7]

---

[4] Contributing to this problem of definition are difficulties in communication between the two discourses where questions about the good society have been rehearsed: Applied Social Theory and Critical Social Theory. One reason for this non-dialogue is the lack of agreement between the discourses on what the appropriate theoretical terms, discursive methods and objects of study should be. The apparent incompatibility between Applied Social Theory and Critical Social Theory is exemplified by the "Positivismusstreit" (beginning in 1961 in Tübingen and involving Popper, Adorno and later Habermas amongst others). For more on this see Adorno, et al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby. (London: Heinemann, 1976) and David Frisby, "The Popper-Adorno Controversy: the Methodological Dispute in German Sociology, "*Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1972; 2; 105. The non-dialogue between the different positions emerges from the central issue of domains of discursive validity. As has been argued from several positions, Applied Social Theory doesn't have the vocabulary to describe and/or justify their own validity and thus faces a problem of legitimation that Critical Social Theory can address by providing an expanded account of validity. As Habermas claims: "A sociology which restricted itself in its critical intention to empirical-analytical research would only be in a position to examine the self-preservation and self-destruction of social systems in the sphere of pragmatically successful adjustment processes, and would have to deny other dimensions. Within sociology as a strict behavioral science, questions relating to the self-understanding of social groups cannot be formulated." Habermas, 'A Positivistically Bisected Rationalism,' in Adorno, et al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. This position is rehearsed by Husserl *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1954) (Northwestern University Press, 1970); Adorno and Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, (Continuum, 1976); Habermas, (trans. McCarthy), *Legitimation Crisis*, (Beacon Press, 1975); JF Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (trans Massumi), (University of Minnesota, 1984)
[5] Maeve Cooke, *The Good Society*, (MIT press, 2006) pg. 2
[6] From: T. Fahey, H. Russell and C.T. Whelan (eds.) Best of Times? *The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2007) Ch. 2, my emphasis.
[7] Stephen K. White, *Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas*, (Cambridge University Press, 1988) pg. 69-70, my emphasis.

In both cases 'flourishing' gestures toward the possibility of an individual reaching their potential and of achieving recognition, satisfaction and/or happiness in accomplishing this end.

3 - Aesthetics and Applied Social Science

From the perspective of Applied Social Science, it would seem that aesthetics has, at best, a peripheral role to play in the good society and in the promotion of human flourishing. This would explain why it does not seem to feature as a research priority in this discourse. As Tony Fahey suggests: "much of the social science research on social progress has concentrated on things that can be measured, like income, housing conditions, educational levels, health and so on."[8] Fahey's suggestion is supported by the research priorities of the OECD [Organisation for Economic and Co-Operative Development]. Their mission statement claims:

> "OECD brings together the governments of countries committed to democracy and the market economy from around the world to: Support sustainable economic growth; Boost employment; Raise living standards; Maintain financial stability; Assist other countries' economic development; Contribute to growth in world trade. The Organisation provides a setting where governments compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practice and coordinate domestic and international policies."[9]

For example, neither the narrow category of access to art nor the broader category of aesthetic experience is listed as one of the eight "Headline Social Indicators" identified by the OECD as providing: "rich information on social conditions in different OECD countries and on the measures taken to improve them …. [giving a] parsimonious representation of social conditions."[10] These indicators are organized around four organizing dimensions: Self-Sufficiency, Equity, Health and Social Cohesion and include "subjective well being" which is perhaps the most appropriate to discuss aesthetic experience. However, as Fahey also notes of the indicators:

> "While all of these are important, the amount of attention they receive may lead to a feeling that some of the more crucial but less tangible aspects of the good life are being left out of the picture … [including] subjective well-being or, in plainer language, happiness."[11]

There are perhaps two main reasons for this lack of attention.

On the one hand discourses on aesthetics are notoriously ambigious. Aesthetics has no single definition or subject matter. It can be taken to mean simply 'philosophy of art' (in the Hegelian

---

[8] T. Fahey, H. Russell, C.T. Whelan (eds.) *Best of Times? The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2007). Ch. 2

[9] "For more than 40 years, OECD has been one of the world's largest and most reliable sources of comparable statistics and economic and social data. As well as collecting data, OECD monitors trends, analyses and forecasts economic developments and researches social changes or evolving patterns in trade, environment, agriculture, technology, taxation and more….OECD is one of the world's largest publishers in the fields of economics and public policy. OECD publications are a prime vehicle for disseminating the Organisation's intellectual output, both on paper and online." From: http://www.oecd.org (Dec. 2009)

[10] OECD, *Society at a Glance 2009: OECD Social Indicators*, (Paris: OECD, 2009) Pg. 10-11

[11] T. Fahey, H. Russell, C.T. Whelan (eds) *Best of Times? The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2007). Ch. 2

tradition), while it can also (in the Kantian tradition) invoke general questions of beauty and taste;[12] or, even more generally, different types of 'sensuous' experience, such as experiences of the ugly, the disgusting, etc.[13] It is because of this ambiguity and polysemy that aesthetics can appear to be an arbitrary placeholder for a wide range of incommensurable issues. This lack of 'substance' in aesthetic discourse, combined with stereotypical ideas about its preoccupation with subjective taste and ineffable emotions, to some suggest the practice of non-rigorous reflection and uncritical value judgment. It seems that in all its guises aesthetic considerations are difficult if not impossible to quantify or measure. In other words, in using the domain of aesthetic experience as a social indicator one faces all of the problems with using happiness (definition and validity) whilst coupling these with further ambiguities about what aesthetic experience is; what its objects are and whether this would have a role in either promoting happiness or serving as its index. In short aesthetics as a means by which to realise the good society does not seem to offer concrete examples or evidence. It is hence not rigorously testable and thus not legible in terms of a certain mode of evidence-based research such as that favoured by Applied Social Science.

Moreover, aesthetics has been critiziced for its alleged reliance on the socio-politically problematic notion of 'pure' aesthetic judgments. As sociologists such as Bourdieu have discussed, aesthetic experience can often serve as a site of social exclusion, grounded in taste and cultural hegemony, and, arguably should not be used as an index of the "goodness" of a society..[14] As Bourdieu (et al) note both the quality and the legibility of works of art are mediated by the hierarchical values of society and perpetuate structures of social exclusion:

> "Considered as symbolic goods, works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them. An agents degree of artistic competence is measured by the degree to which he or she can master all the means of appropriation of works of art available at a given time: in other words, the interpretative schemata which are the condition of appropriation of artistic capital, that is, the condition of deciphering the works of art supplied to a given society at a given time".[15]

And

> "The legibility of a work of art for a particular individual is a function of the distance between the more or less complex and sophisticated code demanded by the work, and the individual's competence, defined by the degree to which the social code, itself more or less complex and sophisticated."[16]

Similarly from the perspective of (late) Marxists cultural theory, such as Terry Eagleton's, aesthetic experience is the domain of a particular set of class interests. For example, in his discussion of the *Ideology of the Aesthetic* Terry Eagleton argues:

---

[12] Recent defenses of this approach have included Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); and, Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago & La Salle: Open Court, 2003).

[13] This connects with the very beginnings of the discipline. See Alexander Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, re-edited and trans. into German by Dagmar Mirbach in a Latin-German edition (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2006; orig. vol. 1, 1750/vol.2, p. 58). Recently, Carolyn Korsmeyer has asked whether the disgusting might replace concerns with the beautiful and the sublime. See Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2004)

[14] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984)

15 Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, trans. Caroline Beattie and N. Merriman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). pg. 39.

16 Ibid. p.42–3.

"The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artifact is thus inseperable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjecticity appropriate to that social order"[17]

In both the sociological and cultural theoretical critiques of aesthetics in sociology, aesthetics is characterised as an activity representing the interests of a priveleged class which is linked to specific artifacts and spaces of display. Conceived of in such a way aesthetic activity is the activity of a particular group within society. Consequently, it cannot be used as an indicator for society as a whole and would perhaps falls within (and is possibly effaced by) other categories of quantification. So, for example, the OECD study uses "Leisure" as one of its social indicators (although, crucially, not one of its 8 headline indicators) and defines it as, "the residual time not spent in paid work."[18] Reflecting upon the literature on the subject, the study reports that:

"While methodologies and approaches vary to a certain degree, all the time-use surveys used in this chapter define the "leisure" category as the sum of non-compulsory activities such as hobbies, watching television or listening to the radio, socialising with friends and family, attending cultural events, hosting events, and practising a sporting activity."[19]

And it lists the types of leisure activity, within which aesthetic activities might fall (such as visiting concerts, cinemas or museums) as follows:

"What are the popular leisure activities? Are there big differences in the leisure activities people undertake across OECD countries? Table 2.4 groups time spent in leisure by five major leisure categories: multimedia entertainment at home (TV or radio at home), other leisure activities (various hobbies, internet use, phone conversations, etc.), visiting and/or entertaining friends (both in private and public venues), participating in and/or attending social events (such as concerts, cinema, museums, etc.), and sports (actively participating in regular physical activities, whether individual or organised)."[20]

There are two key features of this discussion of leisure. First, aesthetic activity is considered merely part of the broader category of leisure, which is itself not a headline indicator of social progress. This would preclude either the possibility of it playing a central role in the good society or it operating in a non-leisure context. Second, leisure activity is conceived of only in terms of economics; that is as the time for which one is not paid which in turn naturalizes a binary of work/not-work, rather than providing the opportunity to critique it.[21]

---

[17] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pg. 3

[18] Although the survey does add the following qualification, "This residual approach to the data is not ideal, in particular because it does not allow cross-country or inter-temporal variations in amounts of unpaid work undertaken. However, the residual approach does allow considerations of leisure for the largest possible cross-section/time series of countries across the OECD." OECD, *Society at a Glance 2009: OECD Social Indicators*, (Paris: OECD, 2009) Pg. 20

[19] Ibid. pg. 21

[20] Ibid. pg 34

[21] .See Arendt's distinction between labor, work and action in *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), n which she argues that human flourishing requires stepping outside of the binary or work/non-work.

4 – Aesthetics and Critical Social Theory

In distinction to applied social theory there is a rich history within the traditions of critical social theory of discussions of aesthetics and the good society. In general these are clustered around the political potential of aesthetics in either maximizing human flourishing (Marcuse and, to some extent, Habermas) or in using certain practices to educate and/or mobilize general publics (Benjamin, Adorno, Lukács).

In what follows I identify 3 aspects of aesthetics and the good society. These are the role of aesthetics in: promoting human flourishing; imagining possible, better worlds; and in providing a model of communicative interaction.

4.1 – Aesthetics, Freedom and Individual Human Flourishing

To have aesthetic experience is pleasurable. And even when we have attendant experiences of sadness, disgust, horror and the like as a result of aesthetic experiences (in art that represents pain and suffering for example), the overall effect is one of pleasure in so far as one exercises their human powers of reason and judgment.

In the Kantian account aesthetic judgment (following aesthetic experience) *precedes* the pleasure in the object: "Now this merely subjective (aesthetic) judging of the object . . . precedes the pleasure in the object and is the basis of this pleasure, a pleasure in the harmony of the cognitive powers."[22]

However, there is more at stake in the Kantian account of aesthetic pleasure than mere pleasure affects. It is rather a feeling leading to the furtherance of life and the flourishing of the human. For Ferrara, the Kantian account of aesthetic experience places it at the very heart of an account of human flourishing because it both affirms and enhances life. Ferrara says:

> "While the pleasure linked with the sublime derives from the sudden release of a tension related to the bridling or reining in of vital forces, the pleasure linked with the beautiful always affords us a sense, as Kant puts it, of promotion, affirmation or enhancement of life."[23]

In this account, then, aesthetic experience provides an instance in which humans not only experience their own flourishing but which is actually necessary for their flourishing.

Further, it is in this sense of necessity that a political dimension to aesthetic experience emerges; in that humans should be free to achieve this flourishing. This was argued by Marcuse. For example he invokes Schiller's conception of aesthetic education and his argument that the "'political problem' of a better organization of society 'must take the path through the aesthetic realm, because it is through beauty that one arrives at freedom.'" [24]

---

[22] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), Ak. V 216, p. 62

[23] Alessandro Ferrara: 'Does Kant Share Sancho's Dream?" *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 34, 1-2, (2008), pp. 76

[24] Schiller, from the end of the 2nd letter on aesthetic education, quoted in Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Art and Liberation, (Herbert Marcuse Collected Papers)*, Vol. 4, (Routledge, 2006) pg. 102

To accept Marcuse's position, in which aesthetics is understood in terms of flourishing and freedom, means to acknowledge that aesthetic experience is always situated in an embodied and thus political and ethical subject. This line of argument has also been developed throughout Foucault's work, in which human flourishing is regulated, constrained and fettered through the operations of power in social systems acting on the sensible, aesthetic body. (This also forms the basis of critiques of Foucault such as those by Eagleton and Habermas, in whose eyes he is seen to aestheticize and thus de-politicize discourse). More recently Jacques Rancière has argued in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* and 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,' for a 'politics of the sensible' that begins from the inextricable coupling of aesthetics and politics and which proposes forms of human freedom and flourishing that will emerge from this. Rancière argues for a 'metapolitics' grounded in aesthetics. He says:

> "Each of these scenarios involves a certain metapolitics: art refuting the hierarchical divisions of the perceptible and framing a common sensorium; or art replacing politics as a configuration of the sensible world; or art becoming a kind of social hermeneutics; or even art becoming, in its very isolation, the guardian of the promise of emancipation. Each of these positions may be held and has been held. This means that there is a certain undecidability in the 'politics of aesthetics'. There is a metapolitics of aesthetics which frames the possibilities of art. Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfill its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy." [25]

2 – Aesthetics, Utopias and Political Imaginaries

Aesthetic activities (such as art practice) provide the opportunities to imagine new societies beyond the parameters of our existent political imaginary. For the curator Daniel Birnbaum art is a means of making worlds. Birnbaum made this thinking explicit by naming the 2009 Venice Biennale "Making Worlds." Birnbaum claims (on the Biennale website), that a "work of art is more than an object, more than a commodity. It represents a vision of the world, and if taken seriously it can be seen as a way of *worldmaking*." Art thus provides means by which to propose new configurations of the "good society,' without lapsing into a type of utopian thinking that is authoritarian.

Birnbaum's utopian thinking draws on the vocabularies of Husserl and Goodman. However, it is perhaps also compatible with the claims of critical social theory. For example, Marcuse argues for the importance of art in utopian thinking, precisely in terms of its 'freedom'. He says:

> "There is a good reason for the exemplification of the cultural ideal in art, for only in art has bourgeois society tolerated its own ideals and taken them seriously as a general demand. What counts as utopia, phantasy and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in art. There affirmative culture has displayed the forgotten truths over which 'realism' triumphs in daily life. The medium of beauty decontaminates truth and sets it apart from the present. What occurs in art occurs with no obligation."[26]

---

[25] Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', *New Left Review*, 14 (Mar, Apr, 2002, pp. 133. ff.
[26] Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture,' *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, (Boston, 1968), p. 114.

And this perhaps talks to Maeve Cooke's call for a 'good utopianism' that is free from authoritarian thinking. Cooke argues that such ideas of the good society "guiding critical social thinking may be described as regulative ideas that have an imaginary, fictive character and re-present an idealized social condition."[27] Art practices, then, as ways of world making, provide fictive situations. They offer possible social configurations, alternative forms of communication and means of imagining modes of human interaction within which human flourishing might be achieved.

For Mark Fisher, new political futures are made available through film, music and art. For example, in his discussion of the film *Children of Men* he works through a position of pessimism to one in which the film provides on the one hand the means by which to identify the conditions of the present (the naturalizing of the conditions of late capitalism, the conditions that Fisher calls "capitalist realism,") and on the other the means by which to imagine an alternative:

> "*Watching Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism'; the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it. Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of the imagination – the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living."[28]

Fisher uses examples drawn from literature, film and music, and despite his pessimism is still invested in the possibility of forms of art as a means by which to think through both the conditions the present and possibilities for the future.

A more optimistic account is given by Grant Kester. In *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*[29] in which he argues for the transformative potential of art practices. Drawing on Habermas,[30] Kester explores the possibility of contemporary art to offer models of what he calls "dialogical practices" that will bring about the development of a "dialogical aesthetic" and form of discursive interaction. For Kester: "The work of art is presented as an object that rejects contingency and frustrates the grasp of discursive systems of knowledge through its relentless formal self-transformation." He continues, that "The challenge that the aesthetic poses to fixed categorical systems and instrumentalizing modes of thought is important." And that for certain modes of collaborative art practice require "that we understand the work of art as a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object."[31]

---

[27] Maeve Cooke, *The Good Society*, (MIT press, 2006) p. 161.

[28] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Zero Books, 2009), pg.2

[29] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, (University of California Press, 2004)

[30] "A dialogical aesthetic, for its part, does not claim to provide, or require, this kind of universal or objective foundation. Rather it is based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded instead at the level of collective interaction. […] Like Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' the model of a dialogically produced identity I am elaborating is something these [art] projects tend toward or approximate, rather than reproduce. At the same time, it is necessary to believe that people are at least potentially capable of entering into discursive exchange without immediately succumbing to the snares of negation and self-interest." Ibid. pg. 112

[31] Ibid. pg. 90

Kester gives a number of examples of contemporary collaborative and participatory art that provide instances of dialogical aesthetics. This represents a dominant strand in contemporary art. Such art normally takes the forms of artists working with disparate groups of people from different communities. This is not only a means but an end, in that it is not only way of producing works of art, but is also part of the meaning of the work that is produced. Here are three examples Inot all from Kester): *Untitled 1992 (Free)* a working kitchen in a New York gallery set up by artist Rirkrit Tiravanija; *Tenantspin* (1999) a TV channel for the elderly residents of a Liverpool housing estate set up by art collective Superflex; and *Pimp my Irish Banger* (2009) a collaborative art project in which artist Terry Blake worked with young people from Dublin to paint car doors and bonnets that were later displayed in a outdoor space at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. The art historian Claire Bishop has identified this trend within contemporary art as a 'Social turn', arguing that the while models of participatory art vary enormously "all are linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas."[32]

3 – Model of Discourse

Habermas' identifies three spheres of validity characteristic of modernity (this following from Weber's account of the differentiation of society in post-enlightenment society.) These three value spheres are (i) Scientific/Technical, which is regulated by a notion of truth, (ii) Moral/Legal, which is regulated by a notion of rightness and (iii) Aesthetic/Expressive which is regulated by a notion of truthfulness (authenticity or accuracy.) In conclusion I argue that of these three it is the aesthetic sphere that best provides a means by which collective understandings (which may be contradictory) of the good society can be negotiated and established. It does so because aesthetic judgment provides a model for how discourse *in general* could and should operate even when there are conflicting and contradictory positions in dialogue. It thus offers the promise of a non-dogmatic, non-authoritarian sphere of discourse in which claims can be made, with an appeal to their validity.

In her discussion on Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* Maeve Cooke agues that for Habermas: "The successful work of art opens a perspective on some aspect of our human or personal situation that has to be experienced before its validity can be assessed." Cooke, then identifies three aspects of this. First, that the validity associated with an aesthetic claim is a "validity of a perspective." Second, that: "works of art disclose a perspective." And third, that: "the validity claims connected with works of art must be justified in the first instance through reference to the subjective experience of those affected and cannot be justified directly through reference to facts or theories."[33]

There is a genealogical origin of Habermas' aesthetics in Kant. In the Kantian account (essayed below), aesthetic judgments are not subsumable under a determinate concept yet they are made as if they were so through appeal to a common sense. As Singer says Kant: "holds out a concern for a practical particularity that is not sacrificed to an abstract universality."[34] In other words, our judgments on aesthetics do not appeal to metaphysical or ideal conditions for their validity, but are instead grounded in human choice, will and judgment. There are 2 key features of this.

---

[32] Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn' in Francis Halsall et al., *Rediscovering Aesthetics*, (Stanford University Press, 2009), pg. 239
[33] Maeve Cooke, *Language and Reason*, (MIT Press, 1994), pg. 77-79
[34] Alan Singer, "Aesthetic Community: Recognition as an Other Sense of Sensus Communis," *Boundary*, 2 Vol. 24, No 1. (Spring, 1997), pp. 205-236

First, it is an account of validity that can allow for the historical contingency of claims. This is because they are situated in relation to the specific time and place where they are made and are thus relative to the values of the lifeworld (the intentional sphere of inter-subjective meanings) within which they are inscribed.

Second in acknowledging this lifeworld of shared values we appeal to a common sense, (*sensus communis*), which in turn provides a ground for recognition of other minds within that lifeworld. In other words, because we make judgments we can imagine that others will share our values and be able to also participate in them (even if they might disagree with them[35].) As Singer argues, this identifies aesthetics as fundamental grounding for recognition in social systems: "Recognition is, in fact, key to the republican idealism of the aesthetic state and the concomitant ethical charge of *sensus communis*, because it indexes self-knowledge within a social consensus to human activity or interaction with another."[36] Thus, aesthetic experience can be used as a means of recognition because we can recognize that other subjectivities within a lifeworld are aesthetic; that is sensing and sensible, agents. And this is an inherently political recognition.

In judgements of taste we, Kant says: 'use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of displeasure.'[37] The recourse to pleasure rather than truth, and the argument that the claims to validity of aesthetic claims are not subject to epistemological proofs, calls the validity of those claims into question. A poem is no more or less 'true' in its account of the world than a painting or a film.

Famously, Kant's solution to the antinomy of taste is that:

> "A judgement of taste must refer to some concept or other, for otherwise it could not possibly lay claim to necessary validity for everyone. And yet it must not be provable *from* a concept, because while some concepts can be determined, others cannot, but are intrinsically both indeterminate and indeterminable."[38]

Kant asserts that our judgements of taste cannot be governed by rules. We are, instead, free and autonomous in our making judgements of taste. This also applies to aesthetic claims because there can be no determining concept under which to subsume them. When an aesthetic judgement is made it is done by using the object as an exemplar of that which has been judged. Likewise we cannot claim an empirical or ethical necessity in the choice of our statements, but rather can demonstrate that some strategies are more exemplary than others. In other words, one aesthetic claim is no truer than another. There is not necessarily a single analytic strategy that definitively applies to all aesthetic judgements. However, what we might say is that some statements are more appropriate to the art in question in a manner that is not determined in so far as there are no rules by which the appropriateness of this match can be judged. Instead a negotiation between statements and object is entered into, in which examples

---

[35] See Chantal Mouffe's claims that disagreement or *antagonism* forms the basis for dialogue and discourse, provided that it is based on the mutual recognition of different positions.

[36] Alan Singer, pg. 212

[37] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pg. 44; AK 203

[38] '(1) *Thesis*: A judgement of taste is not based on concepts; for otherwise one could dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).

(2) *Antithesis*: A Judgement of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise, regardless of the variation among [such judgements], one could not even so much as quarrel about them (lay claim to other people's necessary assent to one's judgement).' Ibid. Pg. 211, AK 338

are produced and in which a free-play of making and matching between examples and objects takes place.

Thus, similar and parallel structures are a place in cognitive judgements in which we seek validity and aesthetic judgements. In both we look for agreement with the object. However, in aesthetic judgements we do so without a determining concept under which that judgement can be subsumed. And this is because aesthetic judgements are predicated on the free (and not rule-bound) play of the understanding and the imagination (the powers of representation.)

Kant's aesthetics shows a way of how we might negotiate disagreements about our claims for art that would have to remain unresolved if we could only appeal to either absolute truth criteria or to tradition and convention. He does so, and thus tackles the antinomy of taste by invoking what he calls the, "supersensible substrate of humanity," an indeterminate idea which he claims "we can do no more than point to".[39] Thus, when we engage in judgments we do so by putting "ourselves in the position of everyone else"[40] and appeal to a *sensus communis*, "a sense shared." This *sensus communis* is predicated on the general communicability of sensation and allows us, at least hypothetically to assume an inter-subjectivity to our judgments. We can sense something and hence can assume that others will do so to. For this reason we make a claim to everyone's assent, although we are unable to prove the truth of our judgments.[41] Yet the significant feature Kant's aesthetics is that our judgments do not always get assent 'from everyone' and that there is no single way to enforce assent. Others are always free to dissent or ignore our claims depending on how plausible they judge them to be.

In conclusion: Applied Social Theory might be skeptical of aesthetics as a ground for dialogue about the good society because it is (rightly) skeptical of discursive claims that cannot be tested and of concepts that scientific quantification cannot grasp. However, my argument is that aesthetics provides a model of validity that is not coupled with a positivist concept of truth and thus provides the opportunity for, on the one hand, imagining alternative non-authoritarian definitions of a "good society", whilst, on the other, providing a model for how discussions about such future states may be conducted.

---

[39] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 213, § 57, Ak. 313.
[40] Ibid. 160, § 40, Ak. 293 f.
[41] A rich history of 20th century philosophy uses Kant in this positive way in order to 'situate' and 'contextualise' his account For example, Hannah Arendt takes Kant's account of aesthetic 'sensus communis' as her point of departure for a Kantian political philosophy. See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. with an interpretative essay by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982). Other authors who explore Kant's aesthetics for accounts of subjectivity and autonomy include, among others, T.W. Adorno and Gadamer and, more recently Jacques Ranciere.