IN GOOD FORM: AN EXAMINATION OF THE POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC REALMS
VIA THE FORMAL QUALITY OF ART

By

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To my friends and family
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Thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche understood the importance of art to the world of the political. In a sense, Plato sought to protect the world from the “dangers” of art, whereas Nietzsche embraced those dangers. Yet, both thinkers recognized that art affects politics. What is the nature of this effect? How does it work? Using those questions as backdrop, this essay is an exploration of the effects, repercussions, and limitations of an aesthetic approach toward politics. Several scholars have evaluated the function of aesthetics in political thinking. While attending to these discussions, I argue that art with little or no political content can have political import due to its formal aesthetic qualities. Specifically, I argue that aesthetic form often surpasses content in its political meaning and consequence. The dissertation subsequently analyses a number of art works and aesthetic events that have significantly affected political life due to their formal aesthetic qualities. In assessing the political dimensions of art works and artistic events, the dissertation engages with canonical thinkers such as Nietzsche, Adorno, Arendt, Dewey, Benjamin, Derrida, and Rorty. Overall, this essay is attempt to properly place the aesthetic in the context of the political.
CHAPTER 1
THE BATTLE OF SURFACES

Explorations and Definitions

It is hard to even explain the awe-inspiring feeling of experiencing a perfect piece of art. I imagine the first time a viewer saw Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Henry V. Was she riveted, changed, entertained, or bored? Did the viewer riot like the crowd that first experienced Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring? One assumes that the art, especially art as established and well-respected as that by Shakespeare or Stravinsky, would have an effect. In fact, thinkers like Plato and Nietzsche feared the impact of art, though Plato sought protection from that fear and Nietzsche embraced it. To have a profound impact, the art does not even have to be a very sophisticated or subtle. It can be the lovely panels in a Will Eisner or Jack Kirby comic; It can be the moment you finally “get” the structure of films like Persona, Pulp Fiction or Rashomon; or it can he the “aha’ instant when you recognize the internal logic of David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas.1 Honestly, to certain extent, it does not matter which piece of art moves a viewer. It is the experience, an experience that—while not relative—affects people in various ways. And, when you experience such pieces of art, they can permeate your whole life. Suddenly, ideas and feelings that initially did not have a structure finally appear understandable. You see the final scene of Citizen Kane, or let the brush strokes in a Kandinsky painting wash over you, and you change the way you view the world. Similarly, your life-view might be altered after hearing the opening of Sgt. Pepper, or from the performance art of Marina Abramovic, or the first time you read William Carlos

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1 These examples are chosen for both their universal and personal meaning. Hence, I do not mean to say that everyone should have reactions to—or have even heard of—these works of art. What is suggested here is that the aesthetic experience is one that is tied to human existence.
Williams. Again, I am not pointing to a particular piece of art, but the artistic/aesthetic experience. This artistic/aesthetic experience affects you at varied registers and it is almost like your world is subtly shaded a different color. Relationships—intellectual, emotional, and human—are created that you had not conceived of previously, and hence you often become persuaded of the solidity of your new thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Sometimes, a piece of art as ephemeral as a Phil Spector girl-group single or a beat by Dr. Dre transform your world in a way that is difficult to explicitly pin-point. Other times is it classics from time-immemorial, such as the afore-mentioned plays of Shakespeare, that affect you. These transformations are linked to the aesthetic experience, and because of the power of that experience, people permit these aesthetic moments a kind of passion that conveys a conceptual transformation itself. In other words, your world-view is sometimes changed by an aesthetic experience in ways that do not seemed to be connected to the explicit subject-matter of said experience. This manuscript examines the underlying aspects of these aesthetic experiences and the way those experiences affect political philosophy and political life.

Put another way, in this manuscript I examine ways in which seemingly non-political art—or art that is not explicitly political—interacts with the political realm. On one level, I contend that non-political art has an impact on the political realm due to the various ways that we interact with the form of art. Additionally, proper attention to aesthetic form allows us to explore the way that aesthetics can and should interrelate with the ethical, moral, legal, and political realm. A deep understanding of the aesthetic realm allows us to understand the proper way that art, aesthetics, and politics should be properly ordered.
In the context of this discussion, it is important to define some key terms. I do not want these definitions to be so strict as to limit discussion. However, there needs to be a framework for the ideas expressed in this manuscript. And, these definitions are meant to provide this intellectual and conceptual framework. For example, initially, it is important to define “politics” or “political” in a discussion such as this one. In one sense, a convenient definition of politics might be offered by Davide Panagia (2009, 30), who argues that “politics is an aesthetic activity of rendering an appearance perceptible, and that this rendering begins from an experience of interruption that arises from the advent of an appearance.” As Panagia acknowledges, much of this definition is borrowed from Jacques Rancière (1998, 2004), who states—according to Panagia (2009, 30)—that “democratic politics becomes an activity of rendering appearances perceptible through a part-taking in the invention of the postures of attention that render political subjectivity available to perception.”

In one sense, I agree with Panagia’s reading of Rancière, specifically as Rancière articulated “politics” in *Disagreement, the Politics of Aesthetics and the Flesh of Words.* Additionally, I am sympathetic to the Panagia / Rancière definition of the political as linked to a viewing of the world. That being said, I feel that this definition links aesthetics and politics so closely that the concepts almost cannot be spoken of independently without implying the other. (Panagia and Rancière may be comfortable with this position.) Additionally, a “politics of the visible” is such an isolated form of politics that it renders the collective a bit shallow. What role does collective action or meaning creation play in this version of the political, beside each individual taking part in

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2 I will discuss Rancière’s definition in depth in chapter two.
Ranciére’s “distribution of the sensible”? Instead of completely embracing Ranciére’s notion of politics, and with the risk of being labeled somewhat intellectually conservative, I embrace Hannah Arendt’s notion of the political as a communal creation of meaning and activity. Arendt (1958, 197) states: “[T]he political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deed.’ … The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, not matter where they happen to be.” Of course, Arendt’s definition does not exclude the Panagia / Ranciére concept of the political. In fact, it is possible that the “politics of the viewing” might fit perfectly into an Arendtian form of politics based on mutual action and speech. Much of my analysis will rest in the overlap between the definition of politics of Arendt and Ranciére.

It is also important to define aesthetics, and eventually art. I adopt a rather Kantian view of the term aesthetics. This is not because aesthetics starts with Kant, but because he has the systematic view of aesthetics that engages with the philosophical discussion, as well as the notion of art. Kant sees aesthetics as the evaluations of things for their own sake; the aesthetic realm is a realm of experience that needs no external justification.³ (CJ, Sec. 4) An aesthetic idea is one that is “the counterpart of a rational idea” (Kant CJ, Sec. 49). Hence, for Kant, the aesthetic is that which is linked to beauty, and in the ways in which beauty is self-justified. Yet, this experience for the sake of beauty is not value-free, even if its value is not linked to truth or morality.

³ Kant’s primary work will be given as follows: CPR = The Critique of Pure Reason (Kant 1781), by the standard A and B version distinctions, unless the section is only in one version, then it will be referred to by A or B, accordingly, CPR = The Critique of Practical Reason (Kant 1788), by section number, CJ = Critique of Judgment (Kant 1790), by section number, MM = The Metaphysics of Morals (Kant 1797), by standard page numbers, and “On Discovery” (Kant 1790) will be cited in the standard manner.
Panagia (2006, 5-6) writes succinctly: “By aesthetics, I refer to the tradition of reflection that turns to sense experience in order to pose the question of value.” This notion of aesthetics as being linked to a value, but a value that does not apply directly to other realms, is fundamental to my discussion. In this context, art is the material or sensual expression of the aesthetic realm. Art is the bringing forth of the aesthetic values in such a way that others may experience it. (Given the thematic organization of the argument here, I will define “art,” and its relation to aesthetics a bit more in chapter five.)

After defining aesthetics and art, it is crucial to define “form” and “content” with regard to art. Additionally, “form” has taken on two inter-locking—but distinct—meanings. “Form” as it concerns the point of view of the artist, is the “material” from which the art is made: the clay, the words, the paint, etc. In contrast, “form” as applied to the receiver of art is linked to the visceral experience that the art produces. Both of these definitions hinge on the creation and experience of art prior to representation or symbolic meaning is assigned to the art. Of course, this is a rather thin theoretical and intellectual line, and no thinker who discusses form should be disingenuous enough to think that one can isolate form completely from content. To a certain extent, the reason that form and content are hard to isolate is because they are partially symbiotic. (Great art is often that which perfectly mixes form and content.) Hence, it is possible that “form” is the most difficult of the terms I am attempting to define in this chapter. Given this, my definition of “form” is influenced by a few distinct thinkers, specifically Dewey (1934), Collingwood (1929), Grassi (2001), Barthes (1991), and Derrida.

As mentioned, “form” is a very material thing for the artist himself/herself. In fact, Collingwood (1929, 340) writes that “form” is the “singular organization of matter” and
that the “work of art is the creature of the artist’s formal or formative power.” Yet for the receiver of art, “form” is the immediate experience of art via the senses, and our initial engagement with that experience prior to an attempt to assign an explicit symbolic meaning to the art. John Dewey (1934, 123) writes that we “see a painting through the eyes, and hear music through the ears.” Art is primarily a visceral and sensuous experience. Dewey continues: “Form may then be described as the operation that carries the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment” (Ibid, 137). Hence, for Dewey “form” may not be exactly the “first impression,” but it is our rather immediate experience with art as it hits our levels of cognition. This notion that “form” is based on the surface experience is echoed in Grassi’s (2001) concept of rhetoric’s quasi-foundational role in philosophy. Grassi (2001, 26-27) writes that “rhetoric was assigned a formal function, whereas philosophy, as episteme, as rational knowledge, was to supply the true, factual content.” Once again, the “form”—here the rhetorical use of language—is separated out as something prior, or external, to our attempt to assign truth or meaning to such “forms.” Similarly, though Dewey is leery of attempts to separate form from content in an analysis of art, Dewey (1934) writes that form is what was evoked as a “substance so formed that it can enter into the experience of other and enable them to have more intense and more fully rounded experiences of their own” (109). Hence, though there can be no “bright-line” divider that separates “form” from “content,” for the purposes of my discussion the realm of non-signified experience will generally be considered in the realm of “form,” whereas an attribution of an explicit signified meaning will be considered “content.” Roland Barthes (1991 18-21) discusses this notion of form, arguing that form deals with the
happening of the meeting involving the art and a viewer/reader/listener, and, hence, the authority that the art has to present itself at that instant. This authority of form—on Barthes’ account—is not tied to what the art “signifies” (Ibid).

As noted above, these terms are not completely distinct. The interaction of these terms and concepts will hopefully give this discussion here some depth, as well as allow us the ability to understand the complex interaction between aesthetics and politics, form and content. In other words, it is important to define terms in a clear enough way such that a reader can understand the arguments in this manuscript. Yet, it is also crucial to recognize that these terms are not fixed symbols.

Many writers with various interests have addressed some of the issues I struggle with in this work. And though I appreciate and am indebted to a whole line of thought that attempts to discuss the psychoanalytic and/or neurological understanding of art, I do not engage head-on in this type of analysis here. If one was attempting to frame this study in the context of the natural science, one could say that I am attempting to discover how the aesthetic impacts the political when one essentially controls for the content or subject-matter of art. However, as I late argue, form and context are so vexed that such a strict analysis is not suited to the discussion here. This vexed nature does not mean, however, that we cannot discuss aspects of form somewhat independent of the context of content. One just needs to be careful of making sweeping statements concerning either form or content. However, an examination of form itself is important becomes it brings to the surface the effect of aesthetics on politics. Given this contention about the nature of form, this manuscript is an examination of the aesthetic experience and its affect on the political realm. I am influenced by recent work by

There is another powerful and interesting strand of literature dealing with the aesthetic and how it affects politics, and that work focuses on the delivering of art and, sometimes, the way it interacts with our class structures. I have in mind thinkers such as Walter Benjamin (1969), Susan Buck-Morse (1991) and Pierre Bourdieu (1987). I have been grateful to these thinkers for their profound influence, but my focus is somewhat different. Though this line of thinking does not focus on content in the way that I will argue that, say, Martha Nussbaum does, it also does not focus on the aesthetic as qua the aesthetic. The mode of delivery is always a crucial aspect of the aesthetic for these thinkers. For Benjamin, it was the movement toward the mass distribution of art, a movement that helped art lose its traditional authenticity. And, though I think, for example, Benjamin’s ambivalence toward this move is brilliantly stated, it still does not engage in the aesthetic as an experience itself. Now, I do not want to pretend like the mode of delivery is not important. It would be silly to argue, to pick an obvious example, that the internet has not changed the way we experience art, and hence the way art interacts with the political. However, in this manuscript I am attempting, possibly foolishly, possibly with simple ambition, to isolate the aesthetic experience as an experience. I am interested in the moment of the experience of a piece of art. And, hence, I am downplaying the modes of delivery in said art.

To be exact, in the chapters that follow I engage possible points in which the aesthetic affects the political, and the occurrences of change that such effects cause. I
argue that these effects have important political effects, implications, or meanings. Often these effects and meanings take place past the discursive inventory of explicit discussion. These effects and meanings are ways in which the aesthetic, properly understood, effect the political, and change, as Ranciére states “the distribution of the sensible.” They create, in Badiou’s language, fidelity to a new event. In this sense, and aesthetic event that creates a quasi-foundational point of departure for the ethical, moral, legal, and political. And before this new fidelity, there is a rupture—a breaking—that can often be tied to an aesthetic moment. This manuscript seeks to explore these moments.

The theoretical political and aesthetic issues that interest me are somewhat rooted in the modern-liberal pluralistic democracy, or, put another way, in a society with no hard ontological or metaphysical underpinnings. As will be discussed below, I assume that the people interact on the level of surfaces, or appearances. And, if I assume that liberal political life is somewhat a perceptual activity—an argument made repeatedly by critical and cultural theorists—then I can attempt to disentangle the way that art and the aesthetic affect the world of appearance, and hence the world of the political. In other words, I attempt to discuss the way that art lets us make political meaning.

Of course, the same issues that motivate me have informed a lot of thinkers. Dewey, Ranciére, Badiou, and Panagia and others have all dealt with the impact of the aesthetic on the political. And, much of their work has informed my own. However, my work explores the way that seemingly non-political art—art without explicit political content—affects the political world via its aesthetic experience. Many thinkers have argued that non-political art might have political impact via its mode of
distribution/participation. Others have explored the subtle political content in artistic work. However, in this work, I argue that the form itself can have political impact and/or meaning. In this context, I should make special note of the work of Murray Edelman (1995), particularly his monograph *From Art to Politics*. In that work, Edelman pays special attention to the way that art shapes politics on an unconscious level. In fact, I use some of Edelman’s work, especially in chapter two of this work. Edelman grapples with the way that art shapes our policy preferences on a subconscious level. Edelman (1995, 109) writes:

> We are seldom aware of how easily and frequently our beliefs about policy preferences, causes, and consequences are created and changed by subtle or unconscious cues. Quite the contrary: we ordinarily assume that we live in a world in which the causes and consequences of actions are stable and fairly well known. Neither the media nor academic studies pay much attention to the fundamental political work that makes the benefits and the depravations politically possible: the creation and remolding of public beliefs and feelings about the causes of particular outcomes, thereby justifying some actions and building opposition to others.

As seen above, Edelman's work is important because he shows us how art can shape preferences without being overtly political. However, Edelman is often concerned with the way subtle artistic messages shape preferences. He argues, I think correctly, deliberative political propaganda is not as effective as more subtle ways that art affects policy preferences (1995, 111). However, Edelman is concerned explicitly with subtle messages of art, and how that art shapes policy preferences. Edelman does not pay explicit attention to the way that artistic form itself affects our understanding of the political, and how that political properly—or improperly—interacts with aesthetics. My work here explores this interaction of the aesthetic and political via form, which is the proper way of interaction in a world of surfaces. In this sense, this manuscript contributes to the literature because it explores an aspect of the aesthetic/political that is
under-theorized, but it also respects and honors the long tradition of work on the nexus of theory-culture-aesthetics-politics.

Before examining the various nodes of argument, it is important that I establish the epistemological underpinning of the discussion here, and, also, to examine how those epistemologies connect with aesthetics. To do this I explore the aesthetic/epistemological thought of Theodor Adorno and Fredric Nietzsche. As noted above, I assume that the liberal-democratic world is one in which appearances are key—a world where the surface is the universe. Yet, what kind of surface? Adorno and Nietzsche both believe in a world of surfaces, but they have different notions of what that surface means and how it affects the human experience. Below, I briefly discuss the thought of Adorno and Nietzsche, and adopt a particular perspective for this manuscript.

**Adorno—Surfaces of Revelation**

Adorno embraces the appearance of our human experience. The surface of reality is, for Adorno, always revealing. In some ways, art captures our “spirit” via mimesis. As mimesis twirls with instinct, so spirit plays similar contextual games with “concept.” If we mull over abstract expression’s meaning, then Adorno’s explanation of the “spirit” of a work of art as its “surplus of truth” should not be shocking. In explaining this surplus of spirit—that through which a thing exceeds its sumptuous materiality and therefore begins revealing—Adorno tries to attach the play of surfaces to the revealing of non-identity. Spirit is not a divisible thing above sensuality and materiality. Adorno (2005, 38) discusses the standard view of modern art, and argues that such art is in the process of revealing: “Therefore, in spite of the summary verdicts passed on it everywhere by those who are politically interested, radical modern art is progressive,
and this is true not merely of the techniques it has developed but of its truth content.” Modern, non-representational art reveals a notion about the world by focusing on the difference between art and basic empirical data. In other word, art works materialize; they are textile objects and things; but what essence exists in them is linked to surface appearance; it is not something underneath appearances and, hence, divisible from such appearances. This emphasis on surface points to one of Adorno’s more interesting claims about art. Adorno argues that art offers a kind of prompt—or tug—regarding what is subdued in the progression of rationalism, reason, induction, and technology. That aide memoire is proper; it has no specific experiential function. This artistic purpose includes the subjugation as well as its object, the brutality of reason and what that reason governs. In fact, it is exactly the interlacing of these two spectacles in the work of art itself that is, on Adorno’s account, the foundation of memory. In this sense, memory is linked to aesthetic dissonance.

As mentioned, on Adorno’s account, memory and dissonance work via art’s autonomy. Art’s will to sovereignty, its abandonment of justification, compels art to work against all earlier artistic trends or languages. Yet Adorno sees art as negating tradition itself, tradition qua tradition. This reversal has a dual configuration. First, the reversal of convention is provoked by the hunt for what makes a work of art purely “aesthetic.” Given that custom is mummification of earlier inquiries concerning the “self” and self-identity, and in so far as those intellectual mummies embrace heteronymous notions of art, then it is only through vital conceptual investigation of tradition that art can attain sovereignty. On the contrary, since the exact effort to accomplish such sovereignty assumes that there is a vital nature essential and suitable to art. Nevertheless, Adorno
is enamored with non-identical art works, which suggest art works that depart from the aesthetic requirements of the past. Such works are similar to the Kantian notion of a “work of genius”: these art works counteract preceding ideas of a proper “work of art” and render unknowable previous claims. Adorno’s theory is that we can only comprehend the meaning of art if we can conceptually incarcerate and ultimately grasp the explicit assertion of modern non-identity. In other words, contemporary art is continuously practicing the unattainable scam of attempting to identify the non-identical. Hence, non-identical art reaches its goal only to the degree such art surpasses its deliberate position.

The theory that art is not dissimilar from the abstract understanding, but an objection to its current configuration, comes from the judgment of detachment and immediacy leading the foundation of art in relation to rational thought and comprehension. Proof that such reason governs art would be provided by an explanation showing that art’s freedom from the requirements of reason is compulsory. That being said, Adorno does not see much evidence in this area, but he is optimistic. Artistic freedom, sovereignty, or autonomy could be seen as another route to art’s intrinsic value. Adorno understands, for example, autonomy as twofold: mutually as art’s failure of an express societal function and as art’s snub of “purposiveness” that dictates the social order.

Art’s autonomy is based in—or against—the backdrop of a society that has embraced “exchange value,” the value something is worth on the open market, as its driving force. Adorno is profoundly disturbed by the emphasis on exchange value in capitalist societies, but he does not imagine art would be produced without it. In fact, art
needs to act alongside an “exchange value” scheme in order to fulfill its autonomy. (It needs to act contrary to the dominant value system.) That being said, Adorno understands the widespread supremacy of use-value by exchange value as a collective rationalization. The meaning of art is obscured, but not completely: Art works are not artificial wholes. Art is exchangeable, sure, but it directs our consciousness to a knowledge that exists outside of calculations of exchange value.

In contrast to the relativity of exchange value, Adorno looks to art’s surfaces to reveal a kind of non-identical reality. The theoretical restoration of the idea of aesthetics, in agreement with the conversion from splendor as creating the aesthetics of sublimity, is the formative motion of Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy. Aesthetic reality is the moving aspect of fantasy. According to Adorno, the “truth” of art is neither its connotation nor the artistic intentions of the creator; the “truth” of art is the legitimacy we achieve through the creation of art. Given that the truth of art is what happens through the creation of art, exactness is not a constituent of art. Adorno (2005, 394) purposely writes that “art moves toward truth. It is not directly identical with truth.” According to Adorno, to presume the opposing view would involve allowing illusion, which is considerable in art, be accurate. This would make fundamentally all art works confirmatory, and consequently meaningless. Adorno does not suggest that art itself opens the door to a kind of ultimate truth, but art allows us a glimpse of a kind of revelation. Art offers a moment—Adorno attaches this moment to a kind of shudder—of seeing something beyond empirical reality. It is in this moment that we help define the concepts of reality, and some have seen Adorno’s Aesthetic Reason as a kind of
“valorization of choosing agents” (Singer 2003, 31). Art does not offer irrefutable truth, but it does reveal portions of reality.

As suggest above, for Adorno, the making of art is a moment of revealing of the reality—or gap from reality—and spirit. Art acts as a kind of enigma:

Artworks share with enigmas the duality of being determinate and indeterminate. They are question marks, not univocal even through synthesis. Nevertheless their figure is so precise that it determines the point where the work breaks off. As in enigmas, the answer is both hidden and demanded by structure. This is the function of the work’s immanent logic, of the lawfulness that transpires in it, and that is the theodicy of the concept of the purpose in art. The aim of artworks is the determination of the indeterminate. Works are purposeful in themselves, without having any positive purpose beyond their own arrangement: there purposefulness, however is legitimated as the figure of the answer to the enigma. (2005, 165)

The enigma of art is linked to the form, but it is in this form that we find answers. These answers are often simply to the questions posed by the work of art itself, but the puzzle sheds light on human existence. Indeed, for Adorno the metaphysics of creation is the metaphysics of the dreaded “identity thinking.” This is true given that created reality copies the subject and swindles from it what is ostensibly approved. What may not be produced is the comprehensible organization of identification of non-identical others. This is Adorno’s notion of “spirit,” and spirit cannot be willed or posited. Bernstein (1992, 205) writes that “illusion now refers to the distance between art and empirical reality.” In fact, Adorno seeks in art the objective of saving the guarantees of the Enlightenment, and especially the guarantees of liberty and contentment (Bernstein 1992, 251). The effort to untie the truth content obscured in the work of art is, for Adorno, nothing but the effort to liberate the truth of art, which would otherwise vanish. Adorno’s explanation does not hinge on forcing the truth about art to overlie the truth content of specific art works. But, even with a focus on form and surfaces, Adorno
believes that art’s power rests in its ability to link us to a mimesis of reality. He writes that ultimately “artworks are enigmatic in terms not of their composition but of their truth content.” (Adorno 2005, 168). The gap between art and empirical reality, a gap that reflects Lacan’s notion of the “real” as well as anticipates Badiou’s ideas about “events,” is a gap based in revelation. Adorno (2005, 169) writes: “The truth content of artworks is the objective-solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This is alone is the justification of aesthetics.” Aesthetics itself is applied when art pulls at our perceptions of reality. The surface reveals itself as surface, and at that moment a kind of depth is produced. It is depth based on revelation via surfaces. Though Adorno believes that art reveals via the interaction of its surface, he also appreciates the subtle textures of such surfaces. In this moment of revelation, Adorno’s aesthetics reveal their link to his Marxist roots.4

**Nietzsche—Surfaces, an Arena for the Creation**

Like Adorno, Nietzsche’s view of art cannot be neatly separated from his view of life. For Nietzsche, the material world encompasses all of reality. There is no supplementary authentic profile of existence. Nietzsche argues that life is an incarnation of dissonance. There are no absolute values in the world, only mystified consequences. Of course, to believe in only the material world is to embrace some existential costs. And it is to these costs and consequences that Nietzsche addresses his aesthetics, and it is within these limitations that aesthetics is justified. Overall, for Nietzsche art functions as a containment of man’s limitations. Nietzsche argues that

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4 My thoughts on Adorno are somewhat influenced by J.M. Bernstein (1992).
man needs art in order to endure life. In some ways, art, for Nietzsche, is more resonant that other forms of empirical truth.

Any discussion of Nietzsche’s philosophy of art must begin, as Nietzsche did, with *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that work, Nietzsche argues that the “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” are the keys to great Greek tragedy. This particular kind of tragedy ended via the purging of the Dionysian from Greek drama by the work of Euripedes, who is influenced by Socrates. At first, Nietzsche discusses the term Apollonian in two interlocking, but different, ways. In particular, Nietzsche uses the Apollonian to speak about both art and metaphysics. Metaphysically, the Apollonian is the setting of limits, or establishing boundaries. In modern terms, we might crudely equate the Apollonian with the “rational.” Put correctly, the Apollonian is the ability of the psyche to divide the world. For Nietzsche, there is no non-contingent relationship between the metaphysical Apollonian and beautiful. In contrast, aesthetically, the Apollonian perception is fundamentally beautiful: it is the routine world forced into the sublime.

If the Apollonian is about boundaries, than the Dionysian is a kind of intoxication. This is generally seen as a kind of “high:” rapture, ecstasy, or frenzy. As stated, on Nietzsche’s account, Dionysian awareness is a metaphorical drunkenness which overcomes the sobriety of order. The Dionysian makes us realize that reality is not rooted in order, but in the non-individual in the chaos. The Dionysian is the pleasure in art itself, not in the way that art glorifies in the world. Nietzsche assigns this moment a kind of religious meaning, all while trying to undermine or supplant religion. In fact, it is possible to read *Birth of Tragedy* as having a quasi-religion as its fundamental concern.

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5 My understanding of Nietzsche’s aesthetics is influenced by Seffler (1974) and Young (1999).
Nietzsche seeks to find, via art, a replacement for God. He attaches his quest with significance via his explanation of Greek tragedy.

Despite his reputation for perspectivism, Nietzsche is somewhat ambivalent toward the destruction of the metaphysical world. Nietzsche was skeptical of all attempts to recreate the religious via a metaphysical scientific, rational, or logical world. Nevertheless, in *The Gay Science*, a work that firmly embraced the death of God and the rise of perspectivism, Nietzsche recognizes that the yearning for metaphysics has returned. Nietzsche’s (1974, 354) nostalgia for metaphysics has something to do with his idiosyncratic perspectivism, or, as he writes, a view of the world where “the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface and a signworld.” In other words, Nietzsche sees—in a traditional vernacular—a world of “appearances.”

This embrace of appearance and surfaces, though first explicitly introduced *The Gay Science* via the above-mentioned term “perspectivism,” goes back to the beginning of Nietzsche’s thought. This perspectivism represents a strong dislike of the Socratic, a view that marks an external truth as driving the world. In fact, a strong hatred of reason characterizes Nietzsche’s thought. In contrast, on Nietzsche’s account, people should learn to love surfaces and not the so-called depth. And, the love of surfaces is linked to the aesthetic, the tie to a creation of the world. Specifically, this aesthetic embrace of surfaces allows humans to cope with the tragedy of existence. In this sense, Nietzsche’s view of art is similar to the Greeks’ view. On Nietzsche’s account the human experience needs art to overcome the tragedy of human existence. We need art for life to have meaning, to create meaning. According to Nietzsche, only through art can humans partially conquer life’s terror. To overcome this terror, art is a
force by which we create the world. In other words, on Nietzsche’s account, the world is eternally justified in the creation of aesthetic experience. And the key here is creation. For Nietzsche, we create new surfaces.

This notion of creation informs the rest of this manuscript. I assume—contra Plato and his ilk—that the world of shadows or surfaces is all we have. I take seriously Nietzsche’s observation that Kant destroyed the “world in itself” and left us only with a world of appearances. In Twilight of the Idols he writes: “Dividing the world into a ‘real’ one and an ‘apparent’ one… is but a suggestion of decadence—a symptom of declining life…. For ‘appearance’ here means reality once more, only selected, strengthened, corrected” (1998, 19, emphasis in original). Nietzsche mocks the “realists” who suppose that they have entrée to the way the world “really is.” In The Gay Science, Nietzsche (1974, 112) writes: “You call yourselves realists and hint that the world really is the way it appears to you. As if reality stood unveiled before you only, and you yourselves were perhaps the best part of it.” As noted, some humans, according to Nietzsche, still need certainty, particularly the religious and scientifically minded: “Metaphysics is still needed by some; but so is that impetuous demand for certainty that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form” (1974, 288). Nietzsche (1974, 228) continues: “faith is always coveted most and needed most urgently where will is lacking.” In a sense, we are terrified to stand naked; we always need the “clothes” of metaphysical firmness and commanded morality.

With this mocking of metaphysical certainty, Nietzsche also embraces the idea that the labeling and appearance of things embody the complete “depth” of an object. There is no “other” that is its so-called essence. He writes that “what things are called is
incomparably more important that what they are‖ (Ibid). Nietzsche continues: “all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to part of the thing ... But let us not forget this either; it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new ‘things’‖ (Ibid, 112). In this context, one could argue that Nietzsche—contra Plato—understood that the “shadows” were all that existed to us as humans.

As noted above, I embrace Nietzsche’s epistemological and aesthetic thought, and such thought informs this manuscript. Though I respect Adorno’s of revelation via surface, I believe that Nietzsche’s version of the world is more interesting and accurate for modern liberal-democratic, pluralistic-capitalistic societies. Given a world of Nietzschean “shadows,” the form of an aesthetic experience becomes paramount in regards to how art can change one’s ethical and / or political views. However, few thinkers have explicitly examined how this epistemological rejection fits into Nietzsche’s rather idiosyncratic view of art. Specifically, what is the political role of art in a world of surfaces or “shadows?” Hence, to a certain extent this introductory chapter establishes my assumptions, but it also sets the stage for the overall project of this manuscript.

**An Examination of the Surfaces**

Taking seriously Nietzsche’s epistemological underpinnings--the notion that life is lived in the world of surfaces—I use this manuscript as an examination of the world of surfaces. The world of appearances is a world driven by aesthetics, and consequently, aesthetics is a basis for human experience. I cannot overstate the fact that humans understand the world via aesthetics. As Nietzsche explains, the world of appearance is all that is left of reality, and hence the concept of the sensible is guided by aesthetic judgment. Hence, to the extent that one accepts the postmodern description of the
universe, or—on some thinkers’ account—the liberal description of the universe, one recognizes that there is no meta-reality that transcends appearance.

That being said, aesthetic judgment goes deeper than merely finding something pleasurable or not, tasteful or distasteful. Aesthetics acts almost as a filter by which we understand the world. In the second chapter of this manuscript, I begin a discussion of aesthetics that revolves around Ranciére’s characterization of aesthetics as a kind of Kantian category. This chapter specifically deals with the way we process things via aesthetics, and hence understand the world. I briefly examine both Kant’s notions of aesthetics and politics, while bringing to light a notion that Kant might have been mistaken in not applying his ideas about cognitive categories to aesthetics. I also examine the way in which Ranciére views aesthetics and how that view links with his notions of the political. In doing this, I consider the implications of the individuals partially understanding the world via aesthetics.

Turning from the individual understanding of the aesthetic to the societal, in the next three chapters I examine specifically how the artistic—and hence aesthetic—interacts with the political. First, my grappling with the implications of a world of appearances is furthered by an examination of the work of Martha Nussbaum. Embracing the Aristotelian view of art, Nussbaum (1995, 5) sees art—specifically literature—as a way in which we can build empathy. The novel is important because it gives us the “ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person.” In other words, art allows us to wonder about the contingency of our own lives. I do not contest Nussbaum’s argument that works of art allow us to feel empathy for others. However, I contest that the content of the art is key to such emotion. I am, of course, not
suggesting that form is irrelevant to Nussbaum. However, her notion of form is almost completely limited to the narrative form of a novel, and her analytical emphasis is tied to the political and/or social content of art. Nussbaum argues that art moves people politically and ethically because “it summons powerful emotions.”

I argue that Nussbaum’s argument collapses upon itself. It is only in a successful form that art can summon powerful emotions. Nussbaum implies this herself, yet she only wants to favor certain forms of art—the novel and traditional literary modes of storytelling. It is as if Nussbaum is almost scared of the implications of her thought; she wants to open the political and legal door to art, but only to certain types of art. That being said, even within the context of the novel the difference in emotional resonance must be tied to the form of the art: Certainly John Grisham and John Updike could tell the same story, but would the power of the story be the same? I contend, in contrast to Nussbaum, that such power remains in the form of art. In discussing Nussbaum, I also offer some cultural critique on various artworks, including David Lynch’s Twin Peaks.

After wrestling with a leading notion of how art effects politics, and hence arguing that form is crucial to that effect, I then examine the impact—and perils—of a world where form might not matter. Borrowing from Wendy Brown (1995), I call this effect “wounded aesthetics.” In States of Injury, Wendy Brown argues that left-wing identity politics can be a variety of Nietzschean ressentiment that uses relative weakness to assume a type of moral and/or ethical supremacy. In the best chapter of the book, Brown uses the expression “wounded attachments” to explain a politics that allows for suffering just to establish a kind of advantaged perspective, as well as a group identity. Brown’s so-described “wounded attachments” achieve lucidity by politicizing
segregation outside an “imagined” universal; the “victims” or the “marginalized” are therefore replicating instead of resisting their own segregation from political regime. On Brown’s (1995, 61) account, “without recourse to the white masculine middle-class ideal, politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion.”

In the fourth chapter of this monograph, I argue that a similar phenomenon occurs in aesthetics. Some aesthetics explicitly gets tied to a notion of a “sub-group” or a political message, and hence proponents of that message forgive the art for being mediocre simply because it advocates a position that is positive. In order to fully discuss the notion of wounded aesthetics, I examine the Philip Roth (1998) novel *American Pastoral*, and address the political implications of its formal qualities. This discussion illuminates the issues of wounded aesthetics and how such issues lead to bad art and bad politics.

In earlier chapters I delve into the way that art does or should not affect the political realm. Yet, in chapter five, I discuss the way that the aesthetic has crept into our individual decision-making. Specifically, the type of aesthetic theory that is often substituted for traditional ethics tends to be lacking. That theory, which I call “aesthetic individualism,” has been espoused to varying degrees by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Michael Foucault (1996, 2004), and Richard Rorty (1989). I take issue with this characterization of aesthetics. After first briefly addressing the means by which aesthetics “fills in” in the (post)modern world, I then outline the notion of “aesthetic

\[\text{6 It could also be called “aesthetic individuality” or “aesthetics of the self.”}\]
individuality” as expressed by Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty. Subsequently I expose some troubles with this theory, focusing on why it partially fails on its own terms. I then suggest that the notion of an “aesthetic event” as characterized by Alain Badiou helps to better explain the way the aesthetic realm interacts with the ethical and political realms. This analysis builds on the Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics as a Kantian category by acknowledging that aesthetics forms a way of seeing the world. And this seeing is fundamentally changed by aesthetic events. Specifically, as an example of an aesthetic event, I explore the Beatles’ arrival on the cultural scene: an aesthetic event that fundamentally alters the primary “truth” of understanding.

Finally, in the last chapter of this book, I examine what I call vital aesthetics. Speaking purely prescriptively, this is the notion of the aesthetic realm properly understood. I explore how the aesthetic, ethical, moral, and political can co-exist in a world of surfaces in such a way that both respects the distinctions in the realms, but realizes that such realms are not discrete entities. Vital aesthetics allows for human existence that respects experience, but also understands that one cannot base politics on aesthetics, just as one cannot base aesthetics on politics.

Why (and When) Art Matters

One might read this chapter—and the skim this manuscript—and ask the question: why should I care about art at all? This is a valid question. As stated above, I assume a world of surfaces, a world of appearances. Experience itself is tied to surfaces, but such is true of all kinds of experiences. Experiences of love shape the world; scientific experiences shape the world. Why is art worthy of discussion? On a certain level, this

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7 I could clearly use other thinkers here—Dewey, Schiller, etc—yet I chose three thinkers whose approach is both similar and broad.
is a whimsical matter. I am—personally and intellectually—interested in art’s interaction with society. However, I also think you should be interested in art, and part of the raison d’être of this work is to convince the reader of the importance of art. Certainly there is a historical basis of this importance, and to the link between art and politics itself. Philosophy is partly born when Plato challenges the primacy of art, and hence banishes them from his ideal republic. Nietzsche, in contrast, was so moved by art that felt a kind of dread because he sensed a great chasm between the truths of art and other kinds of empirical truths. Hence, throughout the history of western intellectual thought, art has been of crucial importance. Of course, this historical importance does not justify the importance of art on its own. Yet, the assumption of this manuscript—which I will argue for in this work—is that art, and the aesthetic realm, is intrinsically connected to the political.

As mentioned above, I explore this important connection in the next chapter, in which I discuss Kant, Ranciére, and the cognitive impact of aesthetics. In that chapter I argue that aesthetics—and hence experiences of art—allow us to judge and see what has value. In fact, this kind of valuing is directly connected to the extent that we understand the world. As discussed in the next chapter, this shaping of the seeable is distinctly a political act. It is an act that defines politics itself.

Though I do suggest in the next chapter that aesthetics is a filter for existence, I am apprehensive in suggesting that this filter is somehow fundamental, or primary. It is contrary to my epistemological assumptions—a world of appearances—to argue that aesthetics would act as a kind of foundation. Concurrently, I do not think it valuable in the context of this manuscript to makes foundational claims about reality. In contrast,
an embrace of the world of surfaces should resist a move toward any foundational ontology, even a kind of ontology that might conveniently inflate the importance of a particular type of argument. Hence, even if the aesthetic sphere helps define the world of existence, it is not foundational in its metaphysical status. Aesthetics helps humans deal with surfaces, but it does not create something underlying those surfaces. Hence, art itself helps us deal with world of appearances. It allows us to make sense of the world of appearances.

Yet even if it is my intention of creating a world in which the aesthetics cannot be metaphysically foundational, the type of intellectual work created here—a manuscript about the intersection of art and politics—acts in a way that treats art as primary. This is especially true if aesthetics is important because it allows us to deal with a world of surfaces. However, I would suggest—and I imply throughout this manuscript—that to wrestle with this question is to grapple with the whole notion of the limit of art. In this sense, aesthetics is both foundational and non-foundational. It is a filter of the world in an approach to life that privileges such filters, but it is also a kind of world-view that challenges the whole notion of foundational reality. Throughout this manuscript I discuss the interaction of form and content in politics, and how that interaction of form and content is the key to the various meanings of art. In a similar fashion, the interaction of the foundational and non-foundational aspects of aesthetics creates a kind of tension on which art depends. On a certain level, this tension reflects the tensions being broadly discussed in this manuscript. And, I do not think it is a stretch to say that these issues reflect a personal and intellectual struggle. Of course, it is my contention
that these issues are important in the broad sense, and that they should be important to most thoughtful readers.

One aspect of the importance of arguments here rests on the possible ahistorical nature of the interaction of art and politics. As mentioned above, this work discusses the interaction of the form of art with the political realm. Yet, it is important to examine whether this interaction—and the importance I place on form—would always be true, or is linked to a particular time and place. The surface-oriented epistemology discussed above resists an ahistorical notion of art’s impact on society. In other words, I think part of the argument here rests on the notion in a world of surfaces form matters. Hence, in a world where the underpinning is based on foundational metaphysics, then it is easier to see how form is irrelevant to the impact of art. Put another way, in a less pluralistic universe—a world based on neo-Platonic-Judeo-Christian principles of the European “middle-ages”—art may serve a different purpose then it does in liberal-democracies.

I do not want to suggest that the world of surfaces is has solely been a new phenomenon. Philosophers since Plato—and possibly before—wrestled with the temptation of the world of surfaces. Certainly, this surface-world has been more prevalent since the rise of science, and the de-entanglement of religion from politics. Hence, I reassert the notion that art has a special—maybe simply different—place in a world based on democratic politics. In other words, in a world where we have notion of individual subjective meaning, both surface and form become increasingly important. Again, to a certain extent, this manuscript is an attempt to grapple with the impact of art in the surface world, with an implication that some people who investigate art are still approaching life from a foundational metaphysical standpoint.
Given this surface world, I think John Dewey is correct in asserting that art plays a somewhat special role in democracy. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey (1954, 182-84) suggests that art is a way for people to express things in the public sphere that cannot be expressed via reason and standard dialogue. Art allows us to communicate with others and close the gap that occurs when one places a premium on discussion. Democracy—tied with liberal capitalism—allows us to celebrate surfaces in a way that might have been difficult when non-democratic views of the world were prevalent.

Richard Rorty argued that epistemology is not necessarily tied to politics, but, in contrast, a contention of this manuscript is that the contemporary world not only embraces the surfaces, but it recognizes such an embrace.\(^8\) Put another way, surfaces always mattered, but now we understand that surfaces matter. Contemporary society, spiting Plato, has let Homer—in the guise of, for example, Steven Spielberg or Toni Morrison—back into our republics. That being said, the pull toward metaphysics is always there, and during this manuscript I might slip into foundational and/or ahistorical language. This slippage reveals both the struggle to, as Dewey suggests, get past foundational thinking, and the tension in my own thinking.

As implied above, in this manuscript, I grapple with the implications of a world of appearances, and how aesthetics would interact with political in such a world. Thinkers have often tried to translate aesthetics into political language, arguing, for instance, that a novel is “democratic” or “fascist.” I take aesthetics seriously as its own endeavor, an endeavor that exists in the Nietzschean world of surfaces. However, I am also intrigued with the notion that aesthetics affects other realms of existence. And, hence, I struggle

\(^8\) Rorty seems to think this occurred in 1910, when most intellectuals gave up the notion of a soul. (1999, 168)
with the ways in which aesthetics, as represented in the world by art, affects the political realm. As mentioned previously, I argue that in a world of appearances, the formal qualities of art would have an effect on the political by shaping the way we see the world. In this sense, art that seems non-political can have a profound effect on political life.
CHAPTER 2
AESTHETICS AS A KANTIAN CATEGORY: KANT, RANCIÉRE, AND AESTHETICS AS POLITICS/POLITICS AS AESTHETICS

Noise or Speaking?

In the film *Battle for Algiers*, the angry Algerians, in a protest to occupation and brutality of the French, start to yell in a tone that is something like pure noise. The French seem shocked and startled by the noise, and the director uses it as was to foretell the eventual collapse of colonialism. However, the film never attempts to explain, in an explicit definitional context, what the yells mean. Are these yells actual political content, political speech, or are the yells simply noise? From the perspective of the French it appears to be noise. However, what does it mean that this is just noise? Does the noise mean anything?

Put another way, is this “noise” actually a kind of “speaking?” Is it understandable? Is it beautiful? The philosophical thought of Jacques Ranciére is a nice way to examine the implications of these aesthetic / political questions. When wondering about the implications of these yells, I think of the following passage in Ranciére’s (2004, 12-13) *The Politics of Aesthetics*:

The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and the time and space in which this activity is performed. … There is an “aesthetics” at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin’s “anesthetization” of politics specific to the “age of the masses.” This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by consideration of the people qua work of art. If the reader is fond of an analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as a system of *a priori* forms of determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics and form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and then what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.
The notion that aesthetics acts as a kind of Kantian category, as well as a way to distribute the sensible, is captivating and fascinating to me. If this is true, as Rancière argues, then the way we see is always linked to the political. The political itself is linked to the sensible. Of course, Ranciére discusses that the notion of aesthetics as a Kantian category is a metaphor. And, hence, Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics is not exactly like Kant’s categories. Given these connections and divergences, it is important to examine the philosophical implications of how aesthetics might work as a kind of Kantian category.

To further this examination, in this chapter I develop the notion that aesthetics are a kind of Kantian category. Initially I discuss, on a basic level, Kant’s categories, and how such categories define the way humans interact with sense experience. It is important to define such categories if one wants to apply this analysis to aesthetics. Then, I examine Kant’s analysis of aesthetics itself. Kant’s aesthetic theory is crucial to this discussion because it establishes how one can look at aesthetics as contemplative judgment. The chapter moves on to examine Ranciére’s aesthetics and politics. As seen below, Ranciére’s aesthetics is linked to his politics in the notion of the way we see and understand the world. In this crucial section, I examine how Ranciére sees aesthetics as a kind of Kantian category, and how that notion of aesthetics is connected to the way we see politics and the political. Finally, the conclusion of the paper is an examination of theoretical implications of Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics.

**Understanding the World; Understanding Kant’s Categories**

One cannot overstate the importance of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is one of the three or four most important works in western epistemology, and it revolutionized
the way we conceive of truth.⁴ Given its importance, I am not attempting to discuss in any depth the various serious issues rendered in Kant’s *Critique*. Instead, in this section I mean to simply define and establish the notion of a Kantian category. This is important because it is a key to the rest of this chapter, as well as the rest of my manuscript. If Ranciére argues that aesthetics acts something like a Kantian category, it is important to know what exactly that means.

Kant offered the then radical notion that the world that we perceive depends on the aspects of the perceiver’s mind, and does not necessarily need to exist independently outside the perceiver. (*CPR*, A111 / B132). Prior to Kant, many thinkers conceived of the truth of existence as “outside” of the mind. Yet Kant argued that certain notions of truth, especially cause and effect, and ordinance in time, act as a kind of filter and are essentially contributed by the perceiver. These filters cover all our experience, and without said filters, we cannot even understand the world. As one might imagine given the title, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* suggests that we need both reason and experience for us to understand the world. In fact, we need the filters we provide. And, for Kant, these filters are what he calls the “categories.”

Before discussing the categories further, it is important to take a step back for a moment. For Kant, humans have no access to the underlying nature of reality. If there is an accurate metaphysical description of the universe, Kant does not believe humans can provide it. This is because we only engage in the world on the phenomenal level. We do not understand the world-in-itself. We essentially interact with the world in two ways: using our “intuitions,” our sense data, and our “concepts,” our way of

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⁴ See Kitcher (1995) for a good discussion of the extent of Kant’s influence and scope.
understanding the world. Both of these ways are linked to sense data, and not to the world-in-itself, which Kant calls the “noumena.”

Importantly, our concepts help us understand the world. One of the key concepts is the notion of space, and space relations. For example, if we see a car in the distance, we need the concept of space relations to organize our perception of the universe. This concept allows humans to understand, label and discuss the sense experience, the intuition, in a meaningful way. We could not have an experience without concepts of understanding, in the same way we could not have such experiences without sense data. Importantly, however, these concepts are contributed by the perceiver, by the human subject. The concepts are not in the world itself. They are added to experience by the human mind. Writing after the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant (1973, 135) stated in an almost succinct manner: “There must a ground in the subject which makes it possible for these representations (of experience) to originate in this and no other manner, and which allows them to be relate to objects which are not yet given. This ground is at least innate.” People bring the categories to bear on the world of experience: They let us understand the sense data we encounter.

As mentioned above, the filters that allow us to employ our concepts of understanding are Kant’s categories. Kant isolates a dozen categories, including substance, causality, and similar conceptual notions, as a kind of lens through which we experience the world. These lenses, the categories, allow us to bring our sense intuitions under our concepts of comprehension. In other words, it is through these categories that we can begin to understand the world. Yet, as mentioned above, it is important to note that the categories are both contributed by the perceiver and are
necessary to understand anything that we actually experience. In this sense, the contribution of conscious subjects actually allows us to understand experience. This is an important insight because it allows for a delicate but extremely important interaction between raw sense experience and parts of cognitive mind. The mind itself helps to filter the experience, to make it real and understandable. Hence, it is not that without humans there would be no world itself. Kant is not an idealist: it is that without the human categories the world would appear as gibberish. (CPR, B 274).

The categories also help Kant to find his the epistemological Holy Grail: the synthetic a priori truth statement. Spinning off ideas explored by David Hume and others, the a priori truth statement is one in which the statement is not definitional, such as “all cats are animals,” nor is it dependant on observation, such as “all dogs are black.” For Kant, a synthetic a priori truth statement is one that is not based on observation but does add something new to the realm of knowledge\(^2\) (CPR, A7 / B11).

One of the key a priori synthetic truths is the existence of the various categories. On Kant’s account, the categories are a concise example of a priori synthetic truths. The categories are prior to experience because they are linked to our minds; they are the filters that sift through experience. This sifting lets us understand the world that can be discussed and explained. In this sense, Kant’s categories are fundamental to the Kantian subject understanding the world.

**A Matter of Judgment: Kant’s Aesthetics**

If the categories allow us to understand the world, Kant’s ideas concerning aesthetics permit us to make judgments about the same world. Like a lot of Kant’s

\(^2\) For Kant, the most obvious example of synthetic a priori knowledge are mathematical equations because they are both necessary and new (CPR, A720 / B748).
thoughts, Kant’s aesthetics is a type of brilliant cheat. Like his notion of the apparent world and the world in-and-of-itself, Kant is trying to let us speak objectively about a world that reeks of subjectivity. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant attempts to discover what kind of *a priori* standards might rest in our ability to judge things. This judgment is rooted in a various kinds of statements, but the majority of the book deals with aesthetic judgments as the pinnacle of human judgment.³ Aesthetic judgments are reflective, and hence are judgments where the determining concept is not a key to the actual judgment itself. In fact, one could argue that Kant sees aesthetic thought as interesting exactly because reflection is actually the subjective condition of the prospect of transcendental philosophy. Like an epistemological excavator, Kant wants to dig out the objective hidden via reflection in our aesthetic judgments.

For Kant, Aesthetic judgment concern things we label as "beautiful," or, sometimes, "sublime." In other words, on Kant’s account, an aesthetic judgment is a judgment that attaches a sensation of pleasure or basic experience with a notion of "beautiful" or "sublime."⁴ A great many of these judgments concern art, though aesthetics can also deal with the natural world. If one states that a film is "great," it, at first, appears that one can ascertain a knowable concept of greatness and was hence applying it to a particular film. Yet Kant argues that is not how aesthetic judgments are made. According to Kant, if we could access such a notion of aesthetic greatness then we could simply give a litany of criteria that would establish a piece of literature as

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³ Kant discusses five types of judgments, but it is clear that Kant wants to discuss the importance of aesthetic judgments, and, maybe teleological judgments.

⁴ “Pleasure” is an interesting concept, and may be a little at odds with the experience of popular art. But, to the extent that some contemporary art is used to gross, shock, or provoke, one assumes that one takes pleasure in taking part in such art.
great. In other words, one would be able to establish a set of precise and universal standards for that film, and, for that matter, any film, being “great.” However, in the hundred plus years of discussing film, as well as the millennia discussing art in general, we have yet to establish these precise and universal standards. For Kant, this is because such criteria do not exist. It is a fool’s errand to search for universal standards of aesthetic greatness. According to Kant, one’s judgment about aesthetic greatness does not follow an external concept of beauty; the judgment is linked to a way of feeling that is traced back to the pleasure in the beautiful (CJ, Sec. 36, 37, 45).

If aesthetic judgment is linked to pleasure, then one could argue that it is a purely subjective-style judgment. Kant himself discusses judgment as to taste as different then aesthetic judgment. Hence, is the statement that I enjoy swimming the same kind of statement that I think “One Hundred Years of Solitude” is a great novel?5 Certainly one might think that the statement about swimming is philosophically, ethically, and politically banal. On Kant’s account, the judgment about swimming is an entirely subjective statement and its internal validity is attached to my feelings of pleasures. Yet, for Kant—breaking with his contemporaries—aesthetic judgments act differently then subjects of simple taste.

As noted, for Kant, aesthetic judgments are not subjective; such judgments have a somewhat larger legitimacy. That being said, Kant needs to establish this larger legitimacy without resorting to a stable exterior standard. In fact, aesthetic judgments seem to have a larger legitimacy and yet such judgments are neither attached to an exterior determinative concept, nor are they—according to Kant—the type of judgments

5 In fact, Kant calls the judgment dealing with swimming “sensual” judgments.
that themselves produce such standards. Given this intellectual problem, Kant wants to understand what exactly I am saying when I say “One Hundred Years of Solitude” is a great novel. In fact, the general problem of these types of statements is the chief theoretical concern of the first half of the Critique of Judgment.

As suggested by the above analysis, Kant is concerned with the way that aesthetic judgments act as universal statements. This is the crux of the intellectual conceit of Critique of Judgment. In this sense, Kant wants to establish the difference between statements like “candy is sweet,” “candy is good,” and “candy pleases me.” Clearly the statement “candy pleases me” is a largely individual and subjective statement. It is based on private knowledge, and others do not have access to that knowledge. (CJ, Sec. 7, 9). On the other hand, the notion that “candy is sweet” seems to be linked to actual definition of candy, and is likely what Kant calls an analytic statement. (In this sense, the existence of sugar in candy defines it as sweet.) If one says that candy is not sweet, one most likely does not know either that candy contains sugar or the actual definition of “sweet.”

To say that candy is sweet is not an aesthetic judgment, and it is not that interesting of a statement. In a similar way, a statement that “candy pleases me” is not

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6 As shall be discussed later in this chapter, Ranciére will see this act of possible creation a little differently.

7 In this sense we can see how a treatise that is chiefly concerned with aesthetics can be actually about “judgment.” Kant is concerned with the various kinds of judgments we make. Yet it is aesthetic and teleological judgments that are discussed in terms that imply that such statements are more than simply subjective statements. This is especially true when one thinks that Kant defines pleasure as something like the feeling of enchantment of life.

8 In this context, I am assuming that something is “sweet” when it contains sugar and that candy contains sugar. I think this is a sound general assumption, artificial sweeteners notwithstanding.

9 It is important to note that though taste is an individual sensation, it is still a sensation with an objective test vis-à-vis correspondence.
that interesting because it acts as an individual statement. In this sense, to switch to a statement like *American Pastoral* is a great novel is much more interesting. And, for Kant, that is because the statement “*American Pastoral* is a great novel” acts like the statement “candy is sweet.” In other words, statements about aesthetics transcend statements of personal taste. Such statements assume that the object of judgment is an objective property of the thing being judged. (*CJ*, Sec. 6). Put another way, the statement “*American Pastoral* is a great novel” is a statement that pretends to be universal. It, unlike the statement “I like candy,” assumes that all people should agree with it. It is a statement about a universal truth in which the truth itself is not universal. For Kant, such is the nature of statements of judgment. These statements of aesthetic judgments make an implicit appeal to universality: Kant himself writes that the judge of beauty judges for everyone. (*CJ*, Sec. 7). Now, one could possibly overstate this, so it is important to note that Kant is not stating that such judgments are objective. The key is that they act like they are objective. To state that a piece of art is beautiful is to state that all people should think that such a thing is beautiful. (*CJ*, Sec. 6, 7). As stated above, Kant believes that aesthetic judgments are subjective statements that act as universal statements. Kant writes:

Therefore we have to justify *a priori* the validity neither of judgment which represents what a thing is, not of one which prescribes that I ought to do something in order to produce it. We have merely to prove for the judgment generally *universal validity* of a singular judgment that expresses the subjective purposiveness of an empirical representation of the form of an object: in order to explain how it is possible that a thing can please in the mere act of judging it (without sensation or concept), and how that satisfaction of one man can be proclaimed as a rule for every other, just as the act of judging of an object for the sake of cognition in general has universal roles. (*CJ*, Sec. 31, emphasis in the original)
Though aesthetic judgments act as if they are universal, Kant realizes that people may not expect other people to actually agree with aesthetic judgments. That being said, if one makes an aesthetic judgment one is asserting that to the extent that the declarer is correct then everyone should agree with the aesthetic judgment. In other words, if someone declares that something is beautiful that I do not think is beautiful, I assume that one of us is wrong. This is the core aspect of Kant’s notion of aesthetic judgments. The assumption is that aesthetic statements act as if they are objective.\(^\text{10}\)

Another key aspect of aesthetic judgments acting as if they are universal is that such judgments must be disinterested. When I judge something beautiful I must not make such a judgment because I have an interest in it. This means that I cannot have an interest in something that I find beautiful. For example, if I am to judge a house beautiful, I cannot have an interest in the actual shelter of the house. Or, if I am very hungry, I cannot claim in a disinterested way that a piece of culinary art is beautiful or sublime. If I assigned beauty to these things when I had an interest in them then such a judgment would be a mistake. Put another way, a judgment of aesthetic beauty should not be based on the aspects of experience exterior to the thing being judged.

This is a very idiosyncratic argument because Kant also assumes that one can point out an individual predilection toward a type of pleasure. For example, if sushi at my favorite restaurant only taps into my subjective taste—if I think I just happen to like the type of vinegar they put in their rice—then the kind of pleasure I feel from eating such sushi cannot form a basis for a judgments that acts as if it is universal. In this sense, Kant’s aesthetic judgments are removed from individual dislikes, even while the

\(^{10}\) Also important to Kant’s idea of aesthetic judgment is the notion of disinterestedness. One engages with aesthetic judgments as if they do not interest us on a subjective way.
same judgments are based on individual pleasure. Taken to its extreme, one could argue that this negates his notion of the ability of someone use aesthetic judgments as quasi-universal statements. However, a close analysis reveals an interesting interpretation.

The disinterest Kant is discussing is linked to the actual existence of something: “Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgment of taste. We must not prejudiced in favour of the existence of things, but be quite indifferent in this respect, in order to judge things of taste” (CJ, Sec. 2). Put another way, one’s aesthetic judgment should not be linked to the actual existence of an item in the world. “An interest involves caring for the real existence of the object” (Burnham 2001, 51.) Interest, hence, concerns any judgment that assigns value as to whether the object exists in the world. For example, a hungry person has a great interest in whether food actually exists, and cannot claim that he is disinterested in the object itself. In this sense, the pleasure one gets from the food is somewhat “tainted” by the preexisting condition of hunger. Hunger itself affects the judgments and does not allow us to eventually state that such judgments are universal. Judgments based on interest—defined as a concern for the actual existence of an item—do not act in a universal manner.

In this moment of disinterest, Davide Panagia (2009) finds a kind of egalitarian spirit. He argues that Kant frees aesthetic judgments from the rules of normative judgment. According to Panagia, Kant’s notion of beauty “is disinterested and hence egalitarian precisely because it cannot be motivated by a normative apparatus. Thus only taste can guarantee the experience of freedom and equally by everyone” (147).
Though it is possible to conceive of this disinterest as egalitarian, and it is likely important to take extreme circumstances out of the aesthetic calculus—for example, the starving person judging a meal’s aesthetic worth—Kantian disinterest cannot be seen as an egalitarian panacea. Panagia ignores the fact that Kant’s disinterest is linked directly to his desire to make aesthetic judgments quasi-universal. Hence, when made universal, those judgments are placed in a systematic and categorical perspective. They become statements with which we can argue and dispute. In that moment, egalitarianism and taste are subjugated to a phony rule-based notion of discourse.\(^1\)

As noted above, Kant attempted to make aesthetic judgments akin to universal claims. In this sense, he wanted us to speak of aesthetics in the same way he imagined we would speak of ethics. Of course, Kant’s ethical philosophy, as expressed in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, is nearly as influential as his epistemological philosophy. And though ethics is often a basis for political theory, Kant himself did not fully engage political philosophy, and few commentators have dealt seriously with Kant’s political philosophy. Elisabeth Ellis (2005) points out that of all the major philosophers, Kant is probably the least explored concerning his political philosophy. This is important in the context of this discussion because one of the most comprehensive treatments of Kant’s political philosophy is rooted in his aesthetic thought as expressed in *CJ*.

This discussion of Kant’s political thought is from Hannah Arendt, and is contained in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, a collection of talks Arendt gave concerning Kant’s notion of aesthetic judgment and how that created a basis for politics.

\(^{11}\) J.M. Bernstein (1992) argues that Kant himself is attempting to make universal the moment of loss when an aesthetic experience passes (18 – 29). This is an interesting interpretation, and one that subtly shapes my thinking here. However, such an analysis does not bear directly on my discussion here.
As discussed above, for Arendt, Kantian political judgment is based around the same principles as Kantian aesthetic judgment. In fact, Kant’s notion of disinterest is of particular importance to Arendt. Arendt (1992, 68-69) compares this type of understanding to the spectator in the audience of a theatrical play: “The advantage the spectator has is that he sees the play as a whole, while each of the actor knows only his part or, if he should judge from the perspective of acting, only the part of the whole that concerns him. The actor is partial by definition.” For Arendt, Kant’s disinterested spectator is in the best position to judge both aesthetically and politically. And, it is through this disinterest that we create Kantian consensus, a consensus based on aesthetic principles that are applied to political judgment.

Given this link between aesthetic judgment and political judgment, Arendt sees Kant’s political philosophy as a march towards “progress” based the ability to build consensus, persuade, and empathize. For, as Arendt repeatedly stresses, a concordance with the common sense is crucial. One does not just determine that something is pleasurable, and therefore desirable. The spectator must engage in the normative debate by looking at the “whole.” Arendt (1992, 69) writes that it “is called taste because, like taste, it chooses. But this choice is itself the subject to still another choice: one can approve or disapprove of the very fact of pleasing.” As discussed above, we first engage in the dialogue on the level of taste, but then we must examine such taste as disinterested spectators to see if we approve or disapprove of such a judgment. And, as noted, the basis of this approval is largely based on whether the general consensus would corroborate the choices of taste. These choices of taste then
interact with the political while forming our quasi-universal judgments about such matters.

Of course, there is quite a bit of imagination at play in this process. Arendt—taking some liberties with Kant—makes it clear that we cannot “know” the common sense. As Kant states, we must imagine from a disinterested position, and then attempt to determine what the community’s likely judgment would be. In other words, would the “common sense” approve of my feeling of pleasure in certain things? Of course, on Arendt’s account, there is another normative leap here because the Kantian spectator must also approve of the judgment of the community. In other words, viewed from a disinterested point of view, is the common sense acceptance or rejection of my taste proper or improper? Of course, the extent to which we can be “disinterested” in this way is very questionable. This notion of aesthetic judgment through the community is powerful, but it is debatable whether it is Kant’s. It appears that Arendt is attempting to structure a way that political judgment can be fashioned meaningful in a world that recognizes contingency in such judgment. And, though Arendt may bend Kant, given the normative concerns here, it is important to understand that Arendt links Kant’s politics to his notion of aesthetic judgment.

**Ranciére’s Aesthetics: Ordering the Universe**

Jacques Ranciére is a thinker who explicitly links aesthetics and politics. However, Ranciére’s thought plays out in a different way than Kant’s. Whereas Kant views aesthetics as a moment of judgment, Ranciére sees aesthetic choice as a kind of pre-cognitive way of ordering the world. In other words, Ranciére sees aesthetics as filter, a kind of cognitive regime that is tied to notions of the beautiful. In this sense, it is
this dividing of the world that is key. Art represents “a new form of dividing up the world.”

(Ranciére 2009, 22). Ranciére writes:

What the term ‘art’ designates in its singularity is the framing of a space of presentation by which the things of art as identified as such. And what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience. (Ibid, 23).

Given this, we see three fundamental aspects of Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics. First, as mentioned, there is a kind of ordering of the universe. This ordering is hugely important, and has political implications that will be explored in further sections of this chapter. Yet, what is perhaps most interesting of this ordering is that it is both personal and inter-subjective. Each individual person has an aesthetic ordering that is linked to the way we view the world. When we interact with the sense world, we filter said senses through a structure that values a certain aesthetic order. However, this aesthetic order is created by both the individual structured of consciousness and a type of collective aesthetic regime that affects all people under such regime.

The second relevant aspect of Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics is that this ordering of the universe is exactly what makes the universe intelligible. In this sense, Ranciére is clever in likening aesthetics to a kind of Kantian category. For, aesthetics, like Kant’s categories, render the world understandable. This is especially interesting because it implies that an aesthetic ordering of the universe is somewhat equivalent to categories of understanding like causality, space-time, and part-whole. In other words, for Ranciére it makes as little sense to imagine a world that does not contain an underlying aesthetic regime. It is this regime that affects and informs the category of aesthetics. This aesthetic regime is essential to the filter that lets humans understand the world.
In this understanding of the world we see the third important aspect of Rancière’s notion of aesthetics as a Kantian category. As noted, notions of aesthetic act as a filter, but it is a filter that implicitly injects a valuing system to sense experience. Just as some might argue that Kant’s categories imbue a kind of value judgment about the world—though Kant himself is attempting to move past such subjective moments—Rancière’s aesthetics explicitly sees a semi-subjective filter to sense experience. This value schema shows that aesthetics acts as a grouping mechanism, and it is a grouping mechanism that is linked to subjective aesthetic filters that act—in a way that might, ironically, make Kant proud—as if they are transcendental cognitive filters.\footnote{As mentioned previously, Murray Edelman (1995) made a similar argument in his work From Art to Politics. He also argues that art shapes out categories of understanding. But Edelman was concerned with the way those categories defined explicitly political ideas like good and bad, friend and enemy. Rancière is concerned with the act of seeing itself, and how that seeing is tied into the notion of the political. For Edelman, art can make us see a kind of person as good or bad, for Rancière, art allows us to see certain people at all.}

It is important to note that these aesthetic filters are pre-contemplation, but not prior to experience. On Rancière’s account, aesthetic value is based on experience, but also is shaped by experience. The aesthetic filter is defined by our cognitive responses to data, and that data is both defined and understood by the past and future aesthetic experience.

This interaction of cognition, judgment, filters, and experience is, according to Rancière, a key to why aesthetics has been linked to Freudian thought:

In short, Dr. Freud, the interpreter of the “anodyne” facts abandoned by his positivist colleagues, can use these “examples” in his demonstration because they are themselves tokens of a certain unconscious. To put it another way: If it was possible for Freud to formulate the psychoanalytical theory of the unconscious, it was because an unconscious mode of thought had already been identified outside of the clinical domain as such, and the domain of works of art and literature can be defined as the privileged ground where this “unconscious” is at work. (2010, 3-4)
Examining the quotation above, one can see that Rancière assumes that any notion of discussing art in the context of the unconscious, and to a certain extent understanding the unconscious at all, is only possible if one assumes a kind of aesthetic regime that is based on an imminent notion of the filter of art. The aesthetic filters acts on all sense data, even as it is acted upon by both sense data and the communal/historical aesthetic schema. Hence, to even comprehend modern notions of the subconscious, or as Rancière wants to speak of it, the unconscious, one must assume an aesthetic regime explicitly changes the realm of art itself from the artist to the observers cognitive filter (2010, 7). It is only via looking at the way we value things aesthetically that we can explore the mind via a Freudian approach. Hence, for Ranciére, a notion of aesthetics as a kind of Kantian category is foundational for a world that takes seriously Freudian ideas of the mind.

If one can probe the subconscious values of a person and/or society by examining its aesthetic filters, then it is important to discuss how these filters are changed. Ranciére assumes that such filters can be altered at moments of rupture, and it is those moments that define new aesthetic regimes. These are moments of revolution. And, importantly, for Ranciére these ruptures are fundamentally political.

**Speaking / Hearing, Being / Seeing: Ranciére’s Politics**

As implied by the above section, it is almost silly to attempt to discuss Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics separately from his ideas about politics. More than even some thinkers linked with post-modernism and post-structuralism—Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard—Ranciére sees deep-seated link between aesthetics and politics. In this work *Disagreement*, Ranciére (1998) describes politics as a kind of "hearing" and "seeing"
the people who are recognized as being able to speak. I quote Ranciére at length because this passage is crucial to the understanding of his notion of politics:

So the simple opposition between logical animals and phonic animals is in no way the given on which politics is based. It is, on the contrary, one of the stakes of the very dispute that institutes politics. At the heart of politics lies a double wrong, a fundamental conflict, never conducted as such, over the relationship between the capacity of the speaking being who is without qualification and political capacity. For Plato, the mob of anonymous speaking beings who call themselves the people does wrong to any organized distribution of bodies in community. But conversely, “the people” is the name, the form of subjectification, of this immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order symbolized by dooming the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence or to animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain. For before the debts that place people who are of no account in relationship of dependence on the oligarchs, there the symbolic distribution of bodies that divides them into two categories: those that one sees and those that one does not see, those that have a logos—memorial speech, an account to be kept up—and those who have no logos, those who really speak and those whose voice merely mimics the articulate voice to express pleasure and pain. Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt. (1998, 22-23, emphasis in original)

Similarly, and equally importantly, Ranciére (2009, 24) later writes:

Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them. Elsewhere, I have tried to show the sense in which politics is the very conflict over the existence of that space, over the designation of objects as pertaining to common and of subjects as having the capacity of a common speech.

As seen above, the act of deciding what is noise and what is intelligible is the key political moment for Ranciére. In this moment we recognize someone’s ability not only to speak, but to be seen by the whole. Hence, for Ranciére political recognition is the determination of whether someone is speaking or simply grunting. Politics is a battle
over the “capacity for common speech.” For example, as Ranciére (1998, 23) notes, for years in Rome the plebs did not speak: “They do not speak because they are a being without a name, deprived of logos—meaning, of symbolic enrollment in the city.”

Given that politics is linked to whether someone is a speaking thing, and hence is tied to what Ranciére calls the distribution of the sensible, it is relatively clear the role that art and aesthetics plays in affecting politics. Put another way, the battle over the capacity for common speech is a battle over the distribution of the sensible, and hence it is a battle that interacts with art and aesthetics. On Ranciére’s account, art helps divide up the sensible world. The framing of various moments with aesthetic values is a key to any attempt to comprehend the world. We must aesthetically preference things in order to make sense of the world. And, in this making sense, we then assign people or things the ability to speak, to be recognized. Ranciére (2009, 23) writes:

Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society’s structures, or social groups, their conflicts and identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this place.

As noted, art divides up the world, and in this dividing, it has a huge political impact. As it reframes the common notion of aesthetic value, and it assigns intelligibility to new things, and renders old things meaningless, it shapes the political landscape. Art cannot, via its explicit subject matter, render things intelligible, but it can affect the sensible by changing “bodily position and movements, functions of speech, (and) the parceling out of the visible and the invisible.” (Ranciére 2004, 19)

This parceling out of the visible and the invisible is a fundamental aspect of the way that art affects the notion of seeing. There are both obvious and not-so-obvious
examples of this in the artistic world. Many of the later chapters in this work will discuss some of the more latent examples of the way art does this—for example, as mentioned later in this manuscript, I see this done in the work of David Lynch, the Beatles, and Philip Roth, among others. However, for a blatant example, one might consider the use of editing in filmmaking. Both the Russian montage filmmaking of the early 20th century and the use of fractured editing in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* toward the end of the Hollywood studio era represent a new way of “seeing.” Russian montage filmmaking explored the possibility of seeing as dialectic, of seeing in a way that allowed viewers to combine ideas and images. Similarly, the choppy editing of *Bonnie and Clyde*—influenced no doubt from the French new-wave—helped break-up our understanding of linear causality.\(^{13}\) By reworking the way in which we see, these uses of editing help divide, re-divide, and define what is sensible and understandable.

Another interesting example of this dividing of the world is argued by Davide Panagia. In his work *The Political Life of Sensation*, Panagia (2009, 6) argues that skin itself is a kind of dividing line that is based on an aesthetic—though possibly not entirely artistic—choice. Panagia writes that there “is no impermeable boundary that our skin might guarantee, and yet we insist on perceiving skin as a containment vessel. Gender, race, sex, desire, beauty, weight, and height are all” somewhat determined by skin a boundary (Ibid, 6). Yet, Panagia argues, a moment in which our sensible read skin in a different way would open up a huge space for new notions of identity, justice, and, eventually, politics. This aesthetic dividing line, like all aesthetic dividing lines, helps to shape our societal outcome.

\(^{13}\) Whole manuscripts can—and have—been written about these stylistic choices. I simply use this as an example of the way Rancière approaches the aesthetics-as-seeing and aesthetics-as-dividing.
In this sense, all art has a kind of politics that is linked with art. These politics are connected to the way we understand the work or art, which is also connected to the aesthetic filter as described above. For Ranciére, it is not the focus on certain issues that makes a work political, it is the means by which a kind of work is created—the form that work of art creates. A crucial issue is whether the art moves into or against the prevailing aesthetic regimes. Hence, Ranciére does not think that all art that has effect politically has to be a radical breath—not everything needs to be Floubert or Goddard to be political. In fact, the tension that slightly radical art can have with the aesthetic regime can be even more interesting a revolutionary painter (Ranciére 2004, 61). Hence, a John Coltrane can be a politically interesting as a John Cage. Sometimes slight disorder can reveal the prevailing order—and change the basic assumptions of our aesthetic category or understanding—even more than radical breaks in the aesthetic order (Ibid, 60-61).

Given this interaction between politics and aesthetics, Ranciére (1998, 58) believes that there “never has been any “aestheticization” of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle.” For Ranciére, the dividing up of the world—which is an aesthetic act, and one which is shaped and reinforced by art—is a the basic political act. To be sure, I have some issues with the reduction of politics to aesthetic, and I express those issues in other parts of this manuscript. That being said, I think that Ranciére’s notion of aesthetics as politics is a useful one. It might be a bit of an overly corrective move in trying to wrestle politics from the realm of power or class/economics, but a move that helps clarify the stakes in aesthetics issues. Some aesthetic forms can render certain people or things mute. These aesthetic filters determine whether “the
common language in which they are exposing a wrong is indeed a common language” (Ranciére 1998, 50).

It is this “wrong,” which is continually established and destroyed by the aesthetic, is the basis of the foundation moments of politics. Ranciére (Ibid, 18) writes concerning the moment of politics: “Politics occurs when the egalitarian contingency disrupts the natural pecking order as the “freedom” of the people, when the disruption produces a specific mechanism: the dividing of society into parts.” It is this dividing that is essentially political. In this dividing, we see the birth of various difference, even such seemingly foundation differences like class or ethnicity. “Politics is the setting-up of a dispute between classes that are not really classes. “True” classes are, or should be, real parts of society” (Ibid). In other words, various groups of people are in association and it the essential political struggle to get these groups to be acknowledged as “true” parts of society. “The wrong instituted by politics is not primarily class warfare” (Ibid). The wrong is one of recognition: it is a cognitive wrong, an aesthetic wrong. And, it is the attempt to correct this wrong—a “wrong” based in the above-discussed aesthetic filter—that forms a basis of political struggle. Ranciére writes: “Politics begins with a major wrong: the gap created by the empty freedom of the people between the arithmetical order and geometric order. (This wrong is) the introduction of an incommensurable at the heart of the distribution of speaking bodies” (Ibid, 19). And, of course, aesthetics is a key to the battle of the distribution of speaking bodies.

In his discussion of the distribution of sensible, Ranciére is concerned with democracy as a kind of politics where there are various and plural claims as to the ability of various people to “speak.” Of course, for Ranciére, democracy is essentially
an aesthetic activity because there are no logic claims as to democratic politics. Any claim for recognition does not actually mandate a normative case for recognition. Like some liberals’ views of rights, Ranciére assumes that when democratic politics is a choice, and when a wrong is claim, then one should engage in democracy. Of course, there is no systematic normative requirement to generate a democratic politics, but the mere existence of a democratic politics injects norms political society. Yet, for Ranciére, the various decisions in democratic politics revolve around aesthetics approaches to understanding.

**Theoretical Implications of Aesthetics as a Kantian Category**

Shifting from a Kantian notion of aesthetics to a notion based on Ranciére’s thought has interesting implications. First and possibly most importantly, is the notion that the kind of judgment that is rooted in aesthetics is much different. For Kant, aesthetic judgment was very much an attempt to separate subjective pleasure from the determination of something as beautiful. To judge a painting beautiful, one must simultaneously find it pleasurable but also be able to say that all people should find the painting beautiful. Hence, whereas Kant does not think that a beautiful painting reflects beauty in the way that Plato might, he also believes that we can speak of beauty as if it is objective. We know that aesthetic judgment is not objective, not in the strictest sense at least, but it is a kind of discourse that we can speak of in an objective way. In its ability to be subjective and yet act objective, Kant thinks that aesthetic judgments act in a similar way to scientific judgments. Both rest on the principle that, with proper judgment, we can speak of subjective determination as if they are objective.

Ranciére sees aesthetics differently. For Ranciére, our underlying aesthetic values shape such judgments. It is silly for anyone to discuss aesthetics as disinterested or
objective, at least in the traditional notion of objective. It is no such thing. Aesthetics are based on subjective and contingent regimes of aesthetic values. This is not to imply, however, that such values are the same for all people. On the contrary, there are intersections—and these intersections create the notion of an aesthetic regime—but there is also definite subjective and personal interaction within aesthetics. However, and this is fundamental, for Rancière the prevailing regime influences our aesthetic choices even prior to pleasure and pain, and, simultaneously, is continuously influenced by those choices. Hence, the aesthetic regime—which, as discussed above, acts as a kind of aesthetic Kantian category—both shapes and is shaped by aesthetic judgment. And, these interactions form a constant friction that creates, and stabilizes, our aesthetic actions and judgments.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that the existence of an aesthetic regime, or category, does not imply that the judgment is not based on subjective interest. It is, but with an underlying aesthetic order as a foundation. As discussed above, that underlying aesthetic foundation is the key to actually beginning to value things and to understand the world. The implication here is clear: whether something is “visible”—whether one can see it in the cognitive universe—is linked to our aesthetic understanding of the world. However, that understanding is not static. People constantly attempt to change that understanding, to challenge the aesthetic regime. It is in these moments, according to Rancière, that the basic premise of politics arises: the ability to be seen and recognized as part of the aesthetic order. In this sense, “to be seen” is more than simply being acknowledged. It is to be valued as comprehensible, understandable, ugly or beautiful, and, possibly, good. It is one thing to be discussed as
ugly; it is another to be not seen at all. On Rancière’s account, this seeing/not-seeing is primarily an aesthetic consideration, and, hence, it links aesthetics and politics in a way that Kant would not have deemed proper.

Again, Davide Panagia provides a good example. In the afore-mentioned *Political Life of Sensation*, Panagia argues that narrative often acts as a kind of aesthetic regime. The world of art is too concerned with narrative—telling a story—and not concerned enough with sensation itself. Panagia examines the work of Caravaggio as well as the horror film *The Ring* in order to discuss the way in which some art actually criticizes the aesthetic regime based on narrative. The in-depth details of Panagia’s argument and analysis are not that relevant to this discussion. What is important is the notion that art itself can help disrupt the aesthetic—and consequently political—regime. This is fundamental. The art can comment—and challenge—the aesthetic regime. For example, Panagia (2009, 120) argues that *The Ring* subverts what he calls the narrativity regime: “*The Ring’s* commitment to capture exploits the dynamics of conviction in cinematic experience by showing structural succession—the chain of events—is insufficient to account for the success of that experience.” Given this “structural succession,” *The Ring* disrupts the aesthetic regime of narrative supremacy. In other words, it allows us to see just a bit differently in our aesthetic category. When we view—and judge—*The Ring*, we have to wrestle with our underlying aesthetic regime.

Of course, I do not want to imply that all slightly discordant works of art challenge our underlying aesthetic assumptions. This would be disingenuous and preposterous. Some works of art simply fail. The do not engender any tug-and-pull with our aesthetic
sensibility, and they do not compel us. However, the implication of Rancière’s thought is that some art, by merely existing and being experienced, challenges our aesthetic regimes and our political order. It does imply that to change aesthetics is to change underlying notions of order and politics. This connection between aesthetics and politics is the logical extension, and rather explicit impact of Rancière’s theories.

Given that much of our aesthetic determination resides after the moment of experience, but before the moments of contemplation, one could argue that a serious implication of Rancière’s thought is that art primarily works on the level of form and experience. In other words, the subject matter of a piece of art is somewhat subordinate to the formal qualities of art, as well as to the way in which the art interacts with us in any given experience. To suggest that form is key is not much of a stretch because Rancière (2004, 14) himself argues such, specifically given his notion of the distribution of the sensible: “These forms define the way in which the works of art or performances are ‘involved in politics,’ whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists’ social modes of integration, or the manner in which the artistic forms reflect social structured or movements.” The form itself is essential to the artistic and aesthetic regime. It is the key to our understanding of the universe as a place that is seeable, with things—and people—who are seen and heard. This is the ultimate implication of aesthetics as a kind of Kantian category: the notion that art shapes our political and ethical universe simply by the nature of us experiencing said art.

Later in this manuscript I will discuss in much greater depth the implication of artistic form, and how it is the proper way of looking at art’s impact on the political universe. (Or, put another way, form is under-examined as a means of determining
art’s particular contribution to politics.) Additionally, I will also explore the procedure of rupture in aesthetic regimes. This exploration will grapple with the thought of Alain Badiou, and attempt to comingle his thought with Rancière’s. However, in the context of chapter, it is important to note that Rancière conceived of aesthetics as a kind of Kantian category, but one that is rooted in an artistic regime that is changeable. Yet, in this artistic regime, which shapes the aesthetic category, we see a kind of order that helps define both the aesthetic, and, eventually the political.
CHAPTER 3
MARTHA NUSSBAUM AND THE PROBLEM OF ART’S EFFECT ON POLITICS AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

Elvis inherited [the tensions of America], but more than that, gave them his own shape. It is often said that if Elvis had not come along to set off the changes in American music and American life that followed his triumph someone very much like him would have done the job as well. But there is no reason to think this is true, either in strictly musical terms, or in any broader cultural sense. – Greil Marcus (1990, 140-41)

Nussbaum on Art

Whereas in the previous chapter I explored the how aesthetics interacts with the conscious mind, and hence potentially with the political, in this chapter I discuss Martha Nussbaum’s (1992, 1995) aesthetic theories as established in Love’s Knowledge and Poetic Justice. Though Nussbaum is now often looked to as an expert on tolerance, the legal system, and cosmopolitanism, her earlier work dealt with art’s alleged beneficial impact on political decision-making. As the statement above suggests, Nussbaum holds art in high esteem, and believes it should inform public choices. Given this, Nussbaum adopts an essentially Aristotelian view of art: Art is a way to learn how various people might react, and it is especially useful for political action and/or deliberation in liberal-democratic societies. As this essay will suggest, I find this analysis lacking. The theory I develop is that Nussbaum does not pay enough attention to the role of form in art, especially when art connects with politics. Additionally, Nussbaum underplays the experiential and cognitive aspects of art. And finally, I argue that if we adopt Nussbaum’s approach our understanding of political thought, and hence politics itself, will be worse off.

Martha Nussbaum attempts to expand the landscape of ethical and political philosophy by opening up a space for literary thinking. In other words, moral and
political philosophers should be more responsive to the milieu of ethical reasoning that literature and art illuminates. Given this assertion, Nussbaum (1992, 1995), in Love’s Knowledge and Poetic Justice, analyzes texts from the context of philosophical inquiry. In fact, Nussbaum (1990) suggests that some truths can only be understood via narrative literature (5). Narrative itself allows us to understand the proper ethical implications of life’s decisions: it nurtures our moral sensibilities.

In Loves’ Knowledge and Poetic Justice, Nussbaum offered the first structured explanation of her theory of literature and how literature interacts in society. Nussbaum seems to make two claims about the political and social value of art: First, certain kinds of novels—especially realistic political dramas—offer us a way into a special type of political reasoning; and second, these realistic novels widen a native human aptitude that helps their readers be more empathetic citizens. Hence, to a certain extent, Nussbaum’s declarations about literature and society rely on the idea that reading trains in humans a kind of moral faculty. In other words, Nussbaum’s argues that to see implies an ability to feel compassion. This compassion must be nurtured and cultivated, and literature is the best way to do this. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that Nussbaum is enamored with the literary, and her most elementary claim is that some aspects of life can only be understood via the literary novel. These aspects of life revolve around the truths that roughly speak to the age-old question of how a human being should live. Nussbaum (1992, 23) is explicit: “My aim is to establish that certain literary texts … are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere.” These texts allow us to flex our muscles of compassion.

14 Other thinkers with less of reliance on the emphatic power than Nussbaum has have made similar arguments. I am thinking of people like Rorty or Laclau.
Nussbaum’s understanding of the role of art and literature in ethics is rooted in an Aristotelian approach to life and aesthetics. The basis of this approach is that meticulous and practical contexts are ethically important. The Aristotelian / Nussbaum approach to life requires a richly differentiated faculty of perception. It requires the kind of salience that can only be found in the appreciation of literature (1990, 37). It should be noted that Nussbaum’s stressing of the cognitive and emotional significance of the “particular,” and upon the concept of praxis, is the consequence of taking Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics as a starting-point. Additionally, Nussbaum takes Aristotle’s Poetics seriously as a source of information about his views on the meaning of life and the nature of happiness.15

To this writer, Nussbaum’s (1992) most basic assertion is that “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms of the characteristic of the narrative artist” (5). Such truths share generally with the larger query that directs her investigation of how we might best live, and especially live together. Nussbaum, in fact, claims that certain ethical decisions need the narrative so that justice may prevail (Ibid). In other words, for Nussbaum reading suitable novels develops compassion in the reader that is also indispensable for any sufficient moral appreciation. This ethical appreciation demands a vigilant awareness to the particulars of our existence as humans. This is clearly linked to the Aristotelian view of ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Thus this Aristotelian attitude requires an opulently distinguished sense of discernment. Despite some trends in philosophy, to Nussbaum and Aristotle, human emotions are not routinely discarded. In fact, on Nussbaum’s

15 A different view of Aristotle’s aesthetics and ethics could be drawn by focusing on his Metaphysics and De Anima, but that interpretation does not tend support Nussbaum’s argument.
(1992) account, human emotions form a “cognitive dimension in their very nature” (41). As stated above, Nussbaum’s stress on the cognitive implication of moral praxis is a consequence of using *Nicomachean Ethics* as a theoretical sounding board. She, like Aristotle, sees *habit* as changing the mind. Furthermore, Nussbaum takes Aristotle’s *Poetics* sincerely as an intellectual foundation regarding his views the ultimate nature of man’s “good life.”

Ethics form the basis of politics for Nussbaum, and hence art is politically functional in democracies. In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum is explicit: Understanding novels will augment the performance of what Nussbaum terms “economic science” by letting social scientists, politicians, judges, and economists craft superior models of reality. The advantages of this superior paradigm will eventually seep downward to the population via the democratic power-structure. (Later in the monograph, Nussbaum suggests that the populace can be better citizens by engaging in literature—by being more informed voters and/or jurors, etc.) On Nussbaum’s account, novelistic writing augments justice in democratic-liberalism. Such insights promote toleration and pluralism. As mentioned, one can see that Nussbaum associates considering an additional viewpoint as analogous to being empathetic about said viewpoint. In fact, Nussbaum (1995, 11) is mindful of basically one type of the novel: the “mainstream realist novel,” particularly those novels “with social and political themes.”

The contemporary fascination with the TV show *The Wire* is a good example of this type of aesthetic value. *The Wire* has been applauded by intellectual or quasi-intellectual publications such as *The Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, Slate*, and others. The key appeal of *The Wire* is that it examines the way American institutions—
specifically in Baltimore—shape various individuals. Each season of the show’s intricately plotted series-run deals with a separate issue: the drug war, unions, reform, education, and the media. The show explored what creator David Simon called the “other America,” the America that is not dealt with on television or in media in general. Of course, it is both true and shibboleth that *The Wire* is one of the five or ten best television dramas of all time. However, there is a kind of “take your medicine” aspect of watching *The Wire*. Whereas many of the characters are enjoyable, and the dialogue is often akin to street poetry, watching the most difficult episodes—mostly in the masterful season four, which concerns the Baltimore education system—is not an enjoyable experience. Simon wants to teach us how the “other” America lives. He wants us to learn. This is certainly a function of art, even great art. (Certainly both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Wire* are very good, possibly great, art.) This is also a function of art that would make Nussbaum proud. However, it is not the only function of art, and it is not the only way that the artistic realm affects the political.

**Taking Issue with Nussbaum’s Notion of Form and Content**

Nussbaum, depending on how one reads her, either pretends like form is irrelevant to the novel, or she privileges the form of the narrative novel.¹⁶ (Or as discussed somewhat below, she does lip-service to form.) For art to be useful in liberal-democracies, Nussbaum thinks that such art must tell a coherent and sympathetic story. Without said story, the notion of empathy and understanding is rendered moot. On Nussbaum’s account, one needs to understand—in almost explicit terms—the elements

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¹⁶ My ideas concerning Nussbaum’s work have been influenced by conversations with Leslie Thiele, Jennifer Forsee, and Stow (2008). Additionally, email exchanged between Stow and I have been very helpful.
of the narrative so that one can empathize with the characters. Art is rooted in narrative, and narrative teaches empathy.

Given this bias toward the novel, Nussbaum’s whole notion of artistic form—to the extent that she has one at all—is limiting. Nussbaum’s useful form is ultimately tied to a conventional narrative. Yet, content and form can be at odds. It is often this tension that makes art interesting. Derrida (1998, 37) made this point late in his life:

Let us take the example of two perfectly identical discourses, identical down to their comas: the one can be lying if it presents itself as a serious and non-fictitious address to the other, but the other (the same in its content) is no longer lying if it surrounds itself with the distinctive signs of literacy fiction, for example, by being published in a collection that clearly says: this is literature, the narrator is not the author, no one had committed himself here to telling the truth before the law, thus no one can be accused of lying.

Derrida strikes at the heat of the issue of form versus content, and his argument suggests why Nussbaum is wrong about form and how it related to the artistic experience. For Derrida, form is important even when the content is the same. This can be seen by imagining the same basic story told by two authors, John Updike and John Grisholm. Though, of course, taste is somewhat subjective, critical response and the empirical past suggests that Updike’s version of the story would have more resonance than Grisholm’s. (Though, of course, Grisholm may sell more copies of the novel.) And though I imagine that Updike might make more of an impact, it is most important—in the context of this paper—to note that the impact would almost certainly be different, and that difference would be tied to the form of the literature. This makes sense if, as Heidegger (1971, 28) suggests, form is the arrangement of matter. It is in this arrangement of matter that art takes shape, and it is in this shape that art communicates.
Even a neo-Marxist like Adorno, who thought that art was ultimately linked to truth and critiquing reason, argued that art cannot be reduced to its social function. Adorno (2005, 1-3) writes:

All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function—of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty—are doomed. Truth exists exclusively as that which has become. What appears in the artwork as its own lawfulness is the late product of a inter-technical evolution as well as art’s position within progressive secularization.

So, for Adorno, even a materialistic philosophical foundation does not allow for art to be reduced to its social function.\(^{17}\) Art is often a kind of intellectual universes in and of itself.\(^{18}\)

One would think of Nussbaum’s concept of art as analogous to cuisine. Using Nussbaum as a template, one could say that we are forced to eat the same kind of food over and over, only paying attention to its nutritional value. Yet, our enjoyment of food is not limited to its nutritional value, it is also—and some would primarily—linked to its form: how it tastes, smells, looks, and etc. Without taking the analogy too far, one could also see we eat for various reasons: sustenance, enjoyment, social connection, comfort, etc. Yet Nussbaum wants us to eat for only one reason, sustenance. She is limiting the form of art, and hence the way we interact with it, and therefore limits her ability to understand the ways that art—like the cuisine mentioned above—interacts with the entirely of life. Of course, the content of art—like food—is important, but so is the form. Or, one could say that, like Derrida implies, that form and content are intimately linked. To ignore or devalue form is to fail to understand how content works.

\(^{17}\) I do acknowledge that this might be a somewhat limiting interpretation of Adorno’s thought.

\(^{18}\) In Dewey’s work on aesthetics, he suggests that art can only be bound in experience. Yet he also adopts a strange—if interesting distinction between form and content. Nevertheless, Dewey links aesthetic form to visceral aesthetic experience.
How Nussbaum Does Not Understand Art as Experience: Red Rooms, Pips, and Other Strangeness

Nussbaum blends art into everyday living, but then is betrayed by her own notion of content. She limits art to a kind of “civics lesson.” This is not to suggest that people do not learn from reading novels, but there is an entire mode of inquiry about how this happens—which often depends on form—and Nussbaum does not tackle this issue. Therefore, to spotlight merely one facet of this subject, and, hence, to argue that people are being “richly responsible” to a state of affairs in a novel is not sufficient. On a simplistic level, such art does not ultimately necessitate people to be active. Humans may relate to the characters in a novel, but humans do it outside of the context of our own lives. Simply put, it is one thing to be empathetic with a character, it is another for that empathy to change ones attitude or, even, spur someone to action. Novels may make us reflect on our lives, or even change our attitudes, but novels—as qua novels—do not necessarily enlighten us.

Art should be, as Heidegger and Dewey suggest, a living experience. It should be connected to our lives. Nussbaum, on one hand, does recognize we must experience a novel. Yet Nussbaum wants the experience to be akin to some kind of lecture, or, maybe, an audio-book lecture about the moral turpitude of the poor and desolate. Dewey argues that philosophers often isolate art from experience. In fact, Dewey notes that aesthetic form—or the visceral aspect of aesthetic experience—has little or nothing to do with reason, empathy, or contemplation. The form, which for Dewey was most important, was what changed citizens. Art acted via form on our emotions, not reason and thoughts. (Dewey 1934, 123, 137) For Dewey, the art’s form allows us to
communicate—especially in the context of democracies—in a way that reason cannot.

We use art to express ourselves and our ideas.

As quoted previously, and in accordance with Dewey’s thought, Davide Panagia (2006, 5-6) refines the term aesthetics in a way that is helpful to this discussion:

By aesthetics, I refer to the tradition of reflection that turns to sense experience in order to pose the question of value: What is value and what are its modes of expression. … Despite appreciations of aesthetic theories of value, there is a tendency to subsume aesthetic insights for the greater purpose of moral reflection (5 – 6).

Panagia understands that an aesthetic theory like Nussbaum’s is one that is hardly a theory at all. It does not engage aesthetics as qua aesthetics. In fact, such theories often ignore the experiential, cognitive, and beautiful aspects of aesthetics, as well as give aesthetics a kind of ‘back-handed’ compliment due to its affect on politics.

Alan Singer (2003), in his book Aesthetic Reason: Artworks and the Deliberative Ethos, labels a position like Nussbaum’s an “anti-aesthetic” position. Additionally, Singer (2003, 10-11) examines the cognitive efficacy of aesthetics:

The anti-aesthetic thus fails to take an analytical stance that might actually produce ameliorative and artistic change. Alternatively, my position will be that such productivity falls within the cognitive precincts of the aesthetic itself. Precisely because the partisans of the anti-aesthetic preclude formal particulars in favor of the factual particulars of lived experience, they cut us off from the productive agency without which the very appearance of factual particulars is unintelligible. They invite us to forget that facts are intelligible only in the context of conceptual choices.

Again, as Singer points out, thinkers like Nussbaum ignore the experiential value of aesthetics and reduce said value simply to a utilitarian cause. Yet the value of aesthetics is linked to, as both Dewey and Singer indicate, sense experience. (Ibid, 71)

As suggested by my analogy regarding the “same” story written by John Updike and John Grisholm, I would argue that form is crucial—if not essential—to art, both
aesthetically and politically. This is not to say that there is no relation between subject matter and quality; there often is. In fact, as both Collingwood (1929) and Nussbaum state, art is often the best when form and content mix in a perfect way (340). An artist who can only work well when stimulated by an odd type of topic is very limited in his approach. Such an artist is not a virtuoso of his ability, but such an artist may be one who is “liberated” from that requirement. Not all artists need skill and mastery. The artist may be freed from his art, and one might not need to worry about the presence or non-presence of a rousing subject matter that creates certain kind of content. If that is so, the essential dominance of the traditional artist evaporates. This is all to say, that form, in all its excitement and vividness, is key to the resonance of art.

In this sense, impressive art receives such procedural and communicative faultlessness that, no matter what it “says,” it says it with accomplishment. Hence, whichever performer that makes a work of art at all is a type of majestic artist. Art is, on some level, the manifestation of the creator’s formal talents. These talents cannot be conjured simply on a desire to “educate” the people who experience the art. In fact, it is a reasonably straightforward emotion to be awed by something and/or to sense that you have something imperative to illuminate via art. It is much, much, more challenging to determine the paramount and most feasible way to communicate this idea, and therefore formulate the art in a way that is lucid, interesting, and entertaining. This so difficult because you often have to make your content prostrate to your form. Additionally, and most importantly, you must stop being enamored with the “significance” and “consequence” of your message, and ultimately an artist must concentrate on the array and combination of the sense-experience creation.
In fact, Hannah Arendt makes the intelligent point that to the extent art is instrumental—to say education—it loses its value as art. Arendt (1958, 168) writes: “Moreover, the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not “using” it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world.” To a certain extent, the key to art is the fact that it is there at all.

In fact, Nussbaum herself subtly acknowledges this by admitting that the standard “philosophical plot” is not effective. Yet, if she is attune those types of forms—the forms of the philosophical polemic—why is she blind to the way she limits and attacks form herself? Nussbaum’s misguided attack on Beckett, a writer who has had serious intellectual, societal, and political impact betrays how vanilla Nussbaum is when it comes to aesthetic form.

One could ask how I can criticize Nussbaum’s notion of narrative while relying so heavily throughout this manuscript on the thought of Hannah Arendt. It is true that Arendt also celebrates narrative, going as far as to argue that it is through narrative that life itself offers us meaning. However, as discussed slightly differently in chapter five, the distinction between Nussbaum and Arendt rests in the idea of the author. Nussbaum rests her analysis on notion of a sovereign author. This author then influences the people who experience her art: There is a one-to-one movement of ideas from author to recipient. In this sense, narrative offers simply another mode of expression of certain ideas from one individual to another.

Arendt has a slightly different notion of narrative. For Arendt, the “author” of our narratives is not clearly delineated; there is no clear author in the way that Nussbaum
likes to imagine. This is partly because Nussbaum is discussing narratives as crafted in the notion of art, and how that art helps us in democratic societies. Yet Arendt is discussing narrative from the perspective of being connected to meaning in life. The Arendtian author, to the extent that such a thing exists, is jointly created by the individual and collectively acting to create the narrative. It is true that we act individually, but the meaning is determined by the ability to act in concert in the public sphere. And though Arendt acknowledges that the historian—as a storyteller—creates meaning, she also states that the individual actors have very little ability to understand the actions while they are acting. In contrast, Nussbaum’s notion of narrative is linked to ideas of individual sovereignty. In this sense, Nussbaum limits her notion of narrative in the same way she limits her notion of aesthetic form.

A casual look at the work of filmmaker David Lynch exposes how much form contributes to meaning, political and social. On his groundbreaking show Twin Peaks, Lynch used a deliberate off-kilter form of filmmaking, especially for network television—and especially before pioneering shows like X-Files, Northern Exposure, Lost, 24, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer shook the foundation of network TV. For neophytes, Twin

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19 Consult chapter five for more about Arendt on this issue.

20 There is a lot of excellent work on Lynch’s art. I am particularly informed by Nochimson (1992-1993) and McGowan (2000, 2004).

21 By “network TV, I mean the non-cable stations of ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and CW (formerly WB and UPN). I realize that this distinction means a bit less now given the rise of quality original programming on cable networks like HBO and Showtime—The Wire, Deadwood, Six Feet Under, Dexter, The Sopranos, Treme, Big Love, and others—as well as excellent shows in semi-cable networks like FX, ScyFi, AMC, or Bravo. These semi-cable shows include such critical darlings as Breaking Bad, Battlestar Galactica, The Shield, Sons of Anarchy, as well as the show that has taken the mantle from The Wire as the most respected show on television: Mad Men. I do not think it is a stretch to argue that none of these shows, especially the network shows, would be possible without Lynch’s Twin Peaks. JJ Abrams and Damon Lindeloff, the creators of Lost—possible the most formally adventurous show ever on network TV—basically said their show was a mix of Twin Peaks, The Prisoner, and The Twilight Zone.
Peaks was a show broadcast in the early 1990s, and co-created by auteur—and known weirdo—David Lynch. The show was ostensibly about the violent and mysterious murder of the homecoming queen in the small town of Twin Peaks. However, Lynch, being Lynch, used the show to dissect the ugly insides of small-town America. He did this via obvious matters of plot/content: For example, the victim, Laura Palmer, seemed to be an all-American girl, but she was also a prostituting cocaine-addict. Lynch also used the clash between the non-logical and the logical to express this tension. FBI agent Dale Cooper—who had jurisdiction because a victim wandered across state lines—has a Sherlock Holmes nature to him. Yet, he also believes in the “deductive” power of Tibetan rituals, evil spirits, and the prognostication of dreams.

In addition to Cooper representing a kind of duality, the whole show played with those ideas. Lynch, being a very visual filmmaker, explicitly used the form of the series to explore his themes. The hues, the set design, the sophisticated catchword rudiments in the show, as well as the unusual narrative surface of “Twin Peaks” incriminate the onlooker in slightly obscene views of “the possible” and “the impossible.” The more conformist exploits of the calculating camera is trapped by unfixed visual peculiarity. Lynch shaped a gaze for “Twin Peaks” in which the ideas of within and exterior are often mixed. An immense employment of timber—chopped or not—offers an exterior sentiment to the obvious internal settings. The internal settings proliferate with stuffed animals, as well strange pictures of the forest regularly photographed like artificial backdrops for interior scenes.

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22 Twin Peaks is, of course, about Laura Palmer’s murder in the same way that Lost is about a plane crash or The Wire is about a drug investigation. In other words, it is “about” those things only on first blush.

23 I realize this is an oxymoron, but is one that fits.
The beginning tableau of “Twin Peaks,” created especially by David Lynch, sets the viewers up for mutually visual methods. Its visual segments soften in the midst of jagged images and clashes with the tensions of the leisurely, sorrowful, but rather dreamy theme the music suggests. According to Lynch, an inscrutable interpenetration of contradictory thoughts such as pretty robins and tumbling waterfalls melt into the objet d'art of a mechanized logging business that discharges chunky pollution and produces blonde flickers with its mechanism. The show is implicit in its ability to generate a type of cultural stew. The series’ suggestion of the amalgamation of once distinct units until said units mingle with each other is seen repeatedly. These images, which, via form, imply the tension between reason and emotion in deciding legal and ethical outcomes would not fit within the formal discussion of Nussbaum. To her, the show would be about the ethical issues concerning a murder investigation. Yet, as the form of the show suggests, that is exactly what the show is not about.

Another example of form conveying meaning over “content” is seen in the “red room” passages of Twin Peaks. The extended passageway of the “red room” is entirely supplementary to a mannish huntsman, inspiring a positivistic requirement of the definitive power of physicality, which as Lynch shoots it seems, strangely, feminine. In comparison, in Twin Peaks, the occurrence of an alternate handling of this attempt deteriorates both its customary sex insinuations and its habitual classification of the association amid the standard detective tropes. And, of course, these sex insinuations connect the body to the deduction. Often a motionless camera might look down a lengthy passageway whilst shapes emerging from far away may come en route for us—the viewer. When Cooper and “John-Q-American” sheriff, named humorously Harry S.
Truman, congregate for the initial time they are minuscule figures shaking hands at the conclusion of an extremely lengthy infirmary hallway. As the two law-man move in the direction of the onlooker, the lengthy hallway is not claustrophobic anymore but somewhat liberating. Yet instead of a place from where benevolent effects materialize, the hallway intimated the political threat of “friendly” authority figures. In fact, the outward affability of the hallway is piece of a text in which the idyllic topic location is Cooper’s below-discussed “Tibetan Deductive Method.”

The use of form in Twin Peaks is a deliberate commentary on the dialectic of desire and fantasy, of the possible and the impossible, the deductive and the intuitive. It is a discussion that does not work on the basic level of content. This is seen clearly in Cooper’s heuristic dreams. In fact, Detective Dale Cooper’s strange dream at the conclusion of the third episode—a crowning achievement of what is even artistically possible on network episodic television—implies that one must wrestle with the inscrutability, and, hence, the gum-shoe must shift amid “maleness” and “femaleness” in a such way that subverts the entire Freudian cliché of Oedipal castration dread. Detective Cooper’s nocturnal vision renders the FBI agent in a “place between two worlds”: The afore-mentioned “Red Room.” It is a huge enclosed space bounded on all sides by flowing scarlet drapery. Aside from the red drapes, the room contains

24 This third episode of Twin Peaks is often listed with West Wing’s “Two Cathedrals” and “Noel,” Buffy’s “Hush” and “The Body,” The X-Files’ “Jose Chung From Outer Space,” and Lost’s “Walkabout” and “The Constant” as one of the best ever episode of network television drama. It often rivals non-network TV such as The Sopranos “College” or Battlestar’s “33.” It is a masterpiece of television filmmaking.

25 The show’s term for it.

26 The Red Room’s vaginal imagery is pretty obvious. I also find it humorous when Joss Whedon did a similar “red curtain” set-up for his excellent episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer called “Revelations,” Whedon did not even remember that he stole it from “Twin Peaks”—a show he liked—but he was explicit in the DVD commentary about the vaginal imagery.
merely a trio of a dark quasi-art-deco chair, an archaic torch lantern, and a Grecian marble sculpture of a nude female shape. The floor of the red room tilted in a pattern that reminds one of Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” music video or a warped picture by M.C. Escher. In Cooper’s dream, a strange-looking, and obviously aging, Cooper is sitting in a geriatric chair. Another chair is taken by a little man wearing an ill-fitting a red ensemble. Within a blink of the eye, or a flash of the camera, another chair is quickly crammed by Laura Palmer, “Twin Peaks” murder victim and human McGuffen. In an eerie moment, the little man in red and Laura converse as though their voices are placed through some archaic filter invented by Thomas Edison in the early twentieth-century. Laura is clad bizarrely in an evening dress much like a custom Lorna Turner would wear in an old Hollywood studio film. As Laura and the little man speak, their gesticulations are inscrutable. This inscrutability is principally accurate regarding the little man in red, who ripples as he talks: His “speaking” is a body idiom with at least as much connotations laden as in his strange discourse, and just as complex a process to decode.

Dale Cooper seems conscientious throughout the dream; he in no way rises to stand, and he scarcely talks. Cooper observes the well-dressed little man boogie to a recurring, cadenced music with a hip jazz/blues tuneful line played on an alto saxophone. Clearly, Cooper is enthralled by the little man, despite there being a lack of logic to his existence and his actions. The little man starts bopping, rasping hands, or merely turning his back to Dale Cooper and trembling.  This is really a spooky effect. Similarly, Cooper’s sight is

\[\text{27 This is really a spooky effect.}\]
besieged by (should be dead) Laura Palmer, who is hardly comprehensible because of some clever sound management by the creators.

In a sense, the Red Room is pure experience, pure form. In true Lynchian fashion, the Red Room is a set-piece where all that has been clichéd of onscreen murder mysteries is upturned. Pushing on this theme, Cooper’s position of unearthing bears a resemblance to the location of a murder or felony in run-of-the-mill detective yarns. In a normal murder mystery, the site of the crime is—like the Red Room—a location where no deed can be branded in terms of a practical or rational purpose. Contrasting more generic filmic detectives, however, Cooper learns more from body than from his rational mind. Like a So-Ho poetry reading, rational lingo and deeds scarcely subsist in the Red Room. In contrast, in Lynch’s Red Room the body speaks, and the body breaks. In a brilliant stroke, Laura (McGuffin) Palmer, who is nothing but an inert body in the waking rational world of Twin Peaks, actually has the answer to her own murder and is willing to tell Detective Cooper in his dream/Red Room. Dissimilar to the standard femme fatale, Laura is neither sexualized and objectified, but neither is she desexualized or sex-less. Dead, aging Laura Palmer of the Red Room is actually a subject with a will; she is granted a will somewhat by the semi-evil Red Room. There is delight when Cooper gains information through integration with Laura Palmer, in some bizarre Vulcan-mind-meld. Laura even informs Cooper the name of her killer while kissing the concerned-looking FBI detective. However, the longing fulfilled in the kiss is a mix of Cooper’s craving to comprehend and commune. Luckily, Laura is not objectified; she is not Cooper’s obstruction. Through form, and nearly form alone,
Lynch deconstructs the boundaries of desire and fantasy, as well as masculine and feminine.  

I explore the work of David Lynch above not to try to suggest that Lynch—though a great talent—relies on formal qualities to only convey meaning, or that such conveyance is unique. Certainly, almost by definition, good artists tend to master form. However, this in is not unique to visual mediums. In fact, this reliance also reaches to several other aspects of art. The early Sun Records recordings by Elvis Presley are great examples. Sun Records owner Sam Phillips kept detailed accounts of all his proceedings, and at this point almost every note of every take has been released for Elvis fans to study and enjoy. Though people often point to “That’s All Right” and/or “Mystery Train” as the pinnacle of Elvis’s Sun period—and “Mystery Train” is a stunning record—I am fascinated by the various takes on “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” It is in these takes that the formal qualities of music really shine, and that formal quality reveals its political implications. The first few takes have Elvis singing it in a sad country voice, something like Hank Williams or Jimmie Rodgers might sing. Yet on a later take something takes hold of Elvis and his band, and at that moment “Blue Moon” takes on the quality of race music, of a county song sung by a white southerner who wanted to sound black. In other words, rock ‘n’ roll was born. And, if Greil Marcus is correct, and Elvis and Jackie Robinson had as much to do with the end of Jim Crow as Rosa Parks and Brown vs. Board of Education, then I hear the first nail in the coffin of Jim Crow in

David Lynch plays similar formal games in his often misunderstood film Lost Highway. Yet some view Lost Highway as a purely formal exercise. Todd McGowan writes: “On a first viewing, it is tempting to chalk up these difficulties to the obscurantist proclivities of the film’s director and to conclude that the narrative is unconventional just for the sake of being unconventional or that the point is simply that there is no point. If that is the case, then Lost Highway hardly sees worth the 135 minutes that a viewing requires, let alone any effort to make sense of it. (2000, 51).” Yet McGowan notes that Lost Highway does seem to find its meaning into “unconventional” structure.
the sound of “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” However, the song itself had not changed. But the style, the form, was radically different. Years of slavery, Jim Crow, white poverty, crooked preachers, and southern comfort are all in that performance of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” and to hear it is to hear the excitement and frustration of change. And, of course, in this particular case, the change is explicitly political, even if the content of the music is not.

To my ears the great musical integration moment occurs in “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” but famed music critic Griel Marcus—in what is possibly the best book about rock music and America, Mystery Train—argues, more conventionally, that the magical transformation occurs in “That’s Alright Mama.” I quote Marcus (1990, 142) in length due to its perception:

[During the Elvis’ first recording sessions the] four men cool it for a moment, frustrated. They share a feeling they could pull something off if the hit it right, but it’s been a while, and that feeling is slipping away, as it always does. They talk music, blues, Crudup [a blues musician], ever hear that, who you kiddin’ man, dig this. The kid [Elvis] pulls his guitar up, clowns a bit. He throws himself at a song. That’s all right mama, that all right… eat shit. He doesn’t say that, naturally, but that’s what he found in the tune; his voice slides over the lines as the two musicians come in behind him, Scott picking up the melody and the bassman slapping away at the axe. [Recording engineer and owner of the then-struggling Sun Records] Phillips hears it, likes it, and makes up his mind.

All right, you got something. Do it again, I’ll get it down. Just like that, don’t mess it up. Keep it simple.

They cut the song fast, put down the instruments, vaguely embarrassed at how far they went into the music. Sam [Phillips] plays back the tape. Man they’ll run us outta town when they hear it, Scotty says; Elvis sings along with himself, joshing his performance. They all wonder, but not too much.

Get on home, now, Sam says. I gotta figure out what to do with this. They leave, but Sam Phillips is perplexed. Who is gonna play this crazy record? White jocks won’t touch it course it is [negro] music and the colored will pass cause it’s hillbilly. It sounds good, but maybe it’s just … too weird. The hell with it.
Yet, Marcus (1990) takes the analysis even farther, linking to desegregation and secularization. The following quotation elaborates on the statement with which I began this chapter:

Elvis inherited [the tensions of America], but more than that, gave them his own shape. It is often said that if Elvis had not come along to set off the changes in American music and American life that followed his triumph someone very much like him would have done the job as well. But there is no reason to think this is true, either in strictly musical terms, or in any broader cultural sense. It is vital to remember that Elvis was the first young southern white to sing rock ‘n’ roll, something he copied from no one but made up on the spot; and to know that even though other singer would come up with a white version of the new back music acceptable to teenage America, of all who did emerge in Elvis’s wake, none sang as powerfully, or more than a touch of his magic…. This is emotionally complex music that can return something new each time you listen to it. What I hear, most of the time, is the affection and respect Elvis felt for the limits and conventions of family life, of his community, and ultimately American life, captured in his country sides, and his refusal of those limits, of any limits, played out in his blues (Marcus 1990, 140, 146-17).

To the extent that Elvis Presley changed America politically and socially—and I doubt that is in dispute, even among “vulgar” Marxists clinging to a base/superstructure distinction—then that change came almost entirely from the form of his music. The content, to the extent that the content was not wrapped in form, was irrelevant. I doubt there are ten fiction books that have had the effect on twentieth-century America that Elvis has, and that effect was nearly the result of formal variations in art.

In fact, pop music—despite the stereotypes—has a long history of very complex forms. Soul music, in particular has an interesting form of dialectic in its vocals. Social critic Chuck Eddy (1997) calls this “The Gladys Knights and the Pips Rule.” Eddy explains:

Rock ‘n’ roll works best when it seems both good for you and bad for you, nutritious and innutritious, at the same time. … The reason I call it the Gladys Knight and the Pips Rule is because in “Midnight Train to Georgia,”
which everybody I’ve ever met acknowledges as a great record, the frivolousness of the Pips doing their train-whistle ooo-woos is what keeps “Gladys’s soul singing down-to-earth. Without the Pips, Gladys would be merely “intense”—not catchy enough, therefore boring, and therefor not intense at all, really. Calling music “intense” or “emotional” or “soulful” is usually a euphemism for “it seems like something I am supposed to like.” It is fairly obvious that the Pips alone would be an ignorable proposition; my point is that Gladys alone would be just as ignorable.” (173)

The point Eddy is making above is similar to my whole argument against Nussbaum’s notion of aesthetics. The form is not irrelevant, and a form tied to “being good for you” does not necessarily have the greatest political impact. One needs the interaction of form and content to experience the full implication of art. Of course, to fully appreciate this, one cannot exclude form, or, as Nussbaum is want to do, limit form to one type of artistic endeavor.

Implications of Form Reconsidered

One of the ironies that Nussbaum ignores her own conclusions by suggesting we learn in an Aristotelian sense from art. Hence, in this version of Nussbaum’s argument content is the key. Yet, this conclusion is contrary to the some Nussbaum’s claims early in Love’s Knowledge that the problem with Anglo-American philosophy is that its style is boring and not compelling. Given the current state of philosophy of aesthetics, the philosophical basics of Nussbaum’s venture are imprecise. In fact, it is often complicated to establish what Nussbaum is protecting. She sometimes seems to argue that analytic styles do not do justice to ethical authenticity. This seems like a strange statement for Nussbaum to make. What appears to be accurate is that a technique which has elements of calculated aridness is not probable to articulate human experience. Perchance such a style cannot create the germane feelings. It may be true

29 In fact, I would personally put in the top 10 or 20 pop/rock/soul singles of all time.
that emotions must be felt to be truly known; if so, we would have the implication that one cannot attain facts of very many ideas from so-called analytic philosophy. In fact, Nussbaum may be comfortable with this notion, since on other junctures she says that traditional philosophy does a bad job at empathy, and hence justice.

Yet, if it is the style of Anglo-American philosophy that makes it difficult for us to learn empathy, then why does she want to narrow the aesthetic styles to issue-oriented narrative novels. It is as is Nussbaum wants to let art into the “political” analysis, but only one type of art. Again, this seems to a case where Nussbaum simply contradicts herself. Or, like mentioned above, maybe she is afraid of the vast pluralism where other types of aesthetic expression are considered in the valuing of justice, politics, and collective living.

Though some elements of this chapter are a theoretical attack on Nussbaum’s view of art that I think is wrong and antiquated, I think this discussion has some impact on how political theorists evaluate texts. For example, I think political theorists could do a better job of engaging in the style other theorists. With the exception of some studies of Nietzsche, this aspect of theory is often lacking, if not explicitly slighted. For example, in Jodi Dean’s (2006) excellent book Zizek’s Politics, Dean makes a comment that I find troubling. First she acknowledges that Zizek is sometime ignored do to his style (and content):

To my mind, it is because [Zizek’s] enthusiasm for popular culture seems to be antagonistic with serious thought. His enjoyment of mainstream movies, his delight in shocking audiences with ethnic and sexual jokes, suggest to many an excess incompatible with rigorous, systemic thought. (Dean 2006, xv).

Though Dean bemoans such misinterpretation of Zizek, she instead tries to rearrange his style—his form—to fit traditional theory. Dean (Ibid, xiv) writes that
“accordingly, this book presents Zizek’s specific, systemic, approach to political theory.”

This is somewhat disturbing to me because Zizek seems to be a writer who relishes his form, and Dean is a thinker who appreciates such form. Hence, it is somewhat sad that his thoughts must be “systematized” to be taken more seriously. Consider these two passages from Zizek’s (1999) *The Ticklish Subject*. First: “At the level of speech itself, a gap forever separates what one is tempted to call proto-speech of “speech-in-itself,” explicit symbolic registration.” (Ibid, 55) Next, more explicitly:

To get an approximate idea of this dialectical vortex, let us recall the classic opposition of the two mutually exclusive notions of light: light as composed of particles and light as consisting of waves—the ‘solution’ quantum physics (light is both at the same time) transposes the opposition into the “thing itself,” with the necessary result that objective reality itself loses its full ontological status—that it turns into something that is ontologically incomplete, composed of entities whose status is ultimately virtual. Or think of the way the universe we reconstruct in our minds while reading a nice is full of ‘holes’, not fully constituted: when Conan Doyle describes Sherlock Holmes’s flat, it is meaningless to ask exactly how many books there where on shelves—the writer simply did not have a precise idea of it in his mind. What, however, if—on the level of symbolic meaning at least—the same goes for reality itself? (56).

Zizek acknowledges that there is a gap between the symbolic order and the way we see the world, a gap that he links to Lacan. Of course, Zizek himself writes in way that helps to represent this symbolic tension. Whether it is strange references to popular culture like Hitchcock or Lynch, or his fragmented paragraph structures, Zizek relishes in the twisted interaction of form and content. His form is always an attempt to get at the “speech-in-itself,” but an attempt that self-consciously fails. However, any attempt to force the elaborate symbolic nature of Zizek’s writing into a rigorous systemic argument is to somewhat basterdize the lovely complexity of Zizek’s writing. This is not to say that a project like Dean’s, or the other attempts by thinkers to systematize a somewhat disorganized a writer like Zizek is useless. In fact, it can be crucial. However,
like the problem with Nussbaum’s notion of art as a singular limiting form, the attempt to reduce a thinker like Zizek to logical arguments diminishes the possibility of meaning in our intellectual capacities. Like the film noir of which Zizek is so fond, one cannot separate the form from the meaning in Zizek’s work.30

As a conclusion, I suggest that theorists should make a specific aim to engage in the form of a work of art and philosophy. And I am not just writing about monographs. I can imagine lots of creative endeavors—think of the radical impact of the editing of Bonnie and Clyde and The Wild Bunch—that would examine political theory on a formal level. There is some tradition of this in work that intersects with political theory. C. Right Mills (1944) discussed the formal qualities of abstract expressionism and the political implications of such form. Additionally, David Craven (1990) discussed similar ideas from a much less explicitly leftist perspective.31 However, the Nussbaum approach is prevalent.32 This approach even permeates the analysis of art and politics, and hence it destroys the notion of the aesthetic as it intersects with politics. However, as indicated above, such a discussion could open up all kinds of avenues of for academic scholarship and perceptive scholarly work, as well as allow for aesthetics to intersect with political thought in a more receptive and perceptive way.

30 For a good discussion of the formal aspects of film noir and how it is linked to meaning, see Broe (2003).

31 For good general discussions of these issues see Jachee (1991). Additionally, for a decent examination of Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionism and how its form has political implications, see Rampley (1996).

32 See Smith (1994) for a good example of the most reductive version of this analysis.
As mentioned in the previous chapter discussing Martha Nussbaum’s theory of art, in his work the *Poetics* Aristotle famously explained the role of art as one of both teaching and catharsis. Aristotle’s investigation of art in *The Poetics* is an element of his larger concentration on the ethical, or moral, schooling of the citizen. Normally considered as a rebuke to Plato’s omission of the poets from the model city imagined in the *Republic*, Aristotle attempts to maintain poetry by asserting the poet’s function in the continuing moral instruction of the individual. Though I think that Aristotle’s view of art is an inaccurate and limiting philosophy of aesthetics, my concern here is not strictly with criticizing Aristotle’s philosophy of art. Instead, I am more troubled by the standards by which so-called “educational” art is judged, especially in the context of art’s political and social impact. I am disturbed at the notion that art is being reduced to its utilitarian value. Nevertheless, it is more important to determine the underlying basis of aesthetic values. To be precise, I am apprehensive regarding the hazard posed to our societal and political existence by the quasi-fundamental aesthetic values of Western culture. Given a Platonic shift in our epistemological outlook—whether based on religion, reason, logic, or science—the current aesthetic climate values “truth” and “authenticity,” regardless of the quality of the art or the aesthetic experience. In other words, there is a kind of aesthetic “affirmative action” at work here, whereas art that is “true” and reveals some little-known suffering gets metaphorical “bonus points”
regarding its aesthetic value. As I indicated above, in this world of “aesthetic affirmative action,” art seems to have even more value if the “authentic truth” described in such is linked to actual suffering. This type of art can be in the form of autobiographical memoirs like the below-discussed work by James Frey (2005), in documentaries like *Born into Brothels*, or in narrative films based on a “true story” such as *Hotel Rwanda*. Contrary to those who value art for its ability to reveal hidden aspects of truth, I argue that such a view of art is actually similar to Wendy Brown’s notion of “wounded attachments,” wherein political identity or political worth creates an unhealthy perception of the political subject. However, I apply Brown’s argument to the interaction between art and politics. During this discussion I use Philip Roth’s excellent American novel *American Pastoral* to contrast what I call “wounded aesthetics” with other possible views of the interaction between aesthetics and politics. Specifically, Roth’s work shows how the form of art can impact the political implications of an aesthetic experience, especially when the categories of “form” and “content” are blurred and confused. Ultimately, I argue—with the help of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Derrida—that Wendy Brown’s argument can be applied with resonance to aesthetics and its impact on politics. Additionally, such an analysis suggests a superior approach in dealing with aesthetics and politics, an approach based on the celebration of life and the appearances of beauty.

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1 This use of affirmative action is simply a metaphor. I do not mean to make any claims regarding affirmative action as a policy in the context of any discriminated sub-group. I am, in fact, generally in favor of affirmative action policies, but such a position has no influence on the theoretical aspects of this paper.

2 This term is from her aptly titled, and quite brilliant, book *States of Injury.*
The appearance of beauty was probably the last thing on Oprah Winfrey’s mind when she was interviewing author James Frey. In fact, Winfrey was irate at Frey’s lack of suffering. As part of her hugely successful “television book-club\(^3\),” Oprah endorsed Frey’s “memoir” *A Million Little Pieces*, and millions of people bought and read Frey’s grisly tale of drug addiction. The book was supposedly based on Frey’s own life, and it detailed the astonishing destruction his dysfunctions and drug-addiction had on himself and anyone close to him. Among the many tales of woe in Frey’s book include his friendship with a mafia boss, having to endure root-canals without pain-killers, and the death of his companion “Lilly.” By most accounts, the book was a decent—if a bit simplistic—read, and it served a cautionary tale about drug abuse.

Frey’s text might be entertaining, but, as an auto-biography, *A Million Little Pieces* is pure bunk, complete humbug. Within a year after Frey’s book was picked for Winfrey’s book club, some researchers began to doubt its “facts.” For example, Frey spent only a few hours in jail, not eighty-seven days (as was claimed in the book). As the evidence began to pour out, eventually Frey and his publisher, Random House, apologized for “misleading” his readers by attaching a “note” to the beginning of all future copies of the book. The note stated, among other things, the following:

> People cope with adversity in many different ways, ways that are deeply personal. [...] My mistake [...] is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience.

Frey even agreed to a confrontation with Oprah Winfrey. Initially, Winfrey had supported Frey; she even called into the television show *Larry King Live* when King was

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\(^3\) Winfrey’s book-club is a strange creation. Its book selections have range from non-fiction by Sydney Poitier and Bill Cosby to respected novels by Elie Wiesel, Gabriel García Márquez, and Cormac McCarthy.
grilling⁴ Frey about his work. Eventually Winfrey did a turn-around on *A Million Little Pieces*, and she was visibly angry when Frey and his editor appeared on Winfrey’s show subsequent to Frey admitting that the book was malarkey. Winfrey expressed this anger to Frey, as well as regret about vouching for Frey to Larry King. Winfrey stated:

> I feel duped. But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers. … It's difficult for me to talk to you, because I really feel duped… [And] I regret that phone call [to Larry King's show in support of Frey]. I made a mistake and I left the impression that the truth does not matter, and I am deeply sorry about that. That is not what I believe. To everyone who has challenged me on this issue of truth, you are absolutely right (Memmott, 2006.)

Frey admitted—feebly—that he misled people, and he then blamed his drug-addiction for his mistakes. That being said, it was amazing the extant that Frey’s authenticity was crucial to readers’ enjoyment of the book. The outcry on Winfrey’s show was evident, and some of the viewers visibly seemed hurt by Frey’s extended use of literary license.

Though Oprah’s pain—and her viewer’s pain—seemed real via the prism of Winfrey’s television show, it is difficult to determine the exact nature of Winfrey’s complaint. Did the experience of reading the book change because of the later-known facts about the author? Do we read “true” books differently than fiction books? Most books that are judged via aesthetic principles—generally novels—are not “true,” yet we have certain expectations of “memoirs.”

It is possible to see Oprah’s outrage as an extension of two requirements for art: authenticity and suffering. In contrast, I argue that these criteria for art represent an

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⁴ King was “grilling” Frey in as intense style as he ever does. That is to say, King was mildly pushy.
improper version of aesthetics. Authenticity becomes a kind of test for the value of art, regardless of the judgments of the aesthetic quality of the art intrinsically. This view of art disguises a kind of continuous wound, a wound being scratched abrasively by an audience suffering vicariously.\(^5\) Like Wendy Brown’s view of “wounded attachments,” art that seems “authentic” creates a self-perpetuating category of identity that is rigid and static. This view of art is, I argue, neither accurate nor normatively proper. That being said, I do not argue that art is pointless from a societal perspective; in contrast, art is at its most successful—aesthetically and politically—when it is a celebration of experience, life, and eternal becoming.

This notion of “authentic suffering” as a standard for aesthetics is expressed by the Adorno’s philosophy of art. On Adorno’s account, art is a fortunate communal space for analysis as it single-handedly suffers segregation from reason or utility. This is a kind of suffering based on pure uselessness, which for Adorno is a key. Art must express suffering, and not have an instrumental value beyond that expression. Any endeavor to alleviate that suffering, for instance by keeping art aesthetic or hastily allowing art to become conscious of its desire to be “non-art,” silences the issue of non-identity and, subsequently, the matter of “truth.” On Adorno’s account, art is justly dreadful and detestable because it contains an ironic flash when the human anguish and desolation establishes its cognitive resonance in the margins of “authentic” art. Adorno (2005, 369) notes: “Surely it would be better for art to vanish altogether than to forget suffering, which is art’s expression and which gives it substance to its form. Suffering, not

\(^5\) It is possible to have a happy and authentic piece of art. However, it appears that pathos is generated from suffering more than from reports of happiness. This is seen in the fact that tragedies are some of the oldest forms of narrative story-telling, and in the fact that comedies—while appreciated—never seem to be taken as seriously as drama or tragedy. It is possible that Wendy Brown’s argument applies here as well: it is easy to create an identity—or a value—from shared suffering.
positivity, is the humane content of art.” In other words, for Adorno art revolves around the issues of suffering and truth. In fact, Adorno seeks to elevate the query of genuineness since the other matter, suffering, if often too hard to handle. Yet it is this suffering that, on Adorno’s account, is shaped into the work of art. For Adorno, art symbolizes the requirement to provide a voice to suffering under the seal of truth.

**Wendy Brown and Her Wounded Attachments**

A certain kind of authentic suffering is also a key aspect of Wendy Brown’s critique of identity in liberal societies. In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown argues that left-wing identity politics is often based around a kind of Nietzschean *ressentiment* that uses relative weakness to assume a type of moral and/or ethical supremacy. In one of the most perceptive chapters in the book, Brown uses the expression “wounded attachments” to explain a politics that allows for suffering simply to establish an advantaged perspective, as well as a group identity. Brown’s so-described “wounded attachments” achieve lucidity by politicizing segregation outside an “imagined” universal; the “victims” or the “marginalized” are therefore replicating instead of resisting their own segregation from the political regime. On Brown’s (1995, 61) account, “without recourse to the white masculine middle-class ideal, politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion.”

It is in these identities, what Brown calls “social categories,” that domination is regulated and controlled. As liberal-democracy continues to base rights on such categories—on the identity of the wounded—then “rights” will always be a kind of subordinate category. Brown ties this notion to an idea that sub-groups have of “images of freedom” (Ibid, 7). Yet in these images of freedom, and in what Nietzsche terms the freedom instinct, exists a yearning for domination. For, on Brown’s account, as groups
seek to emphasize social categories, such groups also emphasize their submissive state. Brown writes that “such images of freedom perform mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the organization of the activity through which he suffering is produced and without addressing the subject constitution that domination effects, that is, the constitution of social categories.” (Ibid, 7; emphasis in the original). As long as social categories exist, then domination can—and likely will—occur.⁶

Brown is not attempting to negate all aspects of empowerment, or even “identity” politics. Yet she wants people to be aware that a politics that relies so heavily on defined social categories might have a gap between the claims of empowerment and the ability to act empowered in the political landscape. In this sense, the left’s highlighting of identity politics might create another chasm between the legal empowerment—created by laws and courts—and the de facto non-empowerment that is perpetuated via the fixed social identities of liberal thinking. Brown states that “the possibility that one can ‘feel empowered’ without being so forms an important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism” (Ibid, 23). Of course, given Brown’s Nietzschean assumptions, one might question whether Brown can even consistently render such an argument. Yet it is exactly in the citizen’s emotional well-being that a chasm can exist; in other words, the gap can be felt by the people claiming the empowerment of group identity. Hence, the identities only feel empowered on one level, and they ultimately lack the “capacity to the shape the terms of [the] political, social, or economic life” (Ibid, 23).

⁶ To be sure, Brown is unclear how we could possibly even comprehend a world without social categories. That being said, a democracy without social categories would be one that might satisfy long-ranging critics of the ability to have freedom in the context of democracy. Nevertheless, such an inquiry is outside of the boundaries of this essay.
This unease with a version of liberty based on group identities is not shocking given Brown’s Nietzschean view of freedom being linked to struggle. For Brown, the liberal version of license—a crude kind of negative liberty—is not sufficient for a full version of freedom. A liberty based on the license of suffering is one that is always determined by a dominant structure and the subordinate litany of groups or social conditions. In other words, if “liberty as license is ever freedom, it invariably transmutes into a form of domination” (Ibid, 24). Freedom must be attached to a struggle, and such struggle can never overcome power: license can never be fully granted. The moment that group identities are fixed and social categories become rigid—even in liberation—then “freedom emerges as that which is never achieved” (Ibid, 25).

Though for Brown, identity is established by alterity, such alterity has the potential for danger. To fully address this danger, Brown argues that we must separate the politics of “what we want” from “who we are.” In other words, we need to remove a strict notion of the truth from our views of identity. In this sense, Brown takes issue with some aspects of the whole liberal project. Nevertheless, Brown wants to see a sense of identity that is flexible and reflects a sense of continual “becoming.” In other words, Brown requests individuals who search for rights and liberties to alter their politics from a basic claim of “I am” to a claim of “I want this for us.” This would be a change the focal point of politics from previous misdeeds to a preferred prospective opportunity of hope, prosperity, and (maybe) equality. And it is in this change that a declaration of life qua life—a becoming—can transpire.

The Art of Wounds: Philip Roth, American

As explained above, Wendy Brown links static group-suffering to the codification of a liberal regime’s categories. In a similar move, Theodor Adorno linked the suffering
located in a market economy as a source for great art. For Adorno, art has no power of revelation without an appeal to suffering. Of course, a key element of Adorno’s aesthetics is the concept of non-identity, and that concept—which acts as revelation of truth—is linked to suffering. For Adorno, the truth of the negation is the only truth, and it is this truth that allows artists to critique the use-value identity-thinking of modern capitalist regimes. In other words, on Adorno’s account art is an advantaged communal space for evaluation because it alone suffers from delineation in identity thinking.

Any effort to alleviate that suffering—by high theory or by market structures—silences the inquiry of non-identity and with it the ultimate inquiry of truth. It is sorrowfully ironic that the human misery that source for Adorno’s critical engagements should find its intellectual reverberation in the marginalized practices of high art. This chasm between the victims of late-capitalism and the art that is the realization of their needs is ironically played out in Adorno’s theory of radical artistic form. In this sense, radical art—because it is based in the pain of the artist—is a way for art to avoid the allegedly a-political stance of postmodernism. Hence, for Adorno, the suffering and truth are linked as the key to art as a production of revelation.

Adorno asserted that art is not merely dissimilar from abstract comprehension—and sensible rule-making—but it is also an objection to its current configuration. This objection stems from the judgment of remoteness and propinquity leading the foundation of art as connected to rational thought. Substantiation that such judgment acts as art may be provided by an explanation establishing that art’s independence from the requirements of praxis is imposed. In other words, on Adorno’s account, art contains a heteronymous instant; its sovereignty is for the sake of heteronomy, and its
mystique is for the sake of the exposure of an underlying truth. Of course, according to Adorno, such disclosure is not imminent: Art established its sovereignty from religious conviction and its redemptive truths, but consequently had to generate its own esoteric classification of truth. Art proposes self-governing reality, in that it puts forward well-rounded totalities exclusively on art’s idioms, provides succor by creating the counterfeit consciousness that humanity exterior to art is similarly well-rounded. Accordingly, such intuitions caused by sovereign art works, and the equivalent visions concerning art that trail from such intuitions, fail to concede the wounds of art. That failure of recognition, the wound of sovereignty, is, on Adorno’s account, the peak of the removal of “true” art. True art must confront its independent spirit; it must, in other words, recognize that its aptitude to divulge truth is grounded in its disparity from empirical “reality.” (Adorno 2005, 184).

Though Adorno is concerned with art’s ability to let us look past the empirical world so as to see the “truth” as revealed via art, I—taking a cue from Nietzsche and Kant—argue that art should essentially be the fight against purpose. Of course, on face value this seems to fit nicely into Adorno’s thought, in that Adorno also thought art should be non-instrumental. Yet, as I argued in chapter one, Adorno’s non-instrumental version of art is always—somewhat ironically—reestablishing a Platonic view of art and truth (Bernstein 1992, 207). In fact, Adorno, mimicking Plato, writes that “works of art are illusory because they give a kind of second-order, modified existence to something which they themselves cannot be (Adorno 2005, 160). Additionally, Adorno even clings to the quasi-Platonic notion of false needs: “Works of art envoys of things beyond the mutilating sway of exchange, profit and false human needs” (Ibid, 323). In contrast,
Nietzsche, borrowing from Kant and Schopenhauer, suggests that art should be a fight against purpose. As Nietzsche states: “The fight against purpose in art is always a fight against the moralizing tendency in art” (1998, 24). In other words, the positive nature of art acts as a normative argument—the purpose of art. The “artist’s basic instinct must ‘aim at life’ otherwise he is not, properly speaking, an artist at all.” (Young 1999, 128). Art is its own justification, and the aesthetic disposition “abides by a regulatory ideal that confines its attachment the worlds’ surfaces in response to their mystery and wonder.” (Schoolman 2001, 244).

Given art’s celebration of life, how does one connect the aesthetic pleasure to political existence? In this context, Jacques Ranciére links a new form of the poetic “I” to a collective political “I,” or maybe “we.” This movement, which is linked the various connections and values of genres and types of art, divides the political and the allegedly non-political. Ranciére (2004) writes:

To emancipate lyricism means to liberate [the “I” of lyrical utterance] from a certain politics of writing. For in the old canon, the ones that separated poetic genres, their own rules and their respective dignity were clearly political. A question can be posed thus: isn’t a new form of political experience necessary to emancipate the lyrical subject from the old political-poetic framework (10).

Assuming that the poetic or lyrical “I” is connected to the political “I,” then one might be able to understand the anger of Oprah Winfrey and her audience in the context of James Frey’s phony memoir. Yet, what is the motivation behind such anger? Is the aesthetic value of the book linked to its truth value, or to the extent of Frey’s suffering? For the Oprah reader, the authenticity of the tale was a key to the enjoyment of said tale. In other words, Frey’s work carried an extra value because it was “true.” Hence, the book itself could meander in places because it works in the service of truth. Yet
when that external justification was destroyed—when the legitimacy of “truth” was ripped from the aesthetic experience of Frey’s book—then the reader felt cheated. The experience was only somewhat less than real.

Given the reaction to Frey’s work—and the work of other not-so-truthful memoirists—I argue that truth is misguided being smuggled in as a criterion for art, and especially art as it relates to the political and/or the social. In contrast, I offer Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral*, as a work that has a profound political meaning and effect, and a work that runs deeper because of its lack of ties to the traditional notions of truth. In fact, much of the meaning in *American Pastoral* is linked to the unique narrative structure of the writing. The form of Roth’s narration acts as a kind of disjunction—its shakes the reader with its unconventional methods. In this context, the form itself blends into the context as the reader is unsure of the “place” or “identity” of the subject in the novel.⁷

The narrator of *American Pastoral* is Nathan Zuckerman, a fictional character whose identity grounds the first third of the novel. In the context of the novel, Zuckerman is a hermetic writer living in New Jersey. Zuckerman has had a respectable career, and has lived a healthy life—sixty years of art, money, and women. A bout with prostate cancer left Zuckerman incontinent and impotent, and, hence, Zuckerman hides himself in rural New Jersey in order to concentrate on his writing. With the danger of reducing him to a cultural cliché, one could say that Zuckerman is a typical American

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⁷ To say that *American Pastoral* is a modern literary triumph would not be overstating the case. It has placed consistently on critics’ list of the best novels of the last fifty years, and it represents the culmination of Roth’s ideas. As Greil Marcus (2007) writes, Roth was “setting a standard against which his own work, his own good faith as a writer and as a citizen, would be judged” (43). Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (2005) calls *American Pastoral* “a Great American Novel for a postmodern age” (5).
post-WWII Jewish intellectual, and he serves as a nice guardian of the various American myths that are played upon in Roth's novel.

Zuckerman starts as the main character of the novel, as well as the narrator, but the book eventually shifts to its chief protagonist: The Swede. Overall, American Pastoral is ostensibly about the life of Seymour “the Swede” Levov, the hope of post-war Newark. The Swede was the adolescent dream of the ethnic New Jersey neighborhood, excelling at nearly everything he did. Seymour Levov grew-up in Newark as the son of a thriving Jewish-American glove manufacturer. Nicknamed “the Swede” due to his atypical blond hair and Nordic good looks, the Swede eventually takes over his father's glove factory — "Newark Maid" — and marries Dawn Dwyer, an Irish-American Miss New Jersey 1949 winner.

The Swede and his father are both archetypal post-war Jewish liberals, rallying behind FDR, the New Deal, and progressive notions of American exceptionalism. Levov establishes a kind of perfect American life, but his life is to some extent a betrayal of his Newark roots because the Swede moves to rural (and Republican) upstate New Jersey. Nevertheless, as the Swede’s liberal dream fades—and the Vietnam War and racial unrest wrack the country and destroy inner-city Newark—Seymour’s own teenage daughter Merry becomes more radical in her beliefs and, eventually, commits an act of left-wing political terrorism. In protest against the Vietnam War and the nefarious "system,” Merry plants a bomb in a local post-office and the resulting explosion kills a bystander. In this singular act, Levov is cast out of his apparently faultless life and is thrown into a world of bedlam.
Though *American Pastoral* is concerned with the life of the Swede, the book’s subject is actually the Swede as interpreted by Nathan Zuckerman. In fact, the “early chapter is an intradiegetic narrative insofar as it serves as the prelude to the primary narrative that will follow it.” (Johnson 2004, 238). Zuckerman meets the Swede at a random social event, and the Swede is interested in having Zuckerman work on his memoirs. Yet, when Zuckerman and the Swede meet the talk is somewhat anti-climatic, and Zuckerman leaves wondering if he would ever write a book about Seymour Levov. Eventually Zuckerman contacts the Swede’s younger brother, who was Zuckerman’s friend as a child, and who escaped the clutches of Seymour’s “American Dream.” Zuckerman then discovers the truth about Merry Levov and some other aspects of the Swede’s troubled life. And though Zuckerman and the Swede do not meet again to finish the book, Zuckerman—inspired by a high-school reunion—imagines what the Swede’s life was like, and “reports” that imagining to the reader.

Though the imaginary Swede is given a persona that represents all the possibility of post-war America, he still remains remarkably shaken by the changing world around him. Even his liberal politics cannot help him understand some of society’s changes—changes represented by his daughter Merry. Yet, in the Swede’s unconscious, there is a kind of lying bare of the soul, a nakedness that Levov refuses to acknowledges, but which Zuckerman can scuff and scrape. In fact, the narrative movement from the consciousness of the Swede to the floating awareness (or unawareness) of Zuckerman gives the novel a refreshing depth.\(^8\) The markedly bizarre narration, in which nearly

\(^8\) As I will explain later, Roth goes way beyond the traditional narrative technique of the unreliable narrator.
insensible profundity, forced to an alert facade, forms a diminutive—but powerful—intellectual speck in the gaze of acuity.

This floating narrative awareness, and the peculiar identities it suggests, reflects Roth’s keen interest in the subjective experience of changes in the structures of American democracy and society after WWII and the New Deal. As the Swede begins to realize—and as Roth begins to show via the fading of the Swede’s identity into the “fake” Swede of Zuckerman—Roth is attempting to reflect, in content and in form, the solidification of liberal-democratic-capitalistic oligarchies into static institutions of concentrated power and wealth. The Swede tries to create a life that both embraces his liberal roots, but also escapes them with guilt. He moves from the working-class city of Newark, but he does not close down the glove factory despite Newark becoming increasingly dangerous and costly. Yet in a sense, the Swede is a prisoner to his own belief in liberalism, or even New Deal-capitalist, equality. In the Swede—as imagined through Zuckerman—we see the corrosion of the dream of the American New Deal.

It is not inadvertent that Zuckerman is chronicling this corrosion, or that he is using the Swede a symbol for his ideas about the contemporary United States. As Greil Marcus (2007, 59) notes, “Nathan Zuckerman creates his own novels out of the lives of now-dead acquaintances by imagining both the external events and the inward thoughts of those lives.” In fact, Zuckerman’s dream helps the reader trace the curves of a gradually budding anti-equality, anti-democratic, or—at least—anti-liberal societal standard. It is a society where discourse is often replaced by violence, and where a privatized partisanship pushes collective communication into vacant structures. This

9 Current statistics about the concentration of wealth in the western world seems to lend some empirical credence to this data.
private communication, like a sick Wittgenstein thought experiment, isolates us from the remote foundations that have traditionally determined the foundation—or at least negative foundation—of our political thoughts. The Swede is destroyed—via the story and via the fact that he exists for the reader only as the personification of Zuckerman’s dreams—and hence the Swede reveals the level of alienation in post-war capitalism. This alienation, from his own guiding principles, is the framing logic of Roth’s novel. The Swede’s accomplishments, and even his grievances and injuries, seem foreign to him. In other words, as Wendy Brown might say, his “wounded attachments” no longer provide an ample cultural landscape. And though the Swede is not the type of person who would define himself by “states of injury,” he is someone whose clings to a notion of identity qua identity.

The reader of *American Pastoral* is in a state of flux: The role of narrator shifts from Zuckerman—as an outsider—to the Swede (via Zuckerman’s imagination). It is difficult to determine if what Zuckerman is imagining “actually” happened to the Swede, or if Zuckerman was just using the Swede to elaborate on his own ideas. In fact, Zuckerman fades in and out of the narrative, continuing to confuse the reader. Yet this confusion—this narrative flux—perfectly illuminates the theme of America’s indeterminate fade from “pastoral” to nightmare.” In one of the most famous passages of the novel, the “fade” is described as a kind of plague “infiltrating the Swede’s castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury,

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10 This kind of alienation goes beyond the type as described by Marx and sympathetic thinkers. The Swede is not only alienated by his actions, but he is alienated even from the normally comforting parts of his own ideology. Allthussser would be proud, or *baffled*. 
the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous America berserk.” (Roth 1997, 86). This “berserk” is unsettling, and it is directly expressed to the reader via the form of the novel’s narration.

The identity games of Roth’s work resonate even more considering the unique notion of what it means to be American. Exploring this uniqueness, Roth sets out to discover the underlying assumption of the American” identity. Greil Marcus (2007, 44) puts it rather succinctly, writing:

Roth set out to rediscover what it meant to be American, and to explore what it means to both invent a country and, as a moral citizen who in some essential way embodies the country, to invent oneself—even if that means leaving the country itself behind, and abandoning all those whose blocked ambitions and withered aspirations those who invent themselves represent. They enact Cantwell’s curse: the solitary’s attempt to keep the American promise betrays America as such.

If America is an invention, or, put another way, the American identity—the America of the Swede, Charles Foster Kane, and Tom Joad—is conceived as impossible without a fundamental conceit of invention, then Roth seeks to wrestle with the American soul. In fact, it is this American soul that is imagined by Nathan Zuckerman. To compound this imaginary invention, Roth’s characters themselves “reread American history, forced to see it not as transcendent, utopic myth but as an ideological construct that foreshadows the demise of earlier stories of nationhood.” (Stanley 2005, 5). Like any invented system—which is to say any system at all—the seeds of its destruction are contained in its primary assumptions.

In fact, the form here is key because this subjective query—the questioning of the subject—can only be done on an experiential level. Or, to put it clearer, we seem to relate to being unsettled on the levels of sensory experience in a more profound way than being intellectually “unsettled.” Roth’s American Pastoral has a very slippery
center, and, in this sense, the form itself bleeds into the content. It is rightly a matter of form regarding the narrative perspective and the initial experience of reading the novel, but this lack of “center” also changes the “content.” The story itself, on a very basic level, changes from being about Zuckerman to about the Swede, and back and forth. In a lovely collision of form and content, Roth expresses the first “fade” from Zuckerman as a floating away during a high-school reunion where Zuckerman dances with an old sweetheart. Gary Johnson (2004, 243-44) writes about this “collision”:

Our narrator, as he admits, is unable to provide a point of view other than that of his youth; he can only focalize the Swede and his story in one way. This conflicts, however, with his sense of reality. He realizes that his vision of the Swede is simplified, naïve, and, in a word, allegorized, but the “residuum of adolescent imagination” does not allow him to see the Swede in a more complicated, realistic way. … By the end of (the) first chapter it has become clear to both Zuckerman and the reader that we do not know the real Swede, if such a thing can be said to exist. … (Hence), we have in this novel a clear and significant shift in focalization.

As the above quotation implies, the form and the content, as well as the identity of the narrator and protagonist, confusingly blend. It is difficult to determine where Zuckerman ends and where the Swede begins, just as it is difficult to tell where form ends and where content begins, or—more pointedly—where the “pastoral” ends and the “nightmare berserk” begins. Instability is the norm in the universe of *American Pastoral*, and this can only be fully expressed by Roth’s experiments in the “form” of the novel. Meaning is derived from this play of identity. As Simon Stow (2004, 84) writes:

“Zuckerman constantly reminds us that he is a writer—‘I’m Zuckerman the author’ he tells us—even as we know that he is the creation of another author, Philip Roth, another semi-fictional character whom we know that we cannot always trust to tell us what is happening in an unadorned style.” Put another way, if one re-told the basic plot points of *American Pastoral*, and hence asked us to “learn” from the novel in a way that
harkens back to Aristotle or Martha Nussbaum, one would miss the meaning of this instability, the flux of American identity. This flux is dangerous and unsettling, and hence exciting. It celebrates the almost pure thrill of formal beauty while linking such beauty to ever-present ugliness.

In this sense, Roth’s formal experiments do the opposite of Brown’s group identities; the experiments help to de-codify fixed social constructs. Whereas Frey’s novel re-enforces the standards of identity, while still attempting to be “shocking” or “radical,” Roth’s work shatters the bland expectations of traditional narrative. Gary Johnson (2004, 238) comments that “the relationship between the two narratives is problematic, but understanding the source of the problems and how they are handled can be enlightening in regard both to the novel itself and allegory more generally.” In fact, Roth has admitted that the novel hangs on the notion of Zuckerman as “mediating consciousness.” (Stanley 2005, 19). Hence, *American Pastoral* worked on many levels: On one level it is about the “American dream” of the New-Deal liberal, and how that dream is destroyed. Yet, on another level, that dream calls into question the whole identity of being American, qua American. As Zuckerman fades into—and out of—the Swede, the floating identity of the uber-American is questioned. Yet, in this floating, a kind of “American” is discovered: “In *American Pastoral* … the country is discovered, and discovered whole, at war with itself.” (Marcus 2007, 66). Of course, the Swede does not embrace this discovery, in fact the “tragedy of Seymour Levov is that he does not invent himself.” (Ibid, emphasis added). Of course, the Swede’s lack of invention calls into question the whole possibility of Roth’s American, which is in some way Whitman’s American and Rorty’s American. Importantly for the discussion here, this
questioning is via the form of Roth’s *American Pastoral*—the narrative structure—as well as the content, the story itself. Though form is crucial to Roth’s work, it is not a cold and distant formal experiment such as advocated by Brecht and similar thinkers. Roth seeks no detachment in *American Pastoral*; he wants the reader to be keenly empathetic to the Swede and his family. But the reader cannot get his/her bearings at certain moments in the novel, and, hence, the subject—and in the case the quintessential American subject—is ultimately disturbed in way that might be out of reach for a book like Fey’s fake memoir. Truth often reveals less than mendacity and lies, especially lies as lovely as the ones spun by Roth-cum-Zuckerman, often say the most about the human condition.

Neither Roth nor Zuckerman can give us a “true” version of the “real,” in a quasi-Lacanian sense. Poets always straddle the distinction between guard and guardian. Alain Badiou writes (2007, 20-12) about this, stating:

> [T]he imagery of the poet-guide, already obsolete by the end of the nineteenth century, is utterly ruined in the twentieth. As heir to Mallarme, the twentieth century establishes another figure, that of the poet as secret, active exception, as the custodian of lost thought. The poet is the protector, in language, of a forgotten opening; he is, as Heidegger says ‘the guardian of the Open.’ The poet, ignored, stands guard against perdition. We are still immersed in the obsession with the real, since the poet guarantees that language preserves the power to name this real. Such is the poet’s ‘restricted action’, which remains a very elevated function.

Though some thinkers might want artists to be revealers of truth, Badiou acknowledges that artists are more like guards of the real. In this sense, the real is unattainable—it is like the Swede is to Zuckerman—but it is also something that the artist can imply, enlighten, and imagine. This “real”—with reflections of Lacan—is something that is created not revealed.
Testimony, Truth, Appearance, and the Branding of Suffering

Though Badiou sees artists as guards or guardians, Adorno—and a lot of Oprah Winfrey fans—see artists more as revealers of truth. Despite Adorno’s desires and implications, art cannot carry the truth. In fact, Adorno’s wish—and Roth’s strange critique of it—appears most disingenuous in the light of Derrida’s troublesome notion of testimonial legitimacy. In a lecture given in 1995, published as *Demeure*, Derrida discusses the problem with both testimony and testimonial fiction. As a thinker steeped in deconstruction, who embraces a referential anxiety in his script, Derrida also forces the strict sovereignty of the language-scheme toward its restrictive ontological state, embellishing the undividable or the odd as an interior disparity united to a textual milieu where a kind of “otherness” is forever in jeopardy. Hence, Derrida focuses a spotlight on what defies context as a variety of perception that cannot flee its self-establishing hermeneutic surrounding. In fact, this lack of freedom—a lack that questions testimonial veracity and mendacity—is a “problem” no matter how “true” the art is, or how much it is based on testimonial genuineness. Derrida (1998, 29-30) states:

> [W]hat I am telling you here retains the status of a literary fiction. And yet, if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury… [I]f testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature.

The starting point needs to be the “possibility” of literature. Derrida asserts such by compelling its intellectual catch-22 on truth-tellers (or artists/authors), while allowing them no place to rest other than an internal struggle that fades into an underlying appraisal of an America willfully sightless to its own aggressiveness. Derrida hence
pleads for the notions of “being” relevant to a legal-liberal system—truth, testimony, etc—and compels the system to stumble upon its own boundary, which is to say that Derrida coerces the system to face the possibility that—like the Swede’s life—it is not exactly what it seems. For Derrida, the passion that rests at the foundation of testimony always implies its own falsehood: “A passion always testifies. But if the testimony always claims to testify in truth to truth, it does not consist, for the most part, in sharing knowledge, in making known, in informing, in speaking true. … [S]ome X—for example, literature—must bear or tolerate everything, suffer everything precisely because it is not itself” (Ibid, 28, emphasis in original).

Derrida, rather predictably, attempts to link testimonial literature to his continued criticism of the law of identity. In fact, Derrida argues that the temporal nature of testimony—and literature—render it impossible to judge in accordance with its truth value. All testimony threatens to carry “the instant outside itself.” (Ibid, 33). In other words, testimonial difficulty destroys truth as “soon as the sentence is repeatable.” (Ibid, 42). To cling to a standard of authenticity in literature—or in art—is to adhere to a criterion that assumes a meta-language from which art cannot speak. Using terms that Ranciére would embrace, Derrida argues that a standard of authenticity—as bound to truth—embraces an idea of the collective “we” and the individual “I.” (Ibid, 35-36).

This attempt to cling to a notion of truth in art is an echo of the Platonic or Socratic notions of truth. To isolate the distinct “we” is to find a truth that comforts us in the tragedy of existence. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche pointed out, life is not simply malicious; it is also purposeless. Persons do not only endure; they endure senselessly, and no declaration of “truth” can mitigate such suffering. As Nietzsche noted in The
Birth of Tragedy, there is no ultimate objective to suffering, and certainly no objective in which suffering may find validation as its compulsory method of life. Yet we try to seek this validation, this meaning. To accept such a stance is to accept what Nietzsche labels “Socratism;” the outlook that human deliberation is proficient in knowing “being,” and possibly even affecting “being.” Though Nietzsche admits that the Socratic could be a remedy to pessimism, he is concerned that our reliance on the Socratic—and hence in science and reason—is a dreadful blunder. Nietzsche argues, in a way that predicts similar complaints by Dewey and Quine, that science itself discloses that definitive truth is not available to scientific inquiry. Embracing the Kantian world of appearances, Nietzsche argues that the “extraordinary courage of Kant” has exposed that humans can only comprehend and value the phenomenon, never the “world in itself.” Hence, like Derrida years later—who took many cues from the German master—Nietzsche had enormous hesitation that one could look to art, or anything, for a revelation of ultimate reality. In fact, Nietzsche was often especially skeptical of people who did just that.

Though Nietzsche is distressed by the hunt for truth in art, he is not blindsided or flabbergasted. In fact, in The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche focuses on religion as one of life’s primary voids. Nietzsche explains the rise of aesthetics as answer to the Godlessness of modern society, and this explanation is believed to provide a form of the rejuvenation of contemporary civilization. The Greek theater, Nietzsche argues, had the role of determining the entire existence of people and society. In describing Greek theater as such, Nietzsche converts Greek theater into a variety of church or cathedral—an aesthetic/secular church that possesses the centrality of social life once
filled by the Catholic church. And like the church, Nietzsche imagines art as satisfying the equivalent task of providing metaphysical solace for the revulsions of human living. In fact, this religious task of art becomes transparent when one takes into account Nietzsche’s devastating negative appraisal of the neo-positivism of present-day industrialized society. On Nietzsche’s account, Greek tragedy—and the salvation and “meaning-creation” of art—was killed by the perseverance of Socrates’ claim that the “beautiful” in art should emulate “reality,” or “reality” as defined by Socrates/Plato. (1967, 12-14). This Socratic curse fashioned an atmosphere in which myth—especially tragic myth—cannot thrive.

Grappling with the death of tragic art at the sword of Platonic logic, Nietzsche notices some disturbing consequences. Modern, myth-less man, deprived of any culturally sanctioned resolution to the anguish and meaninglessness of existence, is drawn to an agitated marauding of past cultures in a twitchy pursuit for fulfillment of the “metaphysical drive” (Ibid, 23). One could argue that an embrace of Nietzsche’s notion of tragedy in art contradicts my previous contention that art should not cling to its ability to reveal “authentic suffering” as a measure of its aesthetic, societal, or political impact. The key difference—as I will discuss below—is in the celebration of suffering. In tragedy there is often no redemption, no lesson learned, no secret moral that will make life better. Art is not concerned with the revelation of ultimate—or authentic—truth; art can focus on being compelling, beautiful, or moving. Art that clings to truth falls into Nietzsche’s Socratic trap—a place where redemption is hidden, as opposed to experienced in the sensual occurrence of the art itself.
Given that the experience of art is the key to its understanding, art that shatters categories—that, as Wendy Brown might suggest, de-codifies—is art that has a profound impact on our political understanding of the world.\footnote{Here, again, one can see my debt to Arendt’s view of politics.} Art, via the play of form and substance, as epitomized—but not limited to—Nietzsche’s view of tragic art, creates new and fresh meaning in the world. This meaning, which is not limited to simply individual understandings of aesthetics but is reflected in reciprocal understanding, is an act of both political creation and political critique.\footnote{Of course, it is very difficult to pinpoint where creation begins and critique ends, and I do not seek to isolate such areas of thought.} Also, art acts as a destabilizing lever for our concepts of identity. Like the Roth / Zuckerman / Levov triumvirate, which also erodes our traditional notions of identity and alterity, the interaction of artistic form and artistic content destroys our notion of individuality. Additionally, this destruction of identity hopefully opens new ways of seeing the world. Of course, this “opening” of the world is a not a panacea, but is an embrace of the kind of artistic and ethical implications of Nietzsche’s thought, as well as an answer to Derrida’s critique of truth-seeking art.

Given this critique of truth-revealing art, one can see the perverse position such memorials to life provide us. The rigidity, the need to think that all knowledge is verifiable or rational, can be a form of tragedy in itself. Yet it is a tragedy that does not fulfill us as social, individual, or political beings. It is an empty tragedy: the tragedy of wounded aesthetics. Ernesto Grassi (2001, 24) alludes to this misfortune when he discusses Cassandra:

\begin{quote}
The tragedy of Cassandra, the curse pursuing her, is based on her rationality, odd though that may sound. Since it is impossible to grasp the
\end{quote}
divine by rational methods, as failure to recognize this facts becomes a
cure. Rationality also prevents the Chorus from having communication, any
dialogue, with Cassandra while she is still on a semantic plane. Her figure
is uncanny because it is her rational intention to communicate timelessness
to the historical and rational world; men lack the means to understand her
pronouncements and illuminations by way of reason.

Cassandra is locked into her rigid interpretation of reality, of art—via the chorus,
and of the world. Yet it is this rigidity that re-sets social categories and fixes a stable,
and conservative, political mindset. This re-setting of categories is seen over and over;
in fact it is evidence in the work of Frey and Roth. Frey wants badly to seem truthful,
and in his duplicity he fails artistically and socially. Philip Roth realizes that rigid notions
of truth should be called into question by the form of his work, and this “calling into
question” helps to both de-stabilize rigid social categories, as well as scratch the
surface of the American identity.

In fact, wounded aesthetics acts to comodify both the suffering and the art.
Hence, as I have argued, wounded aesthetics acts something like Brown's wounded
attachments: It seeks value, worth, and identity in “authentic” suffering. As John
Dewey (1934, 5) notes, the market often destroys art. It renders it sterile by its shear
consumption. And, for Dewey this is particularly true when art moves outside of the
realm of experience and attempts to reach what Nietzsche might call the Socratic level.
Of course, as art clings to the Socratic, rigid social structures are being re-enforced. In
this sense, Frey's tabloid memoir helps us cling to our comfortable notions of the order
of society. In contrast, Roth's American Pastoral shatters that order. Now, the effect of
this shattering can be minimal, and I do not want to overstate the case here. That being
said, it does have some effect, even if one measures effect as only important in material
terms.\textsuperscript{13} For, as Nancy Fraser (1997, 15) argues, cultural oppression can often lead to “economic subordination.”

In addition to the fact that cultural oppression can lead to economic subordination, art that acts as deliberate propaganda is generally not effective, especially if the propaganda is not tied to testimonial “truth” like Frey’s work and other similar faux-art. As I argued above about Roth’s work, art has political effect when it challenges the underlying categories of understanding and meaning creation. Murray Edelman (1995, 110) writes perceptively:

Categorization is, in fact, the necessary condition of abstract thought and of the utilization of symbols in reasoning and in expression, the distinctive abilities of Homo sapiens. Alternative categorization changes meanings, often radically. … Deliberate propaganda is therefore not the fundamental reason people are frequently misled.

This view of art is expressed by Nietzsche when he derides Zola for trying to overtly promote socialism. On Nietzsche’s account, this is not the role of art, even “political” art. This is because life, according to Nietzsche, is fundamentally about transformation, becoming, and eternal child-birth. Hence, despite the fact that there are diverse responses to the ache of existence, one cannot ultimately eradicate or restructure that ache by means of societal manufacturing. One cause for this “negative” result is that the roundabout, implied political claims of a work of art wields its influence on ways of visualizing, considering, and comprehending reality, rather than merely contributing a didactic “argument” concerning a particular governmental rule or social cause. Art does not only manipulate attitudes concerning contemporary public affairs, but it also affects views on parallel events in previous (or forthcoming) eras. Hence, art

\textsuperscript{13} I do not think this is an appropriate measure, but some thinkers do and I seek to appeal to them also.
influences people with a technique that uses the viewers’ own intellectual assets to validate the altered method of formation and deed. For example, this type of transformation emerges in professional photographs of James Dean. The photos in commercials for Dean’s movies offer a gorgeous and sexy male, and hence they lure viewers to procure the viewing experience. But Warhol’s paintings of James Dean bring to mind a more extensive variety of feelings about rebellion, lost youth, sexual yearning, form, gross commercialism, and the exaltation of the “dangerous” male. Warhol’s depiction of Dean offers a dogma that is more profound and less ephemeral than simply the sexual appeal of an attractive actor. The overt petition, even if it is powerful, is liable to be fleeting. Similarly, the direct “moral” of a piece of art often connects with a constricted range of intellectual possibilities. Of course, the suggestion that art offers broad indirect influences in no way suggests that such art contains the identical significance or meaning for everybody. That being said, art with calculated political messages—from Hotel Rwanda to Blowing in the Wind—is successful in as much as it re-affirms already underlying beliefs about the ways in which desirable or undesirable political or societal outcomes may manifest. In short, social manufacturing in art is more successful if it is subtle and builds upon underlying values.

Schopenhauer argues that all that can be attained by societal manufacturing is a modification in the form of anguish: pain is constantly preserved; its substance may neither be amplified nor reduced. However, for Nietzsche, good art is to be service of life. Even if art is tragic, it also celebrates the tragic; and in that celebration rests pure aesthetic politics—the opposite of wounded aesthetics. It is, in other words, the “redemptive power of illusion.” (Young 1996, 135). It is appropriate that Wendy Brown
is heavily influenced by Nietzsche’s normative claims. Brown’s notion that we should cling to a version of life that celebrates affirmations—a celestial “yes”—is in-line with Nietzsche’s views.

This artistic “yes”—embraced by Nietzsche and implied, via my reading, by Wendy Brown—can be tied to the idea that artistic formations have the capability to unveil novel spheres of understanding specifically since they are able to disengage themselves from day-to-day living. (Love 2006, 19; discussing Habermas). In a perceptive passage, discussing the possibility of a form of musical democracy, Nancy Love (Ibid, 118) writes:

This spirit of humanity, as sense of profundity, blurs and crosses, defines and expands, the boundaries dividing individuals, nations, and possibly species. Literally born of a love for life, further cultivated by aesthetic experiences, and openly embraced by as beyond human control or will, it is, I have argued, the most important contribution of movement music to democratic politics.

In this sense, art with “spirit of humanity” that “blurs and crosses,” which I have argued can be seen in the Roth's *American Pastoral*, can go far in repairing the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Consequently, communication of “blurred” identities—such as Roth’s imagining of Zuckerman’s imagining of the Swede—reveals more than “truth.” As Leslie Thiele (1990, 36) writes of Nietzsche: “Communication, or the making common of what is individually experienced, involves a necessary falsification. We can communicate our experiences, but at the cost of robbing them of the essential uniqueness.” This uniqueness is often expressed in the complex interactions of art, especially an art that avoids the “wounds” of being anchored to truth, or Socratic thinking. Thiele continues: “Art is always the self-conscious affirmation of appearance and life … over knowledge…. The appearance produced by art is not only that of a simpler world, but a better one.” (Ibid, 120 – 121). The type of art gripped
here—the art of surfaces and not of “wounds”—is linked to appearance and “perspectivism.” Humans must be taught to adore not depths but surfaces, since “depths” are attached to the death-embracing Socratic view of life. The vision of art advocated here, which is influenced by Nietzsche and Wendy Brown, is primarily opposed to an abstinent ideal of life, and consequently art should be an immense self-affirmation.

Humans can use art as a celebration of life, a political creation of meaning, and an intervention into the societal consciousness. Morton Schoolman (2001, 49) writes that art “sustains a notion of aesthetic rationality, which through the artwork encourages a sensibility to the harm inflicted on difference in every attempt to cross the divide and make unknown known as though the world conformed to its representations.” Art, rid of its wounds and ruins, acts as the ultimate act of life-affirmation. Art helps enchant life, in the sense that Jane Bennett (2001, 10) explains as “an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity.” Play, purposelessness, spirit, thought, and the collapse of categories all collide to produce acts of aesthetic and political importance. Ultimately art acts like William Carlos Williams view of baseball in his poem “The Crowd at the Ball Game”:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly
by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them

Kant suggested that art, to the extent it can be defined, is a play of purposelessness. In this sense, it is similar to William Carlos Williams notion of baseball: celebrating “the spirit of uselessness.” In fact, art self-destructs when it has specific purpose, just as it becomes boring when “form” and “content” are clearly
distinct. At this point, “art” is no longer “art,” it is an instrumental tool. This implementation of art as a tool actually strips art of its unique political context, that of meaning creation.

In addition to meaning creation, a world based on appearance—a world that Kant implies and Nietzsche embraces—must value art that celebrates life, creation, and excitement. This can be the only escape from “wounded aesthetics” based on a false version of “authenticity.” A proper version of aesthetics—what I later call vital aesthetics—would create new ways of seeing the world. Such aesthetics would also act as a kind of play on categories of appearances, a play that would disturb our hermeneutic assumptions. In other words, Oprah Winfrey would not feel cheated by James Frey; and, if the novel was well-written on an aesthetic level, Winfrey and her fans might even celebrate it.

14 I explore this interaction in my work on Badiou’s notion of aesthetic events and the arrival of the Beatles as such an event.
CHAPTER 5
THE PROBLEM OF AESTHETIC INDIVIDUALISM AS AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL THEORY: ALAIN BADIOU AND THE BEATLES

John Lennon, My Dad and His Sports-Car on the Road to Meaning

*Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial*
*Voices echo, “this is what salvation must be like after a while”*
- Bob Dylan (from “Visions of Johanna”)

As a member of what the media like to call “Generation X,” I am sick of babies born in post-war America getting all the glory. I am not sure if it is pure numbers, or over-all wealth, but the narrative of America in the second half of the twentieth-century is defined almost exclusively by the so-called “baby-boom” generation.¹ Like many members of the “baby boom” generation, my father rejected the aspects of his parents’ culture that suited him. Though he became very rich, he was socially, and even politically, rather liberal. His days of reading the Port Huron Statement and marching in the street might have been over by the time I was born, but on a litany of issues that define “liberalism” in the modern American context, my father is—and has been for all of my life—a liberal. In accordance with his boomer-liberalism, my father rejected religion, God, and the notion of a “singular” truth based on an exterior authority.² Being a product of a generation that many thought was essentially narcissistic, my dad was a kind of poster-boy for that lifestyle; he is a pyrrhonist at heart and much of the meaning of his life is based on self-indulgence.

On December 8, 1980, my dad decided to satisfy his indulgent personality by buying an extremely pricey and luxurious sports car. (As the story has been re-told of the years, the exact model of the car has changed over the years. Obviously the details

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¹ It is silly to try to define these things, but most commentators say that baby-boomers were born between 1945 and 1955.

² Also, like many boomers, my father rejected, but then embraced, capitalism as “truth.”
have been lost to inaccurate memories.) We lived on Long Island—the suburbs of New York City—at this point, but my father still worked in Manhattan. As he traveled home on the Long Island Expressway, he heard on the radio news that someone had murdered ex-Beatle John Lennon outside of his apartment building—the famed Dakota—across from Central Park. According to the story, as my dad tells it, my father came home and decided—with a heavy heart—that his youth was over: he could no longer own the posh sports car. My mother, who had never fully embraced the acquisition anyway, understood—so she claims now—how my dad felt and immediately agreed that such a purchase would be trivial and indulgent.

My father was not a particularly dedicated Beatles’ fan, but he—like many members of his generation—felt an extraordinary kin to Lennon and company. I suppose this feeling is somewhat captured in the lyrics to the Paul Simon / Philip Glass tune “The Late Great Johnny Ace,” where Simon sings:

On a cold December evening  
I was walking through the Christmas tide  
When a stranger came up and asked me  
If I’d heard John Lennon had died  
And the two of us went to this bar  
And we stayed to close the place  
And every song we played  
Was for The Late Great Johnny Ace

Lennon’s death was felt as a collective sadness, even amongst hoi polloi. The societal sadness was overwhelming:

During the remaining hours of December 8, 1980, all the next day, and the days after that, detail was piled upon detail, none of it sufficient in any way to give meaning to the event. Millions of people around the world went into long-range shock. Outside the Dakota Building, where the murder had taken place, and only minutes after the event itself had been flashed on New York TV and radio stations, a huge crowd of stunned mourners swiftly assembled, many openly distressed. They were only the vanguard of a much larger magnitude, which was by now constantly being added to. …
Taken as a whole, the mass reaction, as well as the individual reactions one encountered during the first forty-eight hours after the killing, reminded many of the impromptu and almost wholly genuine wave of popular grief that had followed the death, eighteen years earlier, and also by gunfire, of John F. Kennedy. (Carr & Tyler 1981, 131)

Yet how could this musician, nay, pop-star, have an emotional effect on the populace akin to political leaders like John Kennedy or Martin Luther King? This is particularly true given that Lennon’s death came many years after his ultra-popularity ended. (The Beatles had never—and to a certain extent still have never—become unpopular, but by 1980 people were no longer fainting when they saw Lennon.) Nevertheless, for my father, the death of this cultural idol had an extraordinary impact. My father would later divulge that he could not remember where he was when he heard Pope John Paul II or Ronald Reagan were shot, but that the death of Lennon stuck with him.

My father’s reaction is not unique; after Lennon’s death thousands of people flocked to the Lennon’s apartment and held vigil. “The personal grief was intense at the Dakota, where one tenant, (famous composer) Leonard Bernstein, was reported "in a state of shock" at the murder of the man he had hailed as "Saint John." In fact, twenty-five years later, on the leftward leaning political blog The Huffington Post, Martin Lewis eulogizes the loss of John Lennon; a loss that he feels hurt a whole generation. Additionally, Lewis (2005) writes about the explicit political impact Lennon had, specifically on right-wing politicians of his day:

On February 4, 1972, a secret memo (now revealed under the Freedom Of information Act) was sent to Richard Nixon by none other than the late Senator Strom Thurmond (then a youngster of merely 70.) In the memo he railed about Lennon and the danger he could cause the President’s 1972 re-election campaign. Fortunately, Thurmond (writing as a member of the Senate Judiciary committee) had a solution in mind. "If Lennon’s visa is terminated it would be a strategy (sic) counter-measure." Though he noted
that "caution must be taken with regard to the possible alienation of the so-called 18-year old vote if Lennon is expelled from the country." This memo arrived in the Nixon White House shortly after the notorious 1971 John Dean memo in which he proposed "We can use the available political machinery to screw our political enemies." ... Nixon followed Dean's advice to the letter. And John Lennon was on the receiving end of a vicious 4-year campaign of FBI surveillance and INS harassment. ... One cannot think of a single artist or entertainer prior to - or since John Lennon - who had that kind of impact. No other creative artist has ever induced that level of fear in a man who was ostensibly the most powerful man in the world.³

Lennon was certainly involved in left-leaning protests, as were many celebrities of his generation. However, he was no more involved than other left-wing celebrities—Jane Fonda, Paul Newman, Warren Beatty, Robert Redford, etc—yet Lennon’s, and the Beatles’, art seemed political, even if only about ten of their songs are explicitly political. Like some other icons—maybe Marlon Brando—there was something vaguely politically dangerous about the Beatles, even if they only wanted to “hold your hand” in the beginning of their career.

The boomers did not likely miss the implication of “holding hands.” That being said, I think it is possible that for a generation that distrusts symbols of external authority—of religion as symbolized by the Pope or the government as symbolized by Reagan—cultural figures retain an unusual importance. In fact, art and aesthetics—as symbolized by “near universal” cultural icons like Lennon (or Hitchcock, Picasso, etc)—become a way to deal with the crisis of “meaning” in a potentially hollow age. As Lawrence Biskowski (1995, 63) writes: “The criteria and logics of aesthetics expand to fill the roles formerly filled by the criteria and logics associated with now-discredited or putatively obsolete institute, practices, tradition, moral systems, and religions.” Aesthetics “fills the roles” of the old institutions; it becomes a road to meaning.

³ See Sullivan, 1987, for a detailed account of the extensive right-wing backlash against the Beatles
That being said, the type of aesthetic theory that is often substituted for traditional ethics tends to be—in my opinion—lacking. That theory, which I call “aesthetic individualism,” has been espoused to varying degrees by thinkers such as Fridriech Nietzsche, Michael Foucault, and Richard Rorty. After first briefly addressing the means by which aesthetics “fills in” in the (post)modern world, I then will outline the notion of “aesthetic individuality” as expressed by Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty. Subsequently I expose some troubles with this theory, focusing on why it partially fails on its own terms. I then suggest that the notion of an “aesthetic event” as characterized by Alain Badiou helps to better explain the way aesthetics “fills in” for meaning in a world that has lost faith in transcendental universals. Finally, to help understand the cause of my father’s reaction to John Lennon’s death, I explore the Beatles’ arrival on the cultural scene as an “event” in the sense that Badiou describes: one which fundamentally alters the primary “truth” of understanding.

Aesthetics in the (Post)Modern World

As noted above, many philosophers and political theorists—and even lay people—have acted as if Lyotard was essentially correct: the trust in meta-narratives is gone. This distrust has thrown the world of philosophy, and general comprehension, into a state of flux. Taking Lyotard—as well as the many other thinkers who have ushered in the end of all “meta” things (meta-narratives, metaphysics, etc)—seriously, numerous scholars have been troubled by the path to nihilism that is implied by such a world-view. That being said, aesthetics has also acted as a kind of “fall back” position in

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4 Also called “aesthetic individuality” or “aesthetics of the self,” etc.

5 I could clearly use other thinkers here—Dewey, Schiller, etc—yet I chose three thinkers whose approach is both similar and broad.
various forms of philosophical thought. In other words, in a world without a hard
metaphysics, aesthetics can help provide meaning.

This turn to aesthetics is not necessarily seen as a bad thing; many thinkers have
concluded that “reason” is an insufficient grounding for ethics and philosophy. For
many intellectuals, “code-based” notions of ethics are simply not adequate. Hence, if
we live in an era “marked by the end of referentiality,” then the turn to aesthetics is a
smart intellectual move because art and aesthetics exist in the realm of appearance.
(Bosteels 2005, 761). In fact, as noted, according to countless thinkers, aesthetics
might be the only way to get out of the problem of modern life: “Aesthetic ways of
thinking appears to many contemporary theorists to be the best alternative.” (Biskowski
1995, 62)

It is not a stretch to say, as James Ingram (2005, 561) does, that “universalism is
passé.” Modern western cultures tend to operate via an aesthetic mode of existence. If
this is true, one needs an approach to politics and ethics that takes account of the
aesthetic state. Aesthetics is the opportunity of significance in a nihilistic era. In this
context, political theory can no longer—and should no longer—rest on the notion that
there are transcendental truths. As noted above, I am unabashedly assuming that the
non-foundational stance of thinkers like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Dewey, James,
Derrida, Foucault, Quine, and Rorty is roughly accurate. In other words, I start with the
assumption, as Nietzsche and others have argued, that the subject / object or signifier /
signified relationship is unstable. For thinkers like Nietzsche and Rorty, “truth” is
contingent on language, and hence on human interpretation. To the extent that only a
sentence can be either “true” or “false,” there is no eternal truth outside of human
experience. As Rorty (1989, 5) writes, “to say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.” The world itself contains no truth that is independent of human judgment: “The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false” (Ibid, 5). Hence, in a world of judgment, appearances, and sense experience, aesthetics is a natural fit for a standard of existence.

This turn to aesthetics has been grouped—in a crude fashion—with postmodernism and postructuralism. And though I understand the labels, I think that what solidifies the relationship between some of these thinkers is the feeling that reason-based philosophy presents a group of bogus dilemmas. For these philosophers, syllogistic logic is merely a further variety of a story or a narrative, and it is one whose soundness resides contrary to merely a valid composition. On the contrary, soundness or validity of an argument rests on the pervasive recognition of the thesis by likewise positioned individuals. Davide Pangia (2006) argues this exact point in the context of an analytical philosophy text: The syllogism acts as a kind of narrative whodunit, with the truth—which is the stated goal of most analytic philosophers—being simply a Hitchcockian MacGuffin. Having intellectually gripped this assertion that logical analysis—usually done in the form of a syllogism—is a philosophical blind alley, writers like Foucault and Rorty have embraced the aesthetic notion of creating new vocabularies in order offer political evaluation and creation. For these thinkers, political and ethical critique frequently is a issue of creating novel vocabularies or ways of looking at the world—concerning equally one’s individual situation, as well as that of
their enemies—until their position emerges as more striking than the contrary philosophical stance. Notice that appearance is very important here, and it is in this appearance that one sees aesthetics really link with our understanding of ethics, politics, and self-creation. Persuasion and affiliation—via aesthetic judgment—triumphs, and vigilant and rigorous proofs are shoved aside as anachronistic. Ethical and political creation is merely an affair of self-creation and corralling people who share one’s aesthetic values. Evidence—in the traditional sense—might help one persuade another to join an ethical side, but that is simply because that person has an aesthetic disposition toward “evidence.” (Nietzsche and Rorty would probably think this disposition is unhealthy.) Nevertheless, an ethic of self-creation rests on the allegorical supremacy of its tongue, language, and lingo, and not on the might of its syllogism. Consequently, the dominance of language, via rhetoric, that shifts the balance of power toward aesthetic judgment.

Of course, this ethic draws the criticism of perspectivism and—oh heavens, no—relativism. However, this is a false pairing. “Truth and falsity are not relative concepts for perspectivism,” or aesthetic self-creation. (Nehamas 1998, 148). Yet they are for relativism. Given a certain set of assumptions, an outlook’s truth value can generally be tested. That being said, what can change are the chief suppositions, and—possibly more importantly—the significance we consign to these truth claims. Even Nietzsche states that accuracy and mendacity are vital to our existence as humans. Hence, truth does not contain an unrestricted worth; truth is not always to be embraced. Whether the truth is good is contingent on the circumstances of a given situation. Philosophical
standpoints are consequently to be evaluated by their value, and yet, that value is innate and harkens back to aesthetic judgment.

Different thinkers have reacted to this “aesthetic” turn in various ways. Some thinkers—the Frankfurt school Marxists Adorno and Marcuse—seek, for example, the “true” artist as a vessel for the exposure of the sham of exchange value in capitalist societies. In fact, Adorno rates the aesthetic life as the highest form of existence: Art, on Adorno’s account, holds a distinctively spontaneous capability separating it from all contemplation and language. Its advantage to all kinds of intellectual appearance lies in its clout to educate that the design of understanding is a delusion. In other words, art is a way to study the underlying assumptions of “reason” and conventional wisdom. Adorno’s thesis is that we can only appreciate the declarations of art if we can confine and grasp the concept of non-identity. The hunt for newness in art can be significantly altered to an exploration for non-identity, yet Adorno is not asserting that this task is less absurd than a quest for “reality” qua reality. In other words, “art is constantly practicing the impossible trick of trying to identify the non-identical.” (Adorno 2005, 33). Non-identical art only thrives when such art surpasses its deliberate purpose. Consequently, for Adorno a notion of exterior and corresponding truth is the key because the abstractness in art establishes art’s extraction from non-subjective truth.⁶

As stated above, this Marxist—or neo-Marxist—notion of aesthetics assumes an exterior truth that has value, and it is not one that I endorse in this work. That being said, aesthetics itself has been linked to its own type of “reason.” For Kant and Arendt, aesthetic reason is based on a notion of “judgment.” Initially, in his Critique of

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⁶ See Schoolmann, 1997, for possibly the best recent account of Adorno’s aesthetics and its implication for society and politics.
Judgment, Kant argued that an aesthetic verdict must be established via the subject’s epicurean response to the artistic piece. Of course, Kant rather famously changes his mind about the nature of aesthetics between the first critique and the third critique.

As discussed previously, aesthetics is hence a way to have a notion of intrinsic value without a foundational idea of truth; the aesthetic understanding consists in the suitable pleasure of an item for its own sake. However, to overcome the obvious traps of nihilism, aesthetics must offer something more than hedonistic pleasure: It is, more accurately, a “purposiveness without a purpose.” Put another way, one that would likely delight Arendt and Nietzsche, aesthetics is the pleasure in valuing itself; it is the enjoyment taken in ruling something important or in appreciating it. In other words, aesthetics is what is left when we are stripped of god; it is a way of caring for the world even if one does not understand it.

It is important to note that aesthetics is not the same, though is clearly linked, to the notion of “art.” Aesthetics itself, as defined above, is a sense in which we value things, and such valuing becomes a key component of various aspects of the aesthetic existence. Yet, one could value things besides art in an aesthetic sense. So, hence, what is “art” and what is “aesthetics?” Also, and perhaps more importantly, how are these two things related? Clearly this discussion could fill a tome and it somewhat outside of the scope of this manuscript to attempt to “solve” this problem. That being said, a little explanation can help clarify my distinctions.

Aesthetics and art are linked in a similar way that the “political” and “politics” are linked. To assist us in this discussion, I turn briefly to the classic work of Martin

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7 This is a Kantian term that captures quite accurately the notion of aesthetics.
Heidegger. Heidegger, in his important essay/lecture “The Origin of the Work of Art,” states that art defines both the artist and the art. There is a specific method of creation and revealing that Heidegger associates with the origin of the work of art. There are generally two ways of examining the process of artistic development: self-creation or revelation. In other words, some thinkers believe that the artist him/herself is a sovereign being who either creates the world or represents the world, yet—in both views—the artist is kind of like a God in respect to the work of art. Heidegger rejects the notion of artist as God, and argues that art allows Being—as conceived in the special Heideggerian sense—to rise above the rest of beings. The artist must act as a kind of processor for Being, and he/she should not be concerned with control or mastery. Once mastery is a concern, the relation between aesthetics and art becomes a much more difficult one to understand because it is now a relation of instrumentality. However, if the artist nurtures an accessible and understanding attitude toward the world, then art will no longer be in tension with aesthetics—on a conceptual level—and, according to Heidegger, it will allow Being to come forth.

In this Being-coming-forth, humans see the mystery and yearning of the aesthetic, which, on my reading, Heidegger sees as the beautiful. Hence, the Heideggerian aesthetic astonishes humans into a kind of tranquility so that the whimsy of Being can arrive from the ordinary beings. Hence, the artist acts as neither a translator nor a creator, but as a type of facilitator of the aesthetic. Like Alain Badiou later, who I shall discuss in length later in this essay, Heidegger conceives of art as an

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8 My understanding of Heidegger is indebted to

9 This issue of mastery is tied to the later concern of aesthetic mastery over the individual. Please see the next section for a more in-depth discussion.
event or happening, and, as such, the artist is tied to a feeling openness. In this sense, art does not show the truth, it suggests a kind of existence, of Being, that allows people to be distinctly human. Hence, aesthetics and art are linked, like a strand of DNA/RNA, and are tied to uniquely human type of understanding. For, as Heidegger suggests, the work of art has an origin—Being aesthetically in the world—but no sovereign ruler. Whereas one might see a tension—at least on a theoretical level—between aesthetics and art-works, a gesture toward the Heideggerian notion of the origin of the work of art helps mitigate this tension. For Heidegger, art permits Being to come forth aesthetically, yet this is different—as seen below—from living one’s life individually as an aesthetic “being.”

**Aesthetic Individuality: Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty**

Well, since age twelve I felt like I'm someone else, 'Cause I hung my original self from the top bunk with a belt

-Eminem (from "My Name Is")

A major strand of aesthetic reasoning—and hence the key to an aesthetic “solution”—is based on the notion of the “aesthetics of the self.” To my mind, there are three key advocates of this stance: Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty. There have been—of course—other thinkers who have aligned themselves with this theory, and, in fact, Nietzsche and Foucault were particularly influenced by aspects of classical Greek thought. Nevertheless, in the context of this chapter I will focus on the afore-mentioned troika of the “aesthetics of the self.”

For Nietzsche, art is explicitly linked to politics and ethics. Art, even in the conventional sense, is connected to questions of authority and moral opinion. Artists are occupied in the exceedingly ethical enterprise of ranking types of human reality. But
for Nietzsche art is more than just an engagement with the rankings of existence. Art is a kind of force, an almost primal drive. For Nietzsche (2000, 59), art is a cadence that “continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world.” In other words, the metaphysical is equivalent to the aesthetic in Nietzsche’s because there is no straightforward twofold antagonism between facade and reality. Truth emerges through the cadence of perception, speech, composition and iconography. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche clearly (1967, 5) states that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon are life and the world justified eternally.”

Given this, the key to Nietzschean ethic-aesthetics is bold originality. An aesthetic outlook requires the conversion of the individual self into an “aesthetic phenomenon.” Nietzsche (1974, 299, 270) asserts that individuals should develop into artists who create not only art qua art, but also artists who craft their own lives aesthetically. We ought to transform ourselves into the “poets of our lives” and consequently “become who [we] are.” For Nietzsche, the aesthetic life is one of art as action, life as art. In other words, Nietzsche wants to invert the Kantian approach with a more active notion of aesthetics. Put another way, art itself represents the will to live: the meaning—as it is—to life. In fact, art represents the “highest metaphysical task of man.” (Nietzsche 1967, 101). Hence, the great man, according to Nietzsche, is one who lives his life as a work of extraordinary art. Life should be a creation of art.

Similarly, Michael Foucault wants to explicitly include aesthetics into a notion of ethics. The entire notion of aesthetics—and specifically the aesthetics of the self—is the key to Foucault’s notion of freedom. Foucault argues that experience of freedom depends upon the fervent desire for individualized self-direction, upon the reverie of a
wonderfully intended prejudice. As mentioned above, Foucault takes some of his cues from the early Greeks, and he argues that Greek ethics were not code-based, but relied on “practices of the self.” Tempering somewhat the extremes of Nietzsche’s aesthetics of the self, Foucault respected the Greeks’ notion of a well-balanced individual. Foucault moreover shows esteem for the Greek principle of care of self.

Foucault’s notion of the “ethics of the self” is an ethics that embraces aesthetics but moves beyond traditional notions of morality. Instead of investigating the code-based tradition of ethics, Foucault is much more interested in exploring the ways in which we discipline ourselves into certain behaviors. Technologies of the self are contingent, non-universal “subjectivizing practices that create one’s sense of self.” (Emerling 2005, 150). Though the disciplines maintain the technologies of the self, it is key that an element of “freedom” is found in self-creation. Aesthetic self-creation permits “individuals to effect by their own means, (and to) transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfect, or immortality.” (Foucault 2003, 146).

This transformation of the individual is essentially an aesthetic experience. Foucault stated in a 1983 interview that he wondered why art was limited to a group of “special” artists:

From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. … Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life. (Foucault 1996, 350).

Hence, according to Foucault, what we need is an “aesthetics of existence” which applies a level of resistance to the disciplines and the social relations of power. This aesthetics of existence is fundamentally a way for individuals to resist dominance and
fixed power relations. Yet, though Foucault is influenced by certain elements of Greco-Roman thought, he rejects the notion that self-realization occurs in the polis: Foucault does not hold an Aristotelian view of politics as the advantaged location of self-realization. In fact, Foucault embraces the notion of the “dandy” as a paragon of ethics. The dandy articulates a firm upheaval in opposition to consumerist values and utilitarian existences. Additionally, the dandy is subtly subversive; it is destined to clarify the limits that civilization places on people. The dandy also rejects strict code-based ethics, and embraces individualism. Of course, Foucault does not believe there is actual freedom here. Seppa (2004, 9) writes that “despite one’s efforts to create an individual or ‘free’ aesthetics of the self, one remains tied to control mechanisms and outside forces.” Yet, the aesthetics of the self is as much freedom as Foucault allows the postmodern subject, and that freedom is directly connected to aesthetic individuality.

Like Nietzsche and Foucault, Richard Rorty celebrates the notion of aesthetic individuality. Given the postmodern commitment to the discarding metaphysics, Rorty (1989, 36) sees the “purpose” of human existence as the self-creation of meaning. This aesthetic self-creation is the great possibility of humanity; it is what separates humans from animals. Humans can, as Rorty states, “will” our own meaning. (Ibid, 37). Accounting for this notion of self-creation without a fundamental telos, Rorty sees the only standard, albeit a subjective one, as ultimately an appeal to aesthetics. Humans should, on Rorty’s account, live one’s life as if it is a poem. Rorty explicitly acknowledges his debt to Nietzsche in advocating the aesthetic life. The Nietzschean world, according to Rorty, is one were we view “human history as the history of
successful metaphors,” and which would “let us see the poet, in the generic sense of
the maker of new languages, as the vanguard of the species.”

Though Rorty shows some desire to move beyond the elitism of the Nietzschean
world-view, this notion of “metaphor” is crucial to Rorty’s philosophy. Rorty (Ibid, 7)
links human self-creation to the use of a new “vocabulary”: “[T]he human self is created
by the use of a new vocabulary.” By “vocabulary,” Rorty means the ways humans
understand the world—the symbolic order we use to make meaning possible. Hence,
novel metaphors—the new use of vocabulary—is key in Rorty’s world. Rorty, like the
Romantics, thinks that the “talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is
chief instrument of cultural change” (Ibid, 8). Hence, for Rorty an aesthetic view of
philosophy—and of life—is essential to the “betterment” of the world. Using aesthetic
self-creation, as well as the invention of new vocabularies, new and “better” ways to
describe the world develop.

Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty all advocate a form of aesthetic individuality as
basis for ethical behavior. There are, of course, differences in their philosophies, yet all
three reject a code-based notion of ethics in favor of a more flexible value system. In
the next section I shall explore the potential harm in such a world-view.

The Problems with Aesthetic Individuality

“Ah, look at all the lonely people…”

-Lennon / McCartney (from “Eleanor Rigby)

The notion of aesthetic individuality appears to solve many problems of a world
without a solid metaphysical foundation. In fact, from the days of Walt Whitman—and
before—there has been a sense that aesthetic self-creation is tied to a notion of
mastering the universe. Yet this alleged mastery is the root of a latent problem with the
notion of aesthetic individuality: The mastery, in fact, is just an illusion, and not a very compelling illusion. Just as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida argued that one cannot control meaning of a text once it enters the world, an individual cannot control the aesthetic interpretations or ramifications of one’s ethical and/or political actions. Hannah Arendt (1958, 184) keys into this problem when she writes:

> Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human word through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the world, namely, its actor and suffer, but nobody is its author.

> It is an act of hubris to assume that one can be the complete master of one’s fate, or even that one’s aesthetic actions amount to aesthetic self-creation. Aesthetic self-creation cannot exist in a vacuum; it requires what Derrida calls “iteration.” As Davide Panagia (2006, 74) writes, “the constructed of moral agents and principles comes to force as they are likened to pieces of work like sculptures, carvings, pottery,” yet these things are “never free from the mark of force of prior embodiments, intentions, or actions. Art implies a social interaction, even when one is alone.

> It is true that Arendt, like Nietzsche, sees beauty in action. They both respond to the end of metaphysics by self-consciously aestheticizing deeds. In other words, “action is, on Arendt’s account, a self-justifying end. That being said, as political individuals we are never free. Arendt makes it extremely clear that she does not believe we have control over our political actions. The following passage is so eloquently written it is worth quoting in length:

> Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposites sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and
sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never reliably be confined to two partners. ... The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change the very constellation. (Arendt 1958, 190).

Hence, for Arendt ours actions, though they define us, are not committed in isolation. Of course, a thinker like Foucault would also likely admit that we cannot be sovereign in the aesthetics of the self. Nevertheless, the implication of his thought—that one should create one's life as work of art—tends to encourage a kind of aesthetic individuality that might run afoul of Arendt's recognition that we are not sovereign. In fact, this notion of sovereignty is the key distinction between Arendt and Nietzsche. Arendt argues that skill is evident only in terms of the chance provided by serendipity. Humans become who they are, as Nietzsche would argue, through achievement and the accomplishment of a discrete method of action. Arendt makes an equivalent argument when she asserts that human reveal themselves in virtuosic exploits. I find this distinction to be compelling; especially in the sense that Nietzsche has a tendency toward a "great man" view of aesthetics and ethics, whereas Arendt recognizes that we are all part of a greater "constellation."

Being a part of a greater constellation is a key for Arendt's notion of aesthetic and political action. Of course, on some level Foucault's aesthetics shows the complexity of social networks, which is ironic given his notion of the aesthetic self. Again, quoting David Panagia, "all aesthetics are social." (Ibid, 73). Yet some thinkers—possibly Nietzsche and Rorty (as I characterize them)—hope to build an aesthetic system
whereas Vincent van Gogh is the model: The forlorn artist creating art in a lone studio. The other option, according to the ethics of aesthetic individuality, is to live life as art. This, of course, requires a temperament in accordance with the Nietzschean “great man.” Under either version of aesthetic individuality: the Van Gogh version or the John Galt version, the artist (individual) lives a rather solitary life. It is as if aesthetic individuality forces people to live like Robinson Crusoe: a castaway in the universe of meaning and existence.

This loneliness is exacerbated by the fact that an individualistic aesthetic is often less rewarding even on its own terms. In fact, it is hard to understand how individual “self-poems” could exist successfully in a democratic society. For Richard Rorty, the worst possible outcomes are to be discovered a fraud or to be boring. Yet, it seems that one could find meaning in the already crafted roles of society. In other words, autonomy can—and often is—expressed in the freedom to define ourselves through an already existing lifestyle or language. Not all people are compelled toward Nietzschean self-creation. In my mind, there is no reason why self-creation should be incompatible with being like others, unless aesthetic existence is conflated with radical individualism. Indeed, the compulsion to create oneself in a novel fashion, as advocated by supporters of aesthetic individualism, can itself be seen as a form of non-autonomy: a bondage to the new and individualistic. Hence, can humans—as Mama Cass suggests—have a society of people all dancing alone to individual music? This would certainly not be the world of aesthetic-individualist Sally Bowles. In other words, though some humans have hyper-individualistic strands of personality, many others find gratification in fulfilling
already-defined roles. Hence, aesthetic individualism does not answer the problems of (post)modern society; it creates even more anxiety.

Given this possibility of anxiety, it is useful to again turn to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of art, and how its aesthetic reflects the remnants of metaphysics. Heidegger’s mission is to realize the purpose of art as art’s estrangement from reality. That purpose will have grave implications for our consideration of world that introduces it: The purpose of art will be an emotional loss to be lamented. Nevertheless, the certainty that is art on Heidegger’s account is not experiential certainty but an unconditional reality. In other words, Heidegger’s thoughts about aesthetics engage the fact that tangible objects hold a transcendental utility. In fact, it is telling that Heidegger’s concentration must spotlight art works as the objects where this transcendental utility is mainly transparent, because, for Heidegger, the investigation of past significance is an inquiry of the transcendental thoughts of humans. This transcendental nature of art is linked to the concept of “God,” and its eventual loss of meaning (Heidegger 1971, 49-52). For instance, when God stops being the transcendental foundation of significance, then the perception of God transforms, as does the connotation of actions ruled by this conception. Given this, the fundamental nature of sense experience is not a-historical; historicity occupies the character of the forms of action with which humans are troubled.

In other words, for Heidegger what brands the place of the transcendental in contrast to the margin is the way in which we examine and test truth. This does not signify what is, and “reality” stays the equivalent all through the past and all that alters in our manner of conceptually capturing reality (Ibid, 33). Such realism assumes various
types of the subject-object dichotomy. In fact, in this context, one would need to assert that things—or art works—were simply there, and we might then presently carry our cognitive and judgment-making faculties to these items. From that viewpoint, it would then develop into a comprehensible difficulty to hunt for the “foundation” which was mainly sufficient for awareness; in other words, to chase the trail of Kant. In his Kantian move, Heidegger admits that we deem a proposal true—even about art—if it properly symbolizes what there is. Heidegger subsequently inquires as to how a verity can be exposed as to match an intellectual proposal, and the proposal of verity, if it was not previously the case that the verity was obtainable proceeding to and autonomously of the proposal representing it. Heidegger (Ibid, 51) writes:

How can fact show itself if it cannot stand forth out of concealedness, if it cannot stand in in the unconcealed? If such did not concur, then the fact could not become binding on the proposition.

Heidegger chases a deep study of the circumstances for the option of being truthful. In fact, Heidegger concedes that reality has customarily meant accuracy or connection. Overall, the deduction of truth-correctness that implies unconditional determinations must derive from humans’ understanding. Yet, even given Heidegger’s attempt to ground aesthetic individualism in its metaphysical remnants, the question remains as to how far one can push a hermeneutic answer to an ontological question. In other words, Arendt’s complaint that our actions are “boundless,” and that “nobody is the author of his own life story,” remains. An attempt to protect a kind of correspondence theory of truth in the context of aesthetic individualism violates both Heidegger’s premises, and the post-foundational assumptions of Nietzsche and company. Ultimately, aesthetic individualism is an intellectual dead-end.
A Possible Solution: Badiou’s Aesthetic Event

The aesthetic event is something as evident, as immediate, as indefinable as love, the taste of fruit, of water. We feel poetry as we feel the closeness of a woman, or as we feel a mountain or a bay. If we feel it immediately, why dilute it with other words, which no doubt will be weaker than our feelings?

- Jorge Luis Borges (from his 1977 lectures on “Poetry”)

Though I do not wish to follow Nietzsche and his friends down a blind alley, I am also not willing to abandon the aesthetic as a view of life, both individual and social. Yet I do not believe the answer lay in aesthetic individualism. Given this objection, a possible solution to this problem can be found in Alain Badiou’s notion of the “aesthetic event.” Badiou’s notion of the event presents a way that the “aesthetic” shapes contemporary life, yet it does not fall into the atomistic traps of aesthetic individualism.

Badiou is unequivocally not a postmodernist. He disagrees with Lyotard and Derrida, and with the linguistic turn in philosophy. Badiou opposes the overpowering consequence of language for philosophy. He maintains the place of truth instead of the contemporary laboriousness of the post-structuralists. Additionally, Badiou does not run away from metaphysics or ontology. In fact, Badiou is explicitly trying to develop truth outside of “trendy” postmodernism. That being said, Badiou—like Foucault and his brethren—embraces the notion of aesthetics as a fundamental aspect of life. However, Badiou has a unique view of aesthetics and how it interacts with philosophy and the truth. Embracing notions of ontology, Badiou sees the ontology of the world as periodically being shaped by aesthetic events. (There are other type of “events” according to Badiou, but they are less important for the discussion here.) These events alter the relations of the underlying ontology of the world.
Badiou’s notion of aesthetics’ interaction with ontology is rather complex, and it rests on Cantor’s ideas concerning mathematic set theory. In fact, for Badiou Cantorian set theory is ontology. Hence, a study of set theory is essential to any comprehensive examination of Badiou’s work. Of course, a full explanation of set theory is way beyond the scope of this essay; nevertheless, it is important to understand some basic aspects of how Badiou understands set theory. For further explanation I would direct readers to Badiou’s amazing, yet somewhat esoteric, text *Being and Event*. For Badiou, mathematic set theory is a way to confront the notion of both individual and multiple identity. In some sense, it solves the same intellectual rupture that the “forms” did for Plato. Meaning for Badiou is defined as the inequality amid the reason of enclosure and the logic of belonging. In other words, the assigning of sets of identity shapes the underlying ontology of the universe. The Badiou scholar Peter Hallward (2003, 9) writes: “Set theory conceives a multiplicity “made” of nothing but multiples, in such a way that the traditional or premodern distinction of finite and infinite dissolves in a single homogeneous dissemination, in excess of any closure and in violation of any definitive order” (9).

For Badiou set theory explains the very notion of difference. Badiou (2007, 3) writes of this concept in the terms of fidelity to the “axiomatic”:

Axiomatics would be a formal organization of the decision that comes after its realization. The ontological decision, properly said, concerns multiplicity without the transcendence of the one and then, following that, axiomatics is the mathematical realization of the proper formalization of this decision. Naturally, with axiomatic, one will also have a logical choice but the choice would be on a logical world. The world in which one is installed depends on the ontological choice and not the contrary. A precise or technical example, here, is the ‘axiom of choice.’ In reality, the axiom of choice is an axiom concerning infinity, because there is no problem for the axiom of choice in the finite. In reality, the form of the axiom deals with the infinite.
For Badiou, different sets are constituted as our frames of realities. These sets establish the “transcendence of one” and the multiplicity of the single. Fidelity to the set, as it is arranged in the current axiomatic, is the key to understanding reality. As opposed to a view of difference that relies on Lacanian slippage—via Derrida—or on negative dialectics, such as suggested by Frankfurt-school scholars, Badiou sees difference as a kind of “belonging” to a set. Badiou (2005, 33) states that “the inevitable inference that the other is Other than the other as absolutely pure multiple and total dissemination self.” This rather awkward language can be understood as Badiou arguing that truth is relational; it is decided by the relative sets of different signified items. “What set theory itself provides is precisely a way of describing terms whose only distinguishing principle is distinction itself—the distinction inscribed by an arbitrary letter or proper name” (Ibid). Of course, given that relations create meaning, a true empty set is never reached.

On Badiou’s account, we understand the world—in a cognitive sense—by placing individual items into sets. These sets do not make sense if they are empty, and no individual item is understandable unless it is a member of a set. The “sets” are not fixed, but they are also not created arbitrarily: the sets are products of events that both create and reshape the relations of sets. Of course, we all understand that an individual item is not defined by the set, but the set lets us begin to understand the world. Hallward (2004, 85) writes: “To belong to the subset of French taxpayers has nothing to do with the substantial complexity of any individual taxpayer as a living, thinking person. Such elemental complexity is always held to be infinitely multiple, nothing more or less.” In other words, the sets of “French” and “taxpayer” help us understand the world—they
even somewhat shape the world—but the sets do not complete our understanding.

Understanding is complete, relatively, when fidelity is found. Badiou (2007, 6) continues:

In *Being and Event*, I studied exclusively the ontological destiny of fidelity. What interested me in *Being and Event* was demonstration that there exists a multiplicity which corresponds effectively to the production of fidelity which is the generic multiplicity, a generic subset. Thus it is an intra-ontological demonstration concerning fidelity and that is to say, effectively, that there is a real possibility to think the result of the process of fidelity as a multiple and we would not have to search for something outside the ontology itself. It is not something like another type of being, so the truth is not transcendental. Finally, then, the truth is inside the situation. Truth is multiplicity, as I have said, as well as the demonstration, the deduction of all that concerns the concept of generic multiplicity. With respect to the ontology, we have a deductive framework.

As the above-quoted passage indicates, Badiou’s adoption of set theory illuminates how truth can be both universal and contingent. For Badiou, an “event” is the foundation of truth, and all events break and reaffirm social structure. An event for Badiou is like a supernatural tornado that comes in and destroys some houses, creates confusing pandemonium, and then magically lays the foundations for some new buildings. Badiou (2003, 57-59) describes the “event” of St. Paul’s declaration of the savoir in Christ in a fashion that helps clarify the procedure of such happenings:

[T]he moment the real is identified as an event, making way for the division of the subject, the figures of distinction in discourse are terminated, because the position of the real instituted by them is revealed, through the retroaction of the event, to be illusory. … If one demands signs, he who performs them in abundance becomes master for him who demands them. If one questions philosophically, he who can reply becomes a master for the perplexed subject. But he who declares without prophetic or miraculous guarantees, without arguments or proofs, does not enter into the logic of the master. Declaration, in effect, is not affected by the emptiness (of the demand) wherein the master installs himself. He who declares does not attest to any lack and remains withdrawn from its fulfillment by the figure of the master. That is why it is possible for him to occupy the place of the son. To declare an event is to become the son of that event. That Christ is Son
is emblematic of the way which the evental declaration filiates the declarant (57 – 59).

To declare an event, one to which people are compelled to act with fidelity, is to move beyond logic or philosophy. It is change the “sets” of understanding; to make the finite appear infinite in our new faithfulness to the truth-event.

Badiou is often vague or obtuse when discussing the truth procedure of an event. Hence it is often helpful to turn to one of Badiou’s wisest interpreters. Given this need, Peter Hallward’s (2004, 6-7) description of Badiou’s notion of an event is illuminating:

An event is that moment when the ordinary rules according to which things consist in a situation are suspended, and the indistinguishable ‘stuff’ that is thus made consistent if for a passing instant is exposed as what it is, as pure inconsistency or pure indetermination. Since inconsistency can never be presented in the normal sense of the word, no such event can endure: it is never possible to prove that an encounter with inconsistency actually took place. The impact of the encounter depends entirely on the militant conviction of those who affirm its occurrence and elaborate some means of developing its implications.

As seen above, an event necessarily contains a sense of aporia. It is a rupture; a “torsion.” One could compare the aesthetic event to the way people describe so-called “alien abductions.” The “event” is a kind of noise, an “eventual break from the status quo or ordinary situation, which compels a recognition of the new.” (Cobussen 2005, 30). For Badiou, truth-events “shake up” the underlying “sets” of ontology and allows us to understand the world in different ways.

Given this notion of an event, truth—universal yet contingent—is fidelity to an event. Badiou is rather explicit concerning his notion of “fidelity.” Badiou (2006, 232) writes:

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10 Palti, 2003, has an excellent discussion of “torsions” in Badiou.
I call *fidelity* the set of procedures which discern, within a situation, those multiples whose existence depends upon the introduction into circulation … of an eventual multiple. In sum, a fidelity is the apparatus which separates out, within the set of presented multiples, those which depend upon an event. To be faithful is to gather together and distinguish the becoming legal of chance. … The word “fidelity” refers directly to the amorous relationship which refers, at the most sensitive point of individual experience, to the dialectic of being and event, the dialectic whose temporal ordination is proposed by fidelity.

When an event ruptures the ontological sets of society, people can hence choose—in a loose version of the term “choose”—to be faithful to the new arrangements. These new arrangements are hence no longer viewed as the product of rapturous event, or of chance, but of the logical continuous extension of underlying truths. Hence, a “truth emerges thanks to the subject or subjects, who declare fidelity to an event and it is only in doing this that they become subjects.” (Hewlett 2004, 342).

Given Badiou’s notion of both the “event” and of “fidelity,” he can believe in a universal “truth” that is not transcendental. On Badiou’s account, truth is universal in its fidelity to a contingent event. And given that Badiou rejects the notion that thought is mediated via language, he can also reject the poststructuralists notions of the non-subject. In other words, the event is almost similar to the Lacanian real—it is something we know and that affects us, but that which is almost impossible to label or describe. A truth produces the “murmur of the indiscernible.” (Hallward 2003, 91, quoting from Badiou’s *La Distance Politique*).

Hence, as mentioned above, for Badiou, an “event” is a foundation for truth. Specifically, Badiou (2009, 71) identifies four types of truth events: love, art, politics, and science. These four types of events allow for renewal of philosophical truth. Badiou (2005, 340) writes that “love, art, science, and politics generate—infinitely—truths concerning situations; truths subtracted from knowledge.” Though one might be
tempted to see philosophy as empty without poetry, this is not exactly true for Badiou. On Badiou’s account, philosophy must think about the possibility of all four aspects of truth, otherwise, philosophy simply ceases to exist.

Though there are four different types of truth events, aesthetic events are often the most understandable; “the notion of an artistic truth may for many readers be the most intuitively plausible or recognizable.” (Hallward 2003, 193). Aesthetic truth, like all truths, begins with an event—a rupture—that is then sustained by fidelity of subjects. This process is what Badiou describes as “inaesthetics.” In his work aptly titled *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou (2005, 9) describes “inaesthetics” as art’s unique ability to create philosophical truth:

> Art *itself* is a truth procedure. Or again, the philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths—be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy.

Hence, “inaesthetics” is the process by which an artistic event creates a truth regime. One could be tempted to describe Badiou’s aesthetics as a simple variant of traditional Arendtian judgment, but this would be a vulgar misstatement. Events create—using the language of Hallward and Deleuze—a new paradigm of truth, and fresh way by which we examine the world. Once an event occurs, normal philosophy—the tweaking of the positions inside a truth regime—can occur. The conflation of poetry with philosophy is, on Badiou’s account, a symptom of “suture.” Though I have my doubts that such is possible or desirable, for Badiou philosophy and art are (and should be) separate after a truth-altering event.
Badiou’s notion that foundations are contingent and are based in ideas outside of logic is similar to the thought of Ernesto Grassi. A Vico scholar and an intellectual of modern rhetoric, Grassi asserts that the underpinning of all philosophy is a metaphor based around compelling rhetoric. More specifically, Grassi’s ideas fit in with the current restoration of humanism and hermeneutics. Like many contemporary theorists, Grassi starts with distrust of Descartes. That being said, the similarity in thought to Hans-Georg Gadamer is very telling: Both Gadamer and Grassi studied under Heidegger, but both were not swayed by Heidegger’s denunciation of humanism. Additionally, both Grassi and Gadamer saw rhetoric as essential to their assumptions. Yet Grassi found fundamental roots in rhetoric, and his description of how rhetoric grounds truth is similar to Badiou’s concept of a truth-event. Grassi (2001, 7) writes:

The metaphor is, therefore, the original form of the interpretive act itself, which raises itself from the particular to the general through representation in an image, but, of course, always with regard to its importance for human beings.

Though Grassi writes in the language of hermeneutics, and therefore places a lot of emphasis on interpretation, one can still see the common thread between Badiou and Grassi. Both thinkers believe that logic and philosophy rest on a foundation of a kind of creation, and that such a creation is beyond the realm of logic to understand. Grassi (Ibid, 20) continues:

This original speech, because of its “archaic” character, sketches the framework for every rational consideration, and for the reason we are obliged to say that rhetorical speech “comes before” rational speech, i.e., it has a “prophetic”… character and never again can be comprehended from a rational, deductive point of view.
Of course, Badiou’s “events” seem more earth-shattering, but that may be more a matter of degree than of kind. Grassi—like Badiou—thinks that faithfulness to a rhetorical “given” is the key to truth.

Both Grassi and Badiou are influenced by Heidegger, and the notion of the event is laced into Heidegger’s philosophy. However, Badiou’s notion of the event is tied ideas of truth that are both universal and contingent. Events, for Badiou, are collective, but are ultimately based on fidelity to that event. That being said, even if one reads a notion of the “event” into Heidegger—and Grassi—it is still possible to be unfaithful to the event. However for Badiou, one can be unfaithful to the production of truth following an event, but once an event establishes truth then faithfulness is linked to the lack of a rupture. Truth continues once the event is established, at least until a new rupture occurs.

Given this, my analysis of Badiou adds a Ranciére style analysis of Badiouian notion of truth procedures. The events create a new alignment of aesthetic filters, of the afore-mentioned aesthetic categories. In some sense this manuscript is a long-form discussion of alignment of filters, and how those filters interact. Badiou isolates the ontology of various spheres of existence: politics, love, etc. However, Badiou—as even he himself acknowledges—does not fully explore the interaction of the spheres of truth, based on truth-events. As noted previously, Ranciére is very helpful in examining the interaction of the aesthetic and the political. In this sense, it is an assertion of this manuscript that the spheres are independent and co-dependent, in the same way that Badiou’s notes that truth-events are both universal and contingent. Hence, using a well-developed analysis of Badiou and Ranciére—along with Hedegger, Grassi, and
others—this manuscript attempts to outline the interaction of aesthetic truth-events with politics. Hence, Badiou’s truth-creation procedure interpreted through Rancière’s notion of aesthetic filters, as well as the “political,” adds to Heidegger’s ideas on art’s societal position.

As noted above, Badiou’s “truth-altering event” happens in the area of love, science, and politics, but it is most pronounced—for Badiou—in the realm of aesthetics. This notion of “inaesthetics” separates Badiou’s thought from both the critical theory of Adorno / Marcuse and the postmodernism of Lyotard / Derrida / Foucault. Peter Hallward (2003, 193) writes: “Where Adorno and Lyotard, for example, look to the general characteristics of an aesthetic conception of things—as a means, precisely, of “representing” the objectively unrepresentable reality of things—Badiou looks for the quite exceptional consequences resulting from a fidelity to a couple of privileged artistic sequences or ‘configurations.’” Hence, where the critical theorists look at art as a reflection of ideology, and the postmodernists view art as an outgrowth of the discourses of contemporary society, Badiou actually gives art a semblance of autonomy.

Hence, Badiou’s inaesthetics represents a middle ground from the radical atomism of aesthetic individuality and a contrary position—whether Marxist or Platonic—that insists on a hard metaphysics and/or ontology. For Badiou “something new” is possible via art (and love, etc), but not just anything is possible. (Cobussen 2005, 41). In a sense, Badiou’s notion of the (in)esthetic event is tied directly to his ontology of set theory. The status quo, for Badiou, is the existing “set(s)” and, hence, the underlying
ontology of the current situation. However, the event “does not belong to any existing set and belongs only to itself. It is a ‘breakdown of the count’.” (Hewlett 2004, 346).

This dependence on the “count,” as well as the interaction between universal and the particular is a key to understanding how Badiou explains the non-instrumental value of art. In other words, it is a concern that art, seen only as an event to which one can be faithful, hence only has utility and not intrinsic—or aesthetic—value. In other words, does the value of art work lay in its ability to either convert people to a stance of fidelity in accordance with its sensibility or in its usefulness in establishing a philosophical proposition? I would argue that Badiou's work nicely addresses this type of complaint in his discussion of the universal and the eternal. In a sense, Badiou addresses this issue when he talks about the way the eternal appears in the effective. In Logic of Worlds, which acts as a sequel of sorts to Being and Event, Badiou (2009, 13) writes: “As eternal as it may be, a mathematical truth nevertheless appear for its eternity to be effective.” In other words, if things appear to be effective, and as long as they remain effective, then they will be eternal. Badiou (2009, 27) states in Philosophy in the Present: “The universal is both what determines its own points as subject-thoughts and the virtual recollection of those points. Thus the central dialectic at work in the universal is that of the local subject and of the global as infinite procedure. This dialectic is thought itself.” In this sense, the “use-value” of an art work and its intrinsic value are ultimately linked.

Badiou’s discussion in Logic of Worlds of various images of a horse helps elaborate the issue here. Specifically Badiou examines the images of horses as found in the Chauvet cave, dated to roughly 30,000 years ago, and Picasso’s famous horses
painted around 1945. In this sense we have two separate meanings of the image of the “horse.” For the artist of the Chauvet cave, one assumes that the horse image corresponded to empirical data manifesting itself to the artist as a visual impression. Hence, the images in the cave have a kind of utility, a naming, that is a key to early graphics. The Chauvet cave image supports a kind of correspondence theory of truth. In contrast, Picasso is not concerned with the same kind of utility. According to Badiou (2009, 17), a relativist could possibly “declare victory” at this chasm of meaning, and state that “Picasso’s horses, with their stylized heads and the geometric treatment of their legs, are only comprehensible as modern operations carried out on ‘realistic’ horses.” Hence, on one view, horse itself—or the image of a horse—has no inherent meaning. Its meaning is simply tied to its temporal moment.

Badiou does think that the meanings of the various horses are different, but he does not think that this indicates that the term horse itself is has no eternal truth. On the contrary, he sees eternity in the temporality. In a move reminiscent of Badiou’s set-theory ontology, he argues that the movement into existence of thought—and the fidelity to that movement—is where eternity exists. The movement to mark, to outline the horse, is the moment of the eternal. “It brings together a flagrant eternal organic unity with the always recognizable character of its specific form.” (Ibid, 19). In a perceptive passage worth quoting at length, Badiou writes about the meaning of the images of the horse:

This means that—as in the Platonic myth, but in reverse—to paint an animal on the wall of a cave is to flee the cave so as to ascend towards the light of an idea. This is what Plato feigns not to see: the image, here, is the opposite of the shadow. It attests the Idea in the varied invariance of its pictorial sign. Far from being the descent of the idea into the sensible, it is the sensible creation of the idea. ‘This is a horse’—that is what the Master
of Chauvet cave says. And since he says it at a remove from any visibility of a living horse, he *avers* the horse as what exists eternally for thought. (Ibid)

For Picasso, Badiou argues, that the moment of creation represents the moment of an event that allows for the eternal. Hence, the subtraction of the horse—as the artist separates the lines (or outlines)—works in the same way Badiou’s ontological set-theory works. The moment of subtraction is the event to which fidelity springs.

If meaning is defined by fidelity to the event, then both Picasso and the artist of Chauvet cave engage in the same thing: a fidelity to the meaning of the outline of the horse. It is true that the outline itself had a hunting utility in the days of the cave, and in Picasso’s time it has a different “utility,” both of which to Badiou is not much of a “utility” in the traditional sense. Despite this “utility,” Badiou views the horse drawings on the cave in way similar to Heidegger’s aesthetic philosophy. Like the artist bringing-forth-Being, the master of the Chauvet cave is neither corresponding to reality—in an empirical or Platonic way—nor creating reality. The master is, in contrast, bringing forth a moment that allows us to conform to “reality,” which for Badiou means acting in accordance with fidelity to an event. Badiou (Ibid, 20) writes: “A famous critic thought he was laughing behind Plato’s back by saying: ‘I do see some horses, but I see no Horseness’. In the immense progression of pictorial creations, from the hunter with his torch to the modern millionaire, it is indeed Horseness, and nothing else, which we see.” “Horseness” is the bringing-forth of reality in context of marks of subtraction.

This same analysis can be applied to the discussion of whether aesthetics can be “useful.” Of course, it is a concern whether it is appropriate for people to “use” aesthetics and/or art for other purposes. Art cannot be “used” in this sense; art can only exist as a coming-forth. Hence, art experienced in a way that would make Dewey proud
is one kind of Being-bringing-forth, and art as an inter-textual reference is another
Being-bringing-forth. Or, put into Badiouian language, art experienced intrinsically and
art discussed via intellectual debate is still art that remains faithful to a certain artistic
event that is defined by a level of subtraction. In this sense, we can talk about “horse,”
or “Horseness,” or “Beatles,” and still know what we mean.\footnote{We can see this as Badiou “uses” the horses of the cave and Picasso, and, also, in his discussion of
Valery’s “Graveyard by the Sea” in Logic of Worlds. Badiou asserts that Valery creates a kind of world of
understanding. (2009, 455).}

\textbf{The “Event” as it Unfolds: Badiou and The Beatles}

“\textit{Apparition, four brown English, jacket chrishair boys}”

- Allen Ginsberg (from “Portland Coliseum”)

For Badiou, what is true is still aesthetic, but it is shaped by all. (Hallward 2003, 6). Events take place in a situation, in a given context. (Badiou 2006, 23). Hence, to
my mind, Badiou’s notion of inaesthesia answers some of the above-described doubts
about aesthetic self-creation. Badiou’s ideas concerning aesthetics are still
dependent—somewhat—on the subject’s choice, but it also emphasizes the effect that
the collective, chance, and serendipity have on aesthetics, meaning, and truth.
Additionally, Badiou allows for the fact that an aesthetic event can unfold suddenly or
over a series of aesthetic works. In fact, an artistic event is “not usually a single work as
much as a cluster or works.” (Hallward 2003, 196). Hence, Badiou understands that
artistic events can happen over time, and can almost be seen as a less conscious
version of a Kuhnian paradigm shift.

In fact, an entrenched system of truths implies another outside system. In other
words, all aesthetic systems imply a kind of cognitive noise. Cobussen (2005, 31)
examines Badiou’s notion of an event in the context of musical aesthetics: “It is the catastrophe inscribed in every order; in fact, there is no order that does not contain disorder within itself, no music that does not have noise at its fringes, no order that can exclude powers that pushes this order to its own limits.” Hence, to place this contention in Badiou’s language of set theory, the relations of the sets always imply a tension that is the root of the potential event that changes the sets. This is not to say, in a Derridean fashion, that all statements of truth contain their own deconstruction; it is to insist that truth is relational and that all relations imply a non-relation.

I believe that Badiou’s notion of an aesthetic event is seen in the popular-music British Invasion of the 1960s: explicitly in the arrival on the international scene of the Beatles and the change they created in popular music. Given this, I will briefly explore this connection, and hence examine how the arrival of the Beatles can be explained via Badiou’s analysis. In this context, it is important to remember that Badiou is explicit that art can create truth, but it is truth in the context of humanness. (Hallward 2003, 197, 198). Hence, one cannot imagine that Badiou asserts a kind of sovereign creation, even thought artistic creation is—or can be—knowledge creation. “Knowledge is gained in the creative act.” (Cobussen 2005, 32). As Badiou (2005, 29) writes, the “poem teaches us that the world does not present itself as a collection of objects.” Yet, it is not brand-new creation, but creation in the context of the existing ontological sets and fidelity to such sets.

To connect Badiou’s notion of the event to the arrival of the Beatles, one must look inside the aesthetic nature of music creation. Mark Cobussen (2005, 36) writes such a superb description of this process that it is important to quote it extent:
Musicians can practice, surround themselves with kindred spirits and brilliant co-musicians, create an inspiring atmosphere, but they never know if, how, and when it will happen. An intangible moment. It happened for example at a Miles Davis concert at the North Sea Festival in the Hague, the Netherlands. Miles, ill, on the wane, played in an uninspired manner, weakly, perfunctorily. And then, suddenly, unexpectedly ... one note of his (amplified) trumpet ... so poignant, so apt, so, so, so ... true! A shiver went through the audience. For this note they had come and everybody knew it (including the band members). An evental dimension beyond the will of an individual.

Though the progression of creation for the Beatles was slightly different given that they played pop music, not jazz, the meta-process is roughly the same. The Beatles left Liverpool, for Hamburg, an uninspired band with some potential and good taste, and they returned to Liverpool a collective transporting a wholly original view of popular music. Reports of the Beatles’ arrival back in Liverpool—at the Litherton Town Hall—describe listeners in shock. Many people stared, some rioted and rushed the stage: General pandemonium ensued: “The reaction of the audience was so unexpected that Wooler (the promoter) had failed, in first few seconds, to take note of it. Part of the reason was the shocking explosion that shook the hall. ... The music crashing around (the audience) was discernibly a species of rock ‘n roll but played unlike they had ever heard it before. ... It was convulsive, ugly, frightening, and visceral in the way that it touched off a frenzy in the crowd.” (Spitz 2006, 10).

Greil Marcus characterized the Beatles event. Like Cobussen’s comments quoted above, Marcus’ (2006, 78-79) discussion of the Beatles is so perceptive that there is vast merit in quoting Marcus in near completion:

Four hundred people (in Ed Sullivan’s theater) sat transfixed as the Beatles sang “I Want To Hold Your Hand,” and when the song was over the crowd exploded. People looked at the faces (and the hair) of John, Paul, George, and Ringo and said Yes ... They heard the Beatles’ sound and said Yes to that too. What was going on? ... Back at the radio I caught “I Saw Her Standing There” and was instantly convinced it was the most exciting rock
& roll I’d ever heard. … Someone from down the hall appeared with a copy of the actual record—you could just go out and buy this stuff?—and announced with great fake solemnity that it was the first 45 he’d purchased since “All Shook Up.” Someone else—who played a twelve-string guitar and as far as I knew listened to nothing but Odetta—began to muse that “even as a generation had been brought together by the Five Satins’ “In the Still of the Night,” it could be that it would be brought together again—by the Beatles?” He really talked like that; what was more amazing, he talked like that when a few hours before he had never heard of the Beatles. … The next weeks went by in a blur. … Excitement wasn’t in the air; it was the air. … [The Beatles’] music, shaking through the dark, suddenly spooky room, was instantly recognizable and like nothing we had ever heard. It was joyous, threatening, absurd, arrogant, determined, innocent and tough, and it drew the line of which Dylan was to speak: “This was something that never happened before.” … It was, as Lester Bang says … not simply a matter of music, but of event.

Given Marcus’ illuminating statements above, I would contend that the arrival of the Beatles has the markings of an aesthetic event exactly as Badiou envisioned. One might think it is problem that Marcus cannot explicitly explain his fidelity to the new aesthetic choice of the Beatles. Yet, Badiou understands that, to certain extent, the universal is explained by fidelity to an event. Hence, any explanation of such fidelity is a bit besides the point. “The correlation between the universal and event is fundamental.” (Badiou 2009, 31)

Specifically, the Beatles represented an aesthetic of possibility, of the new. Immediately aspects of the old-world—short hair, pristine I-III-V harmonies, un-ironic reverence to authority—were rendered archaic. The old societal divisions were also seen as arbitrary: “girl groups” and “boy groups,” the Beatles were influenced by both; “high culture” and “low culture,” The Beatles smashed the lines between the two. “The Beatles, aided by George Martin, broke through the barriers between “high” and “low” culture.” (Sullivan 1995, 128). In some sense, a whole new brand of authenticity—one of which Heidegger would be proud—was demanded of both our artists and our
populace. Erin Kealey (2006, 116) describes the Beatles’ call for authenticity in Heideggerian terms:

As we fall into the shared world of everyday concerns, authentic individuality is stripped away. Rather than disclosing what Heidegger calls our own most potential, we exist inauthentically as nameless members of the crowd. In authentic existence becomes one without a home, or our own place, because the “there” (the “da” of Dasein) is controlled by average everydayness. Such a “Nowhere Man” (Rubber Soul, 1965) makes no place for himself and does not take an active role in shaping his own possibilities. Instead, he merely sits “in his nowhere land / making all his nowhere plans for nobody.” The Beatles attempt to reach out and warn the Nowhere Man that he is missing opportunities in his Nowhere Land. “The World is at your command,” and the Beatles try to alert him to possibility of an authentic existence.

Yet this quest for authenticity is not based on the atomistic philosophy of aesthetic individualism. Like all aspects of the Beatles’ truth-creation, and of Badiou’s notion of the aesthetic event, the Beatles’ redefinition of authenticity has a collective element: The “Beatles see our potential and compassionately call to us.” (Kealey 2006, 116). This appreciation of the collective was ingrained in the entire Beatles event. Previous groups often focused on one star and his backing band, a kind of capitalist / labor relation (e.g., Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Smoky Robinson and the Miracles, etc). Or, in contrast, other pop groups seemed to represent nameless collectivity (e.g. the Drifters or the Crystals). Yet the Beatles were individualistic—everyone could name all four Beatles and I doubt a culturally literate westerner today, over forty years later, would be stumped as to name them—however, there was also no clear star of the band. The Beatles celebrated their individual characters and the collective notion of the band also. The Beatles—like Badiou’s truth—was both singular and multiple. “When Paul takes lead vocal, John and George will back him up; or George and Paul together will back up John. George frequently takes the lead, and, on simple vocal lines, sometimes
Ringo‖ (Sullivan 1995, 120). This new form of individuality, based on idiosyncratic personal natures and on a sense of solidarity, is at the core of the whole social philosophy of the baby-boomers. One only needs to look at the recent retirement advertisements featuring Dennis Hopper to see that the boomers have remained faithful—keeping fidelity in accordance with Badiou’s theory of the “truth event”—to this unique mix of egoism and collectivism. Though the Beatles shaking their heads and screaming “whoooh” changed society in a slightly similar way to Elvis Presley shaking his hips, the Beatles did it as four musicians together, not as a solitary uber-singer.

The new Lennon-McCartney songwriting partnership also recreated reality. As opposed to a traditional partnership—where the roles of the participants are set—Lennon and McCartney were partners in a unique way. Like their music, there were few—if any—rules to the boundaries of the partnership. This was helped by the fact that Lennon and McCartney agreed early-on that any song composed by either of them would be given the “Lennon-McCartney” composing byline. (Ibid, 121). In one sense, this type of partnership recognized that the budding musicians’ influence on each other was present even when the other was not physically around: “John and Paul had come to internalize each other as Lacan’s idealized gaze.” (Ibid, 123). However, the Lennon-McCartney partnership also established that a unit could be egalitarian without being “fixed” and or overly regulated. This type of musical partnership truly had no precedent.

Sullivan (Ibid, 122) writes:

[T]he very songwriting partnership [of Lennon and McCartney] was novel and, arguably, the first of its kind in history. In everything from show tunes to grand opera, the pattern over the centuries had been for a librettist to draw up a text from a written source or out of his own head, and for the composer to set it to music. … In the case of Lennon and McCartney, both of them wrote music and lyrics, an each edited the other’s work.
In other words, though the “Lennon / McCartney” label had an strong element of equality to it—McCartney received fifty-percent credit for a song that was mostly written by Lennon like “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Nowhere Man,” and similarly Lennon received credit for McCartney-led numbers like “Yesterday” and “Hey Jude”—yet, at the same time, there were few guidelines for the partnership itself. It is possible that this freedom of process helped create such spontaneous-sounding harmonies.

In fact, the Beatles’ harmonies that underlined the “whoos” are as much of the basis of the Beatles’ early greatness; the harmonies sound like pleasant contretemps. The Beatles’ harmonies showed an intuitive grasp of the limits of musical acceptability. Their vocal harmonies were so unique that they bordered on strange: “the complexity of the vocal harmonies still astounds one: Singing in thirds and sixths below the vocal line was standard … [but the Beatles] often put the thirds or sixths above the main vocalists’ lines. … Most characteristically, the sung accompaniment is not sustained throughout, but interjected, or used only at key emotive climaxes.” (Ibid, 120). In fact, their harmonies were almost magical; they are “miracle as experience.” (Ibid, 126). As noted above, Lennon and McCartney tended to write songs that emphasized the “blue notes”—the off notes—that sounded somewhat discordant to the casual listener. Yet these harmonies were so amazingly inventive that they redefined the ontology of acceptable “notes,” rendering the whole universe of old-style harmonies in a set of ideas that now sounded “out of date” or “un-hip.” As Sullivan writes, “one of the Beatles’ most distinctive characteristics in this early period (and throughout their career generally) is the use of nonharmonic tones in the melody line.” (Ibid, 125). Like Dorothy Gale
moving from Kansas to Oz, the world suddenly appeared to be “in color” after the Beatles arrival.

Certainly some of the Beatles impact was connected to the psychology of the west in early 1964—in particular of the U.S. and Britain. The U.S. had just lost its youngest elected president, John Kennedy, and a symbol of youth and vigor was wiped-out in one violent act. The Beatles, I am sure, were a kind of anesthetic for the sadness surrounding the Kennedy assignation. Similarly, the conservative government in Britain was rocked by unprecedented sex scandals, and the newly elected labor-part prime minister—Harold Wilson—pushed for a “new” Britain that celebrated its emerging young culture. Both countries had no desire to welter in their suffering. Luckily the tutelary of musical beauty was about to bless the world.

The Beatles’ arrival and early catalogue was an aesthetic event, but it was one that had clear political impacts. A new cognitive universe was created: one in which new possibilities were created—a sitar on a pop song, “sure;” four guys singing girl-group songs without changing the lyrical gender, “why not;” two working-class fellows without musical training being lauded by people like Leonard Bernstein and William Mann as the greatest living composers, no problem. This new universe of possibilities is one conducive to the women’s rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the gay rights movement. Truth be told, with this new freedom came a kind of narcissistic self-indulgence, which in turn led to a conservative backlash. In fact, no less of a conservative than Allan Bloom (1987) himself links the “closing of the American mind” to the arrival of the Beatles on the cultural scene.
Despite the fueling of a conservative backlash, the music itself—and art in general—became democratized after the 1960s. The Beatles—and, of course, Bob Dylan—made it safe for cultural snobs to pay attention to pop culture without fear of being labeled a louche. Also, “self-contained” pop-cum-garage bands sprang up all over the west, and there was a sense that anyone could be the Beatles. Of course, the Beatles themselves moved quickly away from the notion of a self-contained group—employing orchestras, studio experimentation, and other adornments—but the notion that a group of musicians could create great art in a sweaty club in places like Hamburg and Liverpool remained.

It should be noted that the Beatles aesthetic event—like all events as described by Badiou—does not represent a complete break with the past. It is merely a re-ordering of the underlying sets of aesthetic ideas; as if the masses were dancers whose terpsichorean activities blended ballet and experimental dance. The Beatles arrival, in Badiou’s terms, was an event that created new “genuine thought.” (Badiou 2005, 61) As Greil Marcus noted, reality changed after the Beatles. It is this notion—a collective aesthetic event that creates a whole new version of reality—that is an exemplar of Badiou’s aesthetic event. In other words, the axiomatic of reality shifted somewhat after the Beatles arrived. The acceptability of long(er) hair, the physical expression of female desire, the unique notion of the individual triumphing within a group—all of these notions where somewhat affected by the Beatles. This is not to overstate the case; certainly many other social factors, not to mention economic and political issues, helped to alter reality in the 1960s. However, the Beatles were one of these events that—in Badiou’s terms—rearranged the “sets” of our underlying truth. The way people viewed the world,
and the fidelity to which they felt compelled, was altered why four lower-class men from Liverpool singing pop songs.

Thinkers have recognized the socio-political impact of the Beatles. Robert Pielke (1986) argues that the Beatles’ pop music was actually a radical energy in our society. Moreover, for some thinkers, the standard means for distribution of innovatory value is artistic artifacts. One can outline the 1960s upheaval back to Chuck Berry’s “duck-walk” and the shocking Little Richard. Middle-class adolescence magnetism to forbidden alleged “negro” music initially combined in Elvis Presley, a more metaphorically edible figurative synthesis of white disenchantment and African-American resistance into a dissident reversal of the status quo. The obligatory confirmation of rebellious novel mores lives in the music of the Beatles, who helped propagate the exploration of greater autonomy, uniqueness, empathy, and accord in the subsequent decade. In fact, Joseph J. Mangano (1994) argues that the Beatles supplied a whole distinctiveness for the boomer generation.

Ian MacDonald (1994, 25) writes:

The true revolution of the Sixties—more powerful and decisive for the Western society than any of its external by-products—was inner one of feeling and assumption: a revolution in the head. Few were unaffected by this … It was a revolution of and in the common man; a revolution (that is) readable nowhere more vividly that in The Beatles records (25).

MacDonald continues, writing that the Beatles were revolutionary—in good and bad ways—and their music changed our perception of reality:

The irony of modern right-wing antipathy to the Sixties is this much misunderstood decade was, in all but the most superficial senses, the creation of the very people who voted for Thatcher and Reagan in the Eighties. It is, to put it mildly, curious to hear Thatcherites condemn a decade in which ordinary folk for the first time aspired to individual self-determination and a life of material security within an economy of high employment and low inflation. … [Beatles music] played a role in reinforcing
the relaxation was to various degrees willed by the majority … The ultimate root of this degenerative trait lies in the psychological change induced into the Western life during 1963–1973: the revolution in the head which The Beatles played a large part in advancing and whose manifesto runs willy-nilly through their work, rendering it not only an outstanding repository of popular art by a cultural document of permanent significance. (Ibid, 29-33)

Overlooking the ignorance of right-wing critics, this “revolution in the head,” of which McDonald writes, is an endeavor by the Beatles to discover a conduit to a laudable existence, as well an effort to transgress the limitations of their era. The Beatles, as per a Badiouian even, seemed to be both timely and timeless. Described in the terms of a politics of the mind, the Beatles represent a political revolution of cognition.

**Lennon and the Longevity of Badiou’s Truth Event**

The yarn is now a chaotic one. The contention in this chapter rests on the actuality that we can climb higher than post-modern self-aesthetics and squeeze a diverse vision of the interface connecting aesthetics and ethics/politics. As argued above, the Beatles showed us that individual plurality sees its sources in the plurality of the mind. Taken as a whole, there are abundant ways to interpret aesthetics into our lives. Undeniably, the inquiry of how best to" fit" the Beatles event—or even aesthetics in general—cannot be answered, at least not until these aesthetics have been grappled with on their own terms. Humans’ are almost certainly incapable of entering the aesthetic forms of the Beatles’ web unfettered by our “essential” needs. Moreover, given the dangers lurking within this web, and the likelihood of becoming terribly missing within it is elevated. Even so, we must distinguish that intellectual refuge has its price tag. The Beatles would by no means attain their “revolution in the head” had they clung to formal musical security.
Given this “revolution”—what argued could be a Badiou-style event—a politics is to be tackled in the music of the Beatles. Its drive, on the other hand, is not en route to the understanding of explicit ambitions but somewhat toward the examination of the human existence—the proverbial “human condition”—that any such endeavored awareness must tackle. That there exists a politics of the mind—in which the Beatles’ Badouian revolution can apply—is an enduring inquiry that can scarcely be resolved. This is not to say that the Beatles and Badiou do not present us with some explicit political confrontations. Also, if we are to infer a pragmatically useful message from our contact with the Beatles’ politics of the “head,” and consequently articulate it in words that communicate to with our everyday political life, then it ought to defy our own conventional ethical and epistemological understandings. The “human condition” is plural not singular. Within culture, as within the mind, there are no algorithms for fairness. However much the components might linger; there is no surrogate for experiencing the world in a new way: a revolution in head.

Returning to the story of my father and his sports-car-that-never-was, I think that Badiou’s philosophy solves some of the riddle presented in the introduction. My dad shared a distrust for God-like meta-narratives, but he could still embrace the shared cultural event of the Beatles and his generation. Of course, the notion of aesthetic individuality—read as a kind of hedonism—has had a certain appeal for the “boomer” generation. However, some underlying truths—be they aesthetic, scientific, or etc—have near universal appeal. That is not to say that these “truths” are transcendental; they are not. But the truths are not entirely whimsical. As conservatives noted years ago, many people will feel as if their lives are meaningless if they adopt a Nietzschean
point of view. In contrast, Badiou allows ethical, social, and political theory to still have an “aesthetic element” without reducing people to lonely atomistic individuals. A collective notion of beauty is ultimately celebrated without the fear of an empty existence.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: VITAL AESTHETICS

Form Battles Ressentiment

I spent the previous five chapters discussing the various ways in which the formal aspects of art interact with political thought. This discussion sometimes criticized standard views of art and aesthetics, and it sometimes delved into various art-works in order to examine the political implication of the formal qualities of art. However, this discussion has been short on explicitly prescriptive elements. And in this brief chapter, I attempt to address the issues raised here in a more normative vein. If one of the core chapters of this manuscript discusses what I call “wounded aesthetics,” then I must suggest a kind of “vital aesthetics.”

So how can aesthetics engage with politics in a way that is vital for our existence, a way that avoids the perils of wounded aesthetics? One aspect of such an interaction would be to understand the proper way that aesthetics fits into the ethical. Prior to discussing this issue, I feel I must examine the concern of some thinkers about the aestheticization of politics. Walter Benjamin is one of the first thinkers to discuss the aestheticization of politics, and how such aestheticization leads to totalizing kinds of politics such as Fascism, and—anachronistically—Stalinism. Benjamin argues that politics taken as an art-form can create a system that neglects the individual and sacrifices all to the artistic whole of the collective.

However, Benjamin’s notion ignores the afore-discussed idea from Ranciére that all politics are based on a kind of aesthetic regime. For example, for Ranciére democracy has an underlying aesthetic order that is also reflected in Flaubert’s work. In this manuscript I argued that works by creators as diverse as Phillip Roth, David Lynch,
and the Beatles tend to reflect—or subtly change—our ideas concerning the underlying aesthetic regime, a regime which affects the political. Yet, as seen here, my concern in this essay—and this chapter—is the way that the aesthetic interacts with the political and politics. I am not suggesting that aesthetics themselves would be a good basis for politics. To do so would be to not understand the proper relations between the aesthetic and the political. The aesthetic realm interacts with the political, on an experiential level that is not explained by the content-based theories of Nussbaum and Rorty, but one could not base political thought—or politics itself—on aesthetics. To do would be to invite the complaints suggested by Benjamin and others. Of course, I do suggest that “wounded” aesthetics—aesthetics slave to a notion of content as truth—is a poor basis for politics. However, my concern is addressing how the aesthetic realm—usually expressed via art—does and should affect the political.

Given this, a concern with vital aesthetics would be one that addresses the aesthetic realm as properly understood. I first considered a turn to “healthy” aesthetics, but I feared that such a turn would simply normalize bio-medical view of the world, as well as reinforce a binary mold to understanding the life. To even grasp the aesthetic realm as properly understood, I would suggest that we must destroy the gap implied by my analysis regarding “wounded” aesthetics. Art need not discuss politics explicitly, nor does it need to be concerned with politics. Art should, in an attempt to avoid wounded aesthetics, be politics. In this sense, I am discussing the notion of politics as I have defined earlier in this manuscript—a definition of politics that combines the thought of Arendt and Ranciére. Put another way, if one understands politics in the Arendtian sense of creating meaning via action in a space of appearance, then art itself can be

1 My thoughts on this matter were influenced by conversations with Leslie Thiele.
politics. Effective art that resonates with an audience should create meaning; it should be politics itself. If one wants to put it the context of Ranciére’s thought, art can create various ways in which we redefine the distribution of the sensible.

By creating meaning in this way, vital aesthetics is a way to battle Nietzschean “ressentiment,” a kind of pain that is attached to our own feeling of inferiority and the lack of ego. On Nietzsche’s account, ressentiment is battled when we take action, and hence when we do not contemplate the way the world is acting upon us. Ressentiment is a key concept for Wendy Brown’s notion of wounded attachments, and it is also fundamental to my argument concerning wounded aesthetics. However, art that creates meaning, that embraces Arendt’s notion of politics, can battle this ressentiment by embracing the excitement of life, and hence the fluidity of social interaction.

An embrace of the formal aspects of art, of the aesthetics in aesthetics, is a key aspect of battling ressentiment. As mentioned previously, art’s form is the way that we interact with aesthetic experiences. Hence, it is reasonable to say that form is the primary way that we engage with art. In fact, being exciting and interesting in a formal way is one of the best ways to shape up the often-interesting relationship between form and content. An embrace of form, which would battle the underlying ressentiment of a world based on wounded aesthetics, busts out of our slavery to content, a slavery that Nietzsche might equate with an attachment to the Socratic. Bland form reinforces the status quo, the same way of “seeing” the world, the same distribution of the sensible. In this sense, bland form as a slave to content—a form attached to wounded aesthetics—exercises the demons of Kant’s aesthetics. Content-based art tries to fill the gap between banal form and “true” content—or one could say the gap represented by the
lack of aesthetic quality—with a Kantian loss of truth. In other words, art is sadly allowed to not be good because it is “true.” And this allowance of the lack of quality pushes ressentiment, and it decreases the overall quality of life. However, an embrace of the excitement of form discourages a sickly kind of wounded aesthetics, and it shows us the ways in which aesthetics can be vital.

In other words, a vital notion of aesthetics would embrace a kind of formal quality that would allow us to create meaning—and hence engage in politics—in various ways via art and aesthetics. Art itself would be a political act, and that act would not be dependent on the particular content of the kind of art; it would be formed by the experience of the art itself. Various artworks would allow us to, in Ranciére’s terms, distribute the sensible in way that made us see the world in a new way. This seeing of the world enables us to redefine the political landscapes, in fact, one might suggest that the new way of seeing is political. And hence, vital aesthetics allows art to interact with politics in a way that properly embraces the various roles of the political and aesthetic.

The Aesthetic Realm and Its Influence

The aesthetic realm is the realm of experience valued by beauty, and hence a realm of experience whose value is assigned by the experience itself. (Panagia 2006, 5). To be valuable in the aesthetic realm is to be valuable in a non-instrumental way—non-instrumental outside of immediate sense experience. Of course, this is not the only realm of life: As Heidegger suggests, there are ethical realms, political realms, legal realms, technological realms, as well as others. However, as suggested in chapter

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2 I am in no way attempting to create a hard and fast schematic for existence. Put another way, I do not seek to establish a kind of ontological basis for reality such as Badiou. I acknowledge that these realms can overlap somewhat, and that they are not exclusive or totally distinct. However, I find such realms as a useful and pleasant way to break up the world.
two of this manuscript, the aesthetic realm helps to establish a kind of non-foundational foundation for the ethical and political realm. Using the thought of Rancière, I argued that aesthetics establishes a notion of seeing, and it is this seeing that shapes the political. Hence, properly understood, the vital aesthetic has a role in grounding the political realm.

A proper gratitude for the aesthetic realm would allow us to appreciate experience in an appropriate way; it would allow us to value experience for the sake of experience itself. If we return to chapter one's discussion of Nietzsche, then we can understand the world itself is based on the creation of new surfaces, new appearances. This creation of new surfaces allows us to see the world in different ways because the distinct aspects of appearance are valued in different ways. In other words, various aspects of surface appearance are based almost entirely on the rearrangement of phenomena on those surfaces. To understand the world—to value the surfaces—is to determine what is worth identifying. This identifying—determined what is seen, what is sensible—is the basis of the link between the aesthetic and the political. Hence, a proper notion of aesthetics, an aesthetics based on surface and form, properly interacts with the political realm by rearranging the surfaces of identification.

To properly appreciate the aesthetic, one needs to treat experience for its own sake. This is not to say that all experience should be treated in such a way that justifies experience for its own sake. There are moments when actions must be judged or appreciated for their instrumental value. Specifically, the technological realm is based on the notion that people use certain things for other purposes. Martin Heidegger is crucial to the understanding of technology here. According to Heidegger, modern
technology is troubling because it allows us to use all objects—even possibly people—as a kind of energy for another purpose. The problem with this thought is that it allows us to justify the use of the whole world as a resource, as a thing to be held in reserve. Hence, the aesthetic realm—and other realms, for that matter—is always being troubled by the creeping technological realm.

On Heidegger’s account, this technological battle is more than just a minor stance. Technology changes us; the technological realm creeps over the whole world. As the technological realm creeps in, we begin to see the whole world as a potential puzzle to be solved, a thing to be calculated. And hence when reality is solved, it is something to be exploited. Under this notion of reality, the summit of human accomplishment is seen simply in “mastering” nature. This technological realm, on Heidegger’s account, depletes the human spirit because it resorts the human life into a simple calculation. Life is simply an algorithm. To have a fuller spirit, we need to experience truths of a variety of realms, not just technological truths. In other words, we need to be more than odds calculators. In this sense, the technological realm is not inherently dangerous; it is only dangerous when it colonizes the other realms.

I finish this manuscript by turning briefly back to Immanuel Kant. On might view the ethics of Kant as a way that insures that we not treat people as a means to an end, and that we always treat people as an end. Yet, even Kant’s famed categorical imperative is essentially technological, and it is technological over a hundred years prior to Heidegger’s insightful writings on technology. Kant formulates his categorical imperative in *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *the Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*. The rule is based on the following two formulations: “act only according to that
maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law;”
and “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the
person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time
as an end.” Given these maxims, we can see that Kant is offended by the notion of
treating people as a means and not an end. On face this kind of ethics should form the
basis of morality that would take seriously aesthetic experience because the aesthetic is
based on acts that justify themselves. However, though it appears that Kant’s ethics is
linked to a notion of experience for the sake of experience, Kant’s categorical imperative
is actually “technology” at its most intense.

Kant’s ethics is linked to the notion of both logic and rule-following. Kant
developed the categorical imperative via mental contortions and logical experiments. In
this sense, Kant uses people in service of the categorical imperative. When we treat
people in accordance with the categorical imperative, we are actually using people in
service of rule. And that rule, this categorical imperative, is the actual end of the human
action in the Kantian realm. If people are acting in accordance to a rule, and not in
accordance with human experience, then the actor is not actually treating humans as an
end. In other words, when acting in accordance with the categorical imperative, one is
not actually treating people as an end.

The categorical imperative is established prior to human experience, or at least,
prior to Kant’s notion of human experience. Human conduct, and hence human ethics,
is pulled away from ethics in the categorical imperative. Hence, Kant’s ethics are as
“technological” and “instrumental,” and one could imagine that Kant’s ethics could be
seen as a step away from the raw utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, or the more refined
philosophy of John Stuart Mill. Of course, this is another example where Kant is attempting to take aspects of the human condition that are dependent upon subjective judgment and make them act as if they are universal statements. Ethics and aesthetics, and science, are based on a kind of subjective understanding of the world. Kant wants to erase that subjective understanding.

In contrast to the technological and code-based rules of Kant, vital aesthetics would affect the political realm by bringing experience itself to bear on our views of ethics. With the aesthetic realm being respected, humans would approach ethical questions not in a juridical way, but in a way that allows us to judge ethical issues in regards to the experience itself. In this sense, one aspect of ethics—and hence of the moral, legal, and political—is to examine the way that we, as humans, experience ethical issues themselves. For example, to decide whether to help a friend, one should determine the various implications of the experience of helping. The helping, the act itself, has experiential impacts. These impacts might make us act differently than if we applied the code of the categorical imperative. Hence, a world in which the aesthetic realm is properly understood, we would take into consideration the experiential impact of ethics. I am not suggesting that aesthetics would dictate any other realm—I do not want to bait people into a Benjamin style criticism—but the aesthetic realm should not be destroyed by any other realm of human experience.

This notion of realm creep, or realm colonization, is a key to the destruction of the aesthetic realm. This concern for the destruction of the aesthetic realm is similar to the concern of critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer for the way that instrumental reason destroys all other types of reason. It is disturbing that instrumental
reason destroys other types of reason, but I am discussing more than simply instrumental reason. Vital aesthetics is the notion that the aesthetic realm is properly understood when it interacts with the other realms. As discussed in chapter one, aesthetics acts as a kind of anti-foundational foundation. Properly understood, the aesthetic realm informs the moral, legal, and political. Of course, the instrumental creeps backward, but my concern is the destruction of the aesthetic via the way that, say, the ethical or the technological creeps in and obliterates the aesthetic. This is troubling. If wounded aesthetics is the ethical destroying the aesthetic, then vital aesthetics is a way to appreciate the aesthetic realm properly.

Vital aesthetics would focus on the experience qua experience. Experience itself directs the aesthetic. In this sense, art, which is a kind of expression of the aesthetic, grants someone an experience when they engage in the art itself. Art brings forth the aesthetic by putting experience itself in the mix of our life. As discussed previously in this manuscript, when we focus on form, the vital aesthetic experience is enhanced because the experience itself is valued. This is essential for the proper understanding of the aesthetic realm.

In the first chapter of this manuscript, I suggested that our understanding of the world is based on the notion that life is based on appearance, and the only way we organize those appearances is via an aesthetic notion of creation. Thus, we understand the world in terms of ordering it according to aesthetic preferences. These preferences are both collective and individual, as explained by my application of the aesthetic thought of Ranciére and Badiou. At any given time we feel rather certain of our aesthetic principles—what Ranciére might call the particular aesthetic regime—but that
certainty relies on a fidelity to a contingent event. It is tied to relying on an event to help create aesthetic categories of understanding. This aesthetic realm helps to shape the political realm by letting us understand the world, and, as thinkers such as Rancière, Arendt, and Panagia suggest, this seeing is political itself. From Plato through Zizek, art is has always played an important part in the philosophical realm of the political. However, vital aesthetics would allow us to simultaneously respect art itself, and it also allows us to understand the way that art/aesthetics interacts with the other realms of human life.

Vital aesthetics is an appreciation for the experience qua experience, with an emphasis on the way we appreciate the world via beauty. Additionally, this vital view of aesthetics, as outlined in this manuscript, would experience a world that is continually constituted by the aesthetic understanding of the world. When we engage in the aesthetic realm, our perception is both expressed and shaped. An interaction with art, or something explicitly aesthetic, establishes a kind of order of perception that lasts for the time that one is interacting with said piece of art. This perception at once expresses the domain of the aesthetic regime, as well as it is subtly affects the regime that already exists. In this sense, vital aesthetics would be a universe in which various types of artistic experiences are grappled with in the continued perception of human existence.

Given that the aesthetic realm organizes the seeing of the world, and it orders what would possibly be an ambiguous political ontology. The purpose of aesthetics is to organize and impose order, an order that is defined by our experiences of beauty. Yet, the basis here is experience. The afore-mentioned aesthetic categories, which are tied to the specific aesthetic regime, make sure that things are organized and
comprehendible. This organization is tied to the way the aesthetic, ethical, and political realms eventually intersect.

Vital aesthetics allows for a kind of uniting and, simultaneously, individually liberating interaction with experience. We are united because the aesthetic realm has some a common regime that allows us to communicate and understand the world. This is how artists can even begin to express meaning via beauty. One is tempted to view art in a way that is fragmented and individual. However, there are a substantial agreement as to the vocabulary and value of artistic works, and that agreement is tied to the aesthetic regime. For example, humans generally understand the language of cinema, a language developed by D.W. Griffith and that has evolved over years. The same can be said for, say, comic art. Jack Kirby helped invent the modern vocabulary of comic art, and that regime has evolved and changed through time. Yet, all individuals bring to this regime particular ideas about the beautiful. These individual ideas affect aesthetic regime by, as suggested above, limiting and delimiting the aesthetic regime.

As suggested in a previous chapter, sometimes certain aesthetic events completely reshape the regime in a sudden way. I argued that the arrival of the Beatles does this, but that is certainly not the only such event in the last fifty years or so. Of course, there are many other artistic works that might be considered an “event” by Badiou’s standards. Some of these events might be, on first glance: *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, *Beloved*, *American Pastoral* (discussed in this manuscript), *Pulp Fiction*, *Composition X*, *Breathless*, *Twin Peaks* (discussed in this manuscript), *Infinite Jest*, *The Wasteland*, Elvis Presley’s “Sun” recordings (discussed in this manuscript), *Straight out
of Compton, Untitled (Skull), and many, many, others. It is not that these types of works rewrite our aesthetic realm in such a way that the old regime disappears. As explained previously in this manuscript, the event shakes the ontological foundation of the aesthetic regime. Yet, vital aesthetics is a key to allowing these events to unfold and properly interact with the other realms. A world in which we engage with aesthetics as experience is a world in which we can grapple with the implications of the sensations themselves. In other words, the aesthetic realm properly understood allows us to both be part of the collective—by interacting with the aesthetic regime (category) and experiencing Badiou-style events—and to act as an individual by slightly modifying our own aesthetic interpretations of artistic events.

In the preceding pages, I examine the aesthetic realm and how it interacts with the other realms of human existence. Specifically, I explain how an approach based on vital aesthetics attends to the proper interaction of the aesthetic and the ethical/political, and the way in which people develop themselves a subject of sense perception through the experience of art. Aesthetics—when removed from its wounded aspects—make sense of the artworks via making sense of the world. If, as Davide Panagia (2009, 148) writes, sensation is “dissensual,” then we need vital aesthetics to allow our experience to filter into the ethical/political in a proper way. This is not to say that sensation must be filtered; it can, as Panagia suggests, have pre-sense-making political impact. However, to make sense of certain artworks, and other aspects of the world in an aesthetic way, one must interact with the world properly via vital aesthetics—aesthetics that take experience qua experience seriously. Also, I am not suggesting that aesthetics should be a slave to its impact on the political. Such an approach would
contradict my own discussion of Kant and how his categorical imperative does not actually treat humans as ends. It is important to understand that the aesthetic realm is one in which experience justifies itself. As discussed throughout this manuscript, this experience as qua experience, this vital aesthetics, is, a phrase that seems redundant, vital to political existence.

In these final moments I wonder if the reader would tolerate a slight divergence into a discussion of one my personal heroes: Sally Bowles. Speaking from a personal level, Bowles, is, to me, the lead in the musical play and movie *Cabaret*. I, of course, realize that she was a character from an Isherwood story, and that she is likely based on a real person in Weimar Germany. However, that is not how I have interacted with Bowles the majority of my life, and it is certainly not the context in which my opinions where shaped.³ The Sally of the musical danced away the troubles of Weimar Germany. As National Socialism began edging its way into all aspects of German life, the cabaret remained a place of relative freedom. In this freedom, people like the fictional Sally Bowles acted-out a life of meaningful decadence. To Sally, life is a cabaret, and cabaret is life: “What good is sitting alone in your room? Come hear the music play.” In one sense, Sally represents a kind of “existential” cabaret. Her dance is seemingly chaotic, but it has an internal sense of order to it: It is hectic, but also controlled and somewhat calculated. One could see Sally Bowles as celebrating a life of hedonic excess. However, there is also an almost cheap, rather shameful, tendency to Sally’s hedonism. Reflecting a new class of enjoyment, Bowles has a trashy sensibility that flies in the face of standard society. Nevertheless, this trashiness is fairly

³ The meta-philosophical discussion of which Bowles is *the* Bowles properly understood is outside of my concerns in this manuscript.
welcome in the context of the cabaret. Bowles, overall, is an individual, but still subject to the collective and coordinated aesthetic order of the cabaret. It is possible that Bowles can be seen to represent simply the afore-mentioned cheap and trashy hedonism. Yet, though Bowles behavior might be hedonistic, it has a self-conscious quality to its hedonism: Life, after all, is “a cabaret.” This notion of life can be roughly linked to a kind of liberalism\(^4\) where epicurean pleasure is a focus of the political and social calculus.

Outside the dark corridors of the cabaret, another aesthetic order was being created in 1930s German. This order was expressed in the growing rallies of the National Socialists and in the cinematic work of German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. Part experimental film, part political propaganda, Riefenstahl’s masterpiece *Triumph of the Will* was the exemplar of this new aesthetic. In *Triumph*, Riefenstahl blurs the distinction between the Nazi Party, the German State, and—most importantly—the “German People.” Adolf Hitler is represented as the savior of the whole of German society. The archaic flag of “Imperial Germany” is symbolically mated with the Swastika. The whole of German society, expressed in perfect harmony and order, is seen as an innate beauty. And, of course, Hitler and the Nazis are the logical directors of the new aesthetic—one that is in direct conflict with the chaos of both the cabaret and its political equivalent, the Weimar Republic and the failing liberal-democracy.

These two examples represent two competing aesthetic orders\(^5\). Of course, Riefenstahl is explicitly creating “political art,” whereas the political ramifications of “the

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\(^4\) I am using the term “liberalism” loosely here.

\(^5\) Again, I realize that Bowles is fictional and Reifenstahl is actually existed. Yet, I am using these two figures as examples here. It does not matter to me much that they could not have had an actual
cabaret' may only be implicit. But both regimes rearrange the surfaces that Nietzsche found so important. They both take the shadows and create new orders, new aesthetics. These surfaces and how we understand them—whether via cabarets or triumphs of the will—shape our political understanding of the world. Our encounters with art are crucial to this shaping. In this sense, aesthetics may not allow us to recreate a kind of categorical imperative via Kant, but it does allow a kind of self that cares about our own experiences of beauty. And, this rediscovery of the aesthetic life places sense experience in proper perspective, a perspective that can be correctly united with politics and the political.

discussion in 1938. There were cabarets in Weimer Germany, and given the music of Kurt Weil and others, one assumes that the musical is not a bad representation of such places. Also, for the context of this discussion, the reader just needs to understand that these two orders could exist in competition.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

J. Maggio received his doctorate in political science from the University of Florida in 2010. Primarily focusing on political theory, his interests include the intersection of aesthetics, cultural theory, and political philosophy. He is particularly interested in the way that various forms of expression are linked to the politics of recognition. J. Maggio received a Juris Doctorate from University College of Law, and a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from the University of South Florida.