

POPULAR  

---

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2019

Noora-Helena Korpelainen, Olivia Glasser, and Emily Aiava (Eds.):  
APPEARANCES OF THE POLITICAL ANTHOLOGY

**POLITICAL AESTHETICS:  
A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION**

**Carsten Friberg**

Independent scholar

# POLITICAL AESTHETICS: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

**Carsten Friberg**

## **1. Introduction**

My aim is to discuss the appearance of political elements and structures in everyday situations, in relation to aesthetics. I do this from a philosophical perspective, i.e. I ask for the significance of political aesthetics including implications of this notion. This requires beginning with an explanation as to what both the terms political and aesthetics signify.

Concerning aesthetics, I will make use of a tradition from A. G. Baumgarten where the term aesthetics is applied as a type of cognition. Aesthetics is about perception rather than characterisations of art and attitudes towards it, such as aesthetic appreciation and experiences. It is about a particular aspect of perception, the sensorial. This sensorial aspect of perception means that perception in the following paper is sense-perception; however, I will not add 'sense' but emphasise that the sensorial aspect of perception concerns not only *what* we perceive but more important *how* we perceive.

To perceive is to distinguish between impressions, enabling an understanding because we identify something as something—we learn where to look and what to look for in order to orient ourselves in the world. Perceiving is not a mere receptive faculty collecting impressions but an active, discriminative attention directed towards what we intend to react to and engage in. This active component explains why Baumgarten defined aesthetics as sensorial *cognition*: It is about how the senses exercise these discriminations, hence it is a cognitive activity, i.e. a deliberate and intentional act. A crucial part of sensorial cognition is then related to how we have acquired the capacity to discriminate, which implies we have received guidance and training in how to do it. Such guidance and training is education; as it concerns a training of the sensorial aspect of our perceptual faculty, called aesthetics, I call this training *aesthetic education*. It is important not to confuse aesthetic education with an education in making judgements about aesthetic artefacts, nor with the formation (*Bildung*) of a character educated in ideals of culture. I focus on what

comes before any discussion of the content of any educational curriculum; focus is on the process of training perception and not on the end result of this education.

By aesthetic education I thus refer to a line of different sensorial experiences which have been considered elements in education, like theatre, dance, and music in a Western tradition have been considered elements in education. Such elements represent a crucial meeting point between the particularity of the senses and the generality of the spirit, and the goal of education is to abandon the particularity of oneself to become a member of a community.<sup>1</sup> The process of leaving the particular requires means for affecting and forming our senses and feelings enabling us to act as member of a community. Among these sensorial means one particular group steals the attention: the arts and consequently discourses in aesthetics become often exclusively about them. I wish to keep focus on any artefacts as they are all responsible for affecting and training our senses and perception. The training of the sensorial and bodily elements of our relation to the world is to be considered as material and efficient causes of the education. This is in contrast to the ideals and goals of the education—the formal and final causes. When perception is understood to be more than the direction of attention towards the identification of something as something, and it implies being affected in more ways, then we should investigate how we relate to and are subject to such influences exercised on us by the environment.

The concept of aesthetics must be related to an understanding of education where, throughout Western traditions, participation in plays and processions as well as training in disciplines such as dance, fencing, and piano playing has been considered to be essential for forming individuals to become members of a community. This is not about becoming an excellent dancer or piano player but about exercises which develop senses and bodies that we may perform along with others. Learning to dance is, apart from being able to dance, also to learn how to be bodily present in particular situations. Being present and being present in a particular way also has an effect on how we perceive ourselves and the situation we are in. Such bodily training is hence an element in the educational forming of the individual's perceptual skills and consequently of the mind. Hegel can explain: "This year we have brought a highly recommended teaching into practice... the *military drill* of high school's upper class. This drill—which involves quick perception, being present with one's senses, executing a command without wavering in thought, and adjusting one's position with precision—is the most direct means against the mind's sluggishness and distraction."<sup>2</sup>

In this aspect of perceptual education lies an element of power. Here I follow Steven Lukes in the belief that power is not about decision making and the execution of interests imposed directly on others, but a more complex set of relations influencing how we act.<sup>3</sup> This in-

fluence is a result of any exchange and interaction between people and with cultural artefacts and their organisation.

Through examples of changes in our relation to the world due to economic structures that influence our perception of, for instance, privacy and gender, I will point at how this training of our perception concerns *how* we perceive rather than *what* we perceive and that this has consequences for our relation to the world as such. I argue that aesthetics is a key-discipline for characterising the training of our perception and for the importance of becoming aware of elements of power embedded in this training of our perception which is what I call political aesthetics.

## 2. What is Political Aesthetics?

My use of the term political aesthetics bears a parallel to the term political economy i.e. economy on the scale of society and its different institutions of law and governing, in contrast to economy concerned with specific areas such as individuals and firms, also known as microeconomics. Political economy is a notion that originates in 18th century discussions. Today “political” has disappeared and in public discourses we usually only talk about “economy.” Adding political to aesthetics should likewise emphasize how this perspective on aesthetics concerns our sensorial cognitive capacities in relation to the organisation of the environment, in opposition to being limited to a subjectivist approach that is only concerned with individuals’ reactions and judgements of taste.

Regarding a subjectivist approach in aesthetics I share Hans-Georg Gadamer’s unease about what he terms aesthetic consciousness and separation.<sup>4</sup> His concern is that the aesthetic experience implies separating a characterisation of the object for aesthetic judgement expressed by the individual subject from the context in which the object originates. Likewise, Herbert Marcuse criticises how the term aesthetic in such a separation is used for higher culture and implies a divorce of social reality from practice.<sup>5</sup> An aesthetic judgement thus becomes a demonstration of one’s skills in evaluating particular features recognised by an art-critical audience at the cost of communication and education which has the purpose of engaging with life.

One particular feature is often used in this context: disinterestedness. It has an origin in classical metaphysics as the highest intellectual achievement in contemplating the order of the world. The classical significance of contemplation was to leave an occupation where we seek meaningful answers to concrete problems to instead ask for the meaning of our daily life in general. An enterprising modern society will devaluate such a purposeless activity and place it outside practice as leisure time. Prominent fields for disinterested contemplation can then become art and aesthetics as separated from practice. Stripped away from their place in the

world, they are placed in the museum as objects for disinterested judgements uttered by an audience educated in doing so aesthetically. While this could also be considered as liberation of art from obligations and rules, many artists have, since the 19th century, struggled with institutions being built around this idea of aesthetic contemplation and judgement.

Gadamer's unease about aesthetic consciousness addresses how the educational intentions of aesthetics, the training of sensorial capacity for discriminating between objects, situations and people, fail. The ultimate purpose of such an education is a formation (*Bildung*) of the moral character, in brief to transcend one's individual perspective to develop one's spirit (*Geist*) and enter humanity. Instead it becomes only an education in performing within specific aesthetic discourses for an audience of art-lovers. But someone acquiring expertise in art critique may not also prove to have a moral character. Gadamer's concern is similar to what Theodor Adorno calls "*Halbbildung*,"<sup>6</sup> a formation in which a general perspective on society is lost to a narrow focus on particular interests and functions.

Instead of including education or formation in the title for my article I have used the term political, as any educational process will also imply a political element, or influencing others through different means. When these means are sensorial they belong to aesthetics and thus we need to investigate what elements of power are present in the multiple ways they appear. As I said before with reference to political economy, aesthetics should be viewed on the scale of society and the elements of powers implied, thus it should be considered a political aesthetics.

Political aesthetics is also used by Crispin Sartwell as a title for a book of his.<sup>7</sup> I share his intention of emphasising the significance of the political in a broad sense; where it is about aspects of relations we have to people, organisations and institutions. This brings us within discussions of ideologies, which he says, we often think of too narrowly as texts, books, constitutions and manifestos.<sup>8</sup> If we focus only on the content of these texts our focus become too narrow; we should also pay attention to the style they are written in as it also reflects and reveals their political ideas. His important suggestion is "that an ideology is an aesthetic system" and that "the aesthetic expressions of a regime or of the resistance to a regime are central also to the cognitive content and concrete effects of political systems."<sup>9</sup> Aesthetics is not added to the political content as a means of communication and persuasion; it is an integrated element in how the political appears and is exercised. Furthermore, aesthetics should not be related narrowly to political ideologies and explicit discourses and Sartwell's case studies are instead about different cultural forms like punk, black nationalism, Rastafarianism and graffiti.

Sartwell's concept of aesthetics, on the other hand, I find too narrow. Very traditionally he understands aesthetics to be about "the nature of art; aesthetic values, especially beauty and

sublimity; standards of taste and aesthetic assessment; and mimesis or representation.”<sup>10</sup> Difficulties arise when he, for example, gives beauty, which is seen as the object of longing,<sup>11</sup> a significant role to play. Obviously longing may appear in many contexts and forms such as the “rich, strange, mysterious, bewilderingly complex, teeming, or incomprehensible,”<sup>12</sup> but it also leaves the question of what it is that is rich, strange etc. What is it we are longing for? And what enables us to utter biased statements about beauty, like Sartwell does, such as the assertion that the modern bureaucratic state is ugly?<sup>13</sup> Our longing can change, he admits, and this change is exactly what I would call a change in our sensorial cognition. I would add that such changes come about because of changes in the environment that affect us and teach us what kind of longing is appropriate where we live. Sartwell here draws, importantly, attention to how we should investigate the aesthetic dimension of the environment for ways power appears because of a “refusal to distinguish between the content of a political system and its aesthetic aspects.”<sup>14</sup> However, to use the parallel of the economy above, he remains at the position of microeconomics and does not proceed to the wider political implication. The experience of beauty, he says, “expresses a set of basic human capacities and dilemmas, something that all people seek.”<sup>15</sup> But this is exactly the kind of assumption to address so as we can learn what general structures precede the concrete forms of political powers and what is inherent in them appearing in the environment and forming our perception of it.

There is help then in what Marcuse calls “radical sensibility.” The concept “stresses the active, constitutive role of the senses in shaping reason, that is to say, in shaping the categories under which the world is ordered, experienced, changed.”<sup>16</sup> He emphasises how perception is influenced by society and how this influence is an educational element brought about by the organisation of the environment, an organisation which is an appearance of structures of power. Political aesthetics is about acknowledging the extent to which we are subject to such influences, not least because they form our perception hence our most fundamental relation to the world. Two implications appear for the philosophical interest: One is how far-reaching these implications are; another is the legitimacy of our perception.

The latter is an epistemological question which I will abandon here. In more ways it is discussed in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gernot Böhme.<sup>17</sup> I do relate to them but will not proceed much further into this topic. Instead I will in the next section consider some examples regarding the implications of being embedded in structures of powers which form us and perform for us before in the last section discussing how aesthetics as political aesthetics offers a critical approach to understanding and acting on these structures.

### 3. Witch-hunting and Aesthetic Economy

The presence of structures influencing how we act is a necessary condition for living together and what I call an appearance of the political as any living together implies politics. Some structures are explicit, such as the outcomes of political debates and decisions. So are structures we are subject to and participate in, such as political institutions and economic conditions; we can actively debate them but we may not always pay attention to them. Finally, there are structures we hardly notice which require an effort to be made aware of; we participate in them and often become active supporters of them even though we may want to do differently. An example is how we relate to what is private and public and how we perceive the difference. Such perception is integrated into our behaviour and we pay little or no attention to it except when this difference is challenged. Such a challenge may appear in places with a different order from what one is used to, such as when there is a third space between the public and the private. Such third spaces in-between private and public can be found in the streets of Islamic Middle Eastern cities, even having a name in Arabic, *al-fina*.<sup>18</sup> Those unfamiliar with this third space will not perceive it or perhaps be puzzled about something indeterminate in what is only perceived to be the public sphere. Such structures are “invisible” because they are embodied in how we relate to people and the environment. Precisely because these structures are “invisible” or unnoticed they become of interest as they convey ideologies we reproduce despite us wishing to do differently. Here lies the interest in political aesthetics.

The difference between public and private in Western thinking belongs to the political economy. The word economy has a Greek origin, coming from the house, *oikos*. The house was in ancient Greece a private sphere in contrast to the public and political but this differentiation, writes Hannah Arendt, becomes blurred in modern times where we see “the body of people and political communities in the image of the family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a nation-wide administration of housekeeping.”<sup>19</sup> What is considered private, how it is considered, and to what extent it is considered separate from the public and independent of it, is throughout history and in different cultural constellations a matter of different political ideas and manifestations.<sup>20</sup>

It is not to dispute that we have private sensations in the sense that no one has access to one’s feelings, but it is of little interest to anyone that I feel something if feelings, passions, and sensations are not transformed “into a shape to fit them for public appearance.”<sup>21</sup> The moment I utter something about my inner state I also make it subject to an interpretation to share. Even the fact that I feel something is not that simple, as I also discriminate between many feelings in order to select which to give attention to and share. My exchange with others is, as an

exchange, a participation in the public sphere, influenced by and influencing what and how we perceive something. No one can deprive me of the feeling of pain, but I am alone in it and it has as such in this subjective aspect no particular human side to it, hence it does not characterise humanity. Feelings of pain or other bodily irritations do not form the direction for a human existence; a hedonistic absence of pain “is but the most radical form of a non-political, totally private way of life.”<sup>22</sup> Irritation is what disturbs us and throws us back upon ourselves hence it is, subjectively, “worldless.” The idea of characterising an understanding of our relation to a community based on subjective feelings ignores that these intimate, subjective states only become meaningful in a community. The poet may have the same feelings as I have but will be better in translating these feelings into words and help me understand them. However, any translation is also an interpretation and may colour and form my view on these feelings. What could be seen as a loss of the unique character of the private feeling is also the necessity of any human exchange: only through it do I come to an understanding of my feelings and manage to leave myself and meet others.

It is important to understand how our interpretation of ourselves is essential for enabling an engagement with others and in return is also formed by others. It is an interpretation based on our perception that is trained in and by the social environment, what I referred to earlier as aesthetic education. Examples can demonstrate the extent and implication of this education.

**a.** One example comes from Silvia Federici’s book about witch-hunting.<sup>23</sup> She draws attention to how changes in economic structures from the Middle Ages into emerging capitalism, i.e. mainly between the early 15th and late 18th century, also brought about a change in the perception of different groups of people, in particular women, with the witch hunts in 16th and 17th century as the climax. Many elements were included in enabling this form of terror. One was the privatisation of what before had been common land, the commons, which served as a means of social support for the poor through “access to meadows in which to keep cows, or woods in which to gather timber, wild berries and herbs, or quarries, fish-ponds, and open spaces in which to meet.”<sup>24</sup> The loss of the commons was particularly problematic for women who had few alternatives for supporting themselves; it marks one important step amongst others in reducing women’s independence.<sup>25</sup>

Another element Federici adds is a change in the relation between production and reproduction. Reproduction, i.e. maintaining the family’s existence and producing offspring, was a necessity that traditionally belonged to the house. In antiquity it was hidden because it was there man was “alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive.”<sup>26</sup> Necessity was considered something we shared with animals, contrary to the public figure who had to be a free



human being, i.e. not a slave to necessities.<sup>27</sup> In the period of emerging capitalism the household became a public affair, however its economic value was not recognised. It remained outside the economic system and was considered as being in need of means of control to ensure its subjection to economically more valuable production. The disappearing of the commons, which had given women some independence, contributed to how women, instead of the commons, became a means for reproduction and “*women themselves became the commons.*”<sup>28</sup>

These elements were accompanied by a judicial system depriving women of rights, and a new understanding of the sciences rejecting older interpretations like magic. Magic was an influential scientific tradition in the Renaissance, among the traditions that the scientific revolution in the 17th century would put an end to. But magic included elements such as lucky and unlucky days, special powers granted to special people or circumstances which were seen to undermine the ideas of and stability expected for a capitalist work-discipline.<sup>29</sup> Such challenges to the economic structure were answered by organising particular means such as work-life according to a particular work-discipline. This implied a change in perceptions of life and how to order it. Disciplines such as magic would be excluded not only by the emerging new sciences but also by new ideals of production. Such changes in perception were not about deliberate and conscious ways of relating to the world but about transition due to changes in how people lived. The case of magic and capitalist work-discipline could be considered an element in changing how men viewed women when some specific forms of knowledge practiced by some women were then seen as relating to magic now to be excluded and demonised. It thus led to structures of controlling these women of which witch-hunting was an extreme form of terror as a means of social oppression in the 16th and 17th century. While witch-hunting is the most extreme form of controlling women it should be taken as one of many examples which followed from an interest in controlling reproduction and introducing different views on what was rational and beneficial for the emerging capitalist society. Another form of controlling appears perhaps less extreme but one can argue it has more extreme consequences—the demonising of female sexuality.<sup>30</sup>

The change in the perception of women is a radical implication of the training of our perception due to changes in societal order and an example of an appearance of the political. When such an implication is revealed to also be a means of oppression it would be classified as an ideology, i.e. as a set of ideas in the service of a particular balance of interests and powers using instruments, such as witch-hunting, for maintaining them. Witch-hunting belongs to the past, but it demonstrates how far-reaching the consequences of changes in society are for our perception of it. Even though witch-hunting is a closed chapter in Western history, past chapters often have

an influence on what follows. Federici makes aware how the end of most witch-hunting did not imply an end to legal processes against women but only a change of content.<sup>31</sup> We can, and should, ask how the heritage of witch-hunting is still present in contemporary views on women.

**b.** Another example is how perception is formed in and by the social environment in what is discussed as aesthetic economy. For a characterisation of aesthetic economy I will include what Hannah Arendt describes as a change in perception of labour. She makes a distinction between labour and work where labour relates to the basic, physical necessities of life, to reproduction and to what is consumed to maintain life. Work, on the other hand, is concerned with what is unnatural, with the artificial things we make.<sup>32</sup> Labour consists of both reproduction and production. When reproductive labour falls outside of a monetary economy, as was the case in early modern times, it loses value.<sup>33</sup> With the later development of the modern capitalism of today the household is included in the economy, taken care of by “the entertainment industry, fast food and convenience food, tourism and professional childcare.”<sup>34</sup> Household inclusion must be seen as a consequence of capitalism characterised as a system of needs; the inclusion answers also the decisive characteristic of capitalism, growth, by expanding into what was before not included into the economy. However, we must, as Hannah Arendt points out, explain how it is possible to have an increase in consuming beyond the necessities for sustaining life.<sup>35</sup>

Especially in Critical Theory the late development of capitalism has been discussed and Böhme has recently contributed with his *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*.<sup>36</sup> He relates to, among more, Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s discussion of consumer aesthetics, where Haug argues that the illusions commodities give people are to an extent where “[a]ny other world, different from that provided by the commodities, is almost no longer accessible to them.”<sup>37</sup> These illusions are what Haug and Böhme point at as an answer of how consuming grows beyond our needs. A characteristic of capitalism today is, as Marcuse quotes from Marx (from *Grundrisse*) that “the level of needs has been developed to the degree where surplus labor over and above work for the necessities has itself become a universal need generated by the individual needs themselves.”<sup>38</sup> An important point in understanding contemporary capitalism, Böhme emphasises, is that we cannot understand it solely as a system of needs, as needs will reach a fulfilment; continuing growth must be explained in term of desire as desires, when met, are increased.<sup>39</sup>

The change from a system of needs to a system of desires also includes the question of public and private discussed above. Needs can be seen as belonging to the public domain as we can collectively largely agree on what the needs to satisfy are in a society. Of course there are individual variations, but if anyone has excessive needs it is the collective norm they are judged to be excessive in relation to. Desires on the other hand relate to individual differences to what

are largely private matters. That desires can be influenced to an extent where they can explain growth in economy is an example of how deeply we, as sensorial and bodily beings, are formed by different means of influencing us.

In section 2 I suggested Marcuse's radical sensibility in response to Sartwell; concerning the influence of society on our perception, this response can be seen as an aesthetic aspect of what we read in Marx' studies of Hegel, that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."<sup>40</sup> Marcuse's possible answer to how the education of such radical sensibility can come about is, very briefly, drawing on Sigmund Freud and his idea of two fundamental principles, the pleasure and reality principles, where the reality principle appears as a means of limiting an unlimited pleasure principle that strives for satisfaction of instinctual needs beyond what the world can provide; "the pleasure principle is incompatible with reality, and the instincts have to undergo a repressive regimentation."<sup>41</sup> When the reality of the world is scarcity it could have been compensated or answered through distributing goods in accordance with individuals' needs; instead scarcity has, along with efforts of overcoming it through work, been imposed upon individuals, implying an element of domination. Forms of this repression are what characterises the different forms of the reality principle appearing in institutions, laws, and values for example. Reality and pleasure principles find their emphatic appearances in civilization and sexuality when for instance the pleasure principle is reinterpreted and sexual impulses then become restricted to the reproduction in the nuclear family.<sup>42</sup>

This description is an oversimplification and Marcuse points at a complex of reality principles which add specific forms of domination denoting surplus-repression. As a possible answer to how desire has become fundamental for our consumer society one element is of particular interest; it is what he calls a performance principle (*Leistungsprinzip*).<sup>43</sup> Our performances are through labour, but labour is mainly related to an apparatus the individuals have no control of and their needs are not satisfied through work, and work without gratification becomes painful. Due to a world-interpretation of the rationality of the work-life that conditions our material welfare a self-imposed repression appears. Work-life is compensated through leisure time, the free time granting moments of happiness. In particular the entertainment industry plays an essential role in filling leisure time with narratives reproducing the world-interpretation of rational life and material welfare.<sup>44</sup>

To answer the question of how modern capitalism's continuing growth is possible Haug and Marcuse hence suggest how desires are fundamental and formed by society to become the fundamental drive of a consumer-based capitalism. While Böhme is in agreement about the

fundamental importance of desires he criticises their false conflict between true values of use and the superfluous and manipulative elements of aesthetics, which increase the exchange value. For Böhme the aesthetic is no mere superfluous addition but a use value of social importance that he calls staging value.<sup>45</sup> Böhme's critique can be questioned but he makes a point that it throws light on what is implied in a radical sensibility, to borrow the term from Marcuse. It characterises the training of our perception through the environment in which particular structures of power appear.

#### 4. Approaching Political Aesthetics

I have characterised aesthetic education to be about training our perception, which is an essential step in learning how to relate to other people and different situations. Aesthetic education is not the refinement of specific skills such as knowing how to judge aesthetic works of art, but a step towards the formation (*Bildung*) of the spirit to become a moral being. This education has traditionally been through an active sensorial and bodily participation like learning to dance and play music, as I gave in examples above; it is also the participatory, in relation to for instance film and literature that engage our senses and emotions. Through such participation we do not only learn what to perceive, we also learn *how* to perceive. Furthermore, education is not limited to specific situations which we would think of as learning-situations such as educational institutions; it concerns all of our involvement with the environment making us subject to influences from social and physical interactions. In any of these relations we are engaged in and subject to structures of powers. Being permanently exposed and subject to elements of power forming us, and being permanently engaged with them in ways where we also maintain and reproduce them, motivates a political aesthetics that focuses on the training of our sensorial cognition by the political structures we are part of to become aware of the political dimensions hidden within.

The examples given have hopefully established both how fundamental the hidden political dimensions are and also how comprehensive they are when they concern our relation to anything we do—not only specific situations. Often, we are not aware of how deeply embedded in political structures we are, and even if we are aware, we have little possibility of acting different. We know very well we are affected by the environment, by advertising and media, by work-life and leisure products, by people and design. However, it is difficult to choose to act differently in relation to these matters, and there is also the question of to what extent acting different is possible if this is not about choices of relations to people, work and consuming but about how we perceive anything.

However, being strongly influenced is not the same as saying we are determined. An essential step to take here is to become aware of the mechanisms of the influences we are subject to. This is also the reason for moving on from Sartwell to Marcuse's radical sensitivity and similar critical approaches to how we are aesthetically educated through our engagement with the environment. I will draw attention to one very influential element in this education: popular culture.

Popular culture plays a very prominent role because of our fascination with it. Even if we try to keep a distance and insist on not adhering to all kinds of messages conveyed non-stop through popular culture we will find it very difficult not to be subject to at least some influence as it forms the common discourse of society we are participating in. Not only as a matter of references that we could at least notice and actively distance ourselves from, but also through language and modes of expressions that we use for interpretation to become influential and even dominating in how we talk about and consequently see things. We can here think of metaphors which currently, in the second decade of the 21st century, often come from a monetary world and sports making us describe many activities as investing, profiting, performing, and winning. The performance principle introduced by Marcuse in the 1970s seems to be even more to the point today.

Views on popular culture differ as to whether it should be seen as a potential liberating force or a means for maintaining and upholding specific structures. The transformative power of popular culture is a point made by Richard Shusterman who gives 1960s rock music as an example: "Rock music has long been carrier of covert messages. Emerging as it did from conditions of social and cultural oppression, rock's complex levels of meaning [. . .] enable it to dissemble its message of protest with a guise of innocuous mindlessness."<sup>46</sup>

In opposition to this we have critique insisting that the progressive and emancipatory elements are only seemingly so, only translating rather than transforming cultural patterns. Transformative power is not only disguised as innocuous here but may turn out to be in fact innocuous, even prove to be itself a veil over the appropriation of an independent (sub or counter) culture transformed into entertainment for consumers. This is what Marcuse writes happened when black music was appropriated by white people to become music performed in an organized space—for an audience in the form of a concert or recorded music. The outcome he calls totalitarian "in the way in which it overwhelms individual consciousness and mobilizes a collective unconscious which remains without social foundation."<sup>47</sup> The possible emancipation within the music and the cultural protest remains at the surface, giving the illusion of liberation, but it is no liberation for the community or of the spirit. "Liberation remains a private affair."<sup>48</sup> In the end such illusions return and form our perceptions because, as Haug writes,

commodities give “the people a sense of meaningfulness” and they provide “them with a language to interpret their existence in the world.”<sup>49</sup>

Marcuse’s critique that rock music has moved out of a cultural foundation in black people’s experiences that are lived again in music and become an object of entertainment and aesthetic judgement is similar to the concern of Gadamer about aesthetic consciousness mentioned above. Music is enjoyed and judged for its qualities in relation to a set of criteria of what good music is while its cultural origin or the experiences to learn from within it have been lost. Or, we should say, the experiences have been transformed into a culture of entertainment and consumption of music that calls for a reflection on this transformation, but such reflection lies outside these products. The music as well as other popular cultural products may convey messages, also messages with a political critical content or at least a content that changes our perception of for instance social issues like gender roles and sexuality, but they hardly convey a message about their own embeddedness into a political and ideological order. Sub and counter cultural movements often find they are appropriated by popular culture and transformed into something which loses their motives and experiences.

The example of popular culture is meant to draw attention to how a particular organisation of the world, the one of aesthetic economy where desire and consume are main characteristics, implies also taking possession of our lives, forming us to adhere to these interests. They define and distribute powers and ideas of human relations and existence and engage us by forming our senses and body, hence our perception and way of thinking. The political then appears in *how* we perceive for instance privacy, gender roles, and our emotions and desires. Such studies are conducted in different contexts and my suggestion of a political aesthetics is to point out a common focus here and to emphasise aesthetics as a field of interest when we understand aesthetics in relation to Baumgarten’s sensorial cognition.

One focus is to investigate the foundation and legitimacy of our perception, a study exercised particularly in relation to phenomenology which I above said I relate to without developing further. The phenomenological approach questions how we characterise perception and investigates “how this setting, which acts as a background to every act of consciousness, comes to be constituted.”<sup>50</sup> A dominant idea of perception is that it is object-oriented and Böhme invites us to consider whether we instead should begin with the presence of something for which he then uses the term atmosphere as a key-concept for both perception and aesthetics.<sup>51</sup> The critical potential of such an investigation is to question the structures by which we perceive and consequently interpret as well as reproduce specific patterns in our relation to the envi-

ronment. The question here is not so much *what* we perceive, the specific elements we can identify as embedded in different ideologies, but *how* we perceive.

Political aesthetics may benefit from drawing on more works from different fields, adding to phenomenology inspiration from Critical Theory which I have used here—an iconic text in this tradition is Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>52</sup> He addresses how perception is determined by historical forms and changes in human existence. From other traditions in philosophy Wolfgang Iser makes aware how we must distinguish between sense-perception (*Sinneswahrnehmung*) and making sense of that which is perceived (*Sinnwahrnehmung*) while also paying attention to how both forms are related in a sensuous influence on thought-processes.<sup>53</sup> When perception and thinking is kept together, and this can now open a philosophical debate between traditions that keep them together and others that do not, it is clear the consequences of forming perception through our engagement in the environment are far-reaching. Again, this makes aesthetics a central topic when, as Arnold Berleant characterises it, it “rests on sensory perception together with the personal and cultural factors that affects perception.”<sup>54</sup> In discussion of Iser and also Jacques Rancière<sup>55</sup> about an aesthetic politics Berleant speaks of a “perceptual commons”<sup>56</sup> which is the common perceptual sphere we live in and share with others. This brings back the question of our relation as individuals to the common and social, the key-issue of education and formation, which is a direction to take for aesthetics requiring attention directed<sup>57</sup> towards the political elements already present in how perception is formed when we not only set out on a journey towards formation of spirit, but ask what to do at the beginning.

Political aesthetics offers a first step of characterising the field of our relation to and interpretation of the environment, asking for an awareness of how comprehensively we are formed by it and to understand then the importance of a critical investigation of perception as provided by aesthetics. We should distance ourselves from aesthetics concerned with characterising a specific field of objects and relations to these objects expressed in appreciation and similar characteristics of art as well as objects of the everyday. Instead, we should ask what objects signify and do to us beyond determining what they are and can be used for. Required is that we see the ideological elements embedded in the environment, ask for the implications of them, and the legitimacy of our usual ways of dealing with them, as we otherwise maintain those structures of power we should become aware of.

*I would like to thank the reviewers and editors, in particular Olivia Glasser, for many important and substantial comments and Coral McDonnell for help with the language.*

- 1 I place myself here within a tradition of German philosophy and the idea of *Bildung*, or “formation” in translation if translated at all. The differences between educational traditions are far too complex to bring up here and it will become an unnecessary digression. I will only mention three works I see as forming my background: Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009); Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Theorie der Bildung des Menschen,” in *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung, 1960), 234–240; and G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), in particular section 6, part B. For clarification of concepts and positions see Asger Sørensen, “Not Work, but Alienation and Education,” *Hegel-Studien* 49 (2015), 57–88. I have briefly outlined positions in Carsten Friberg, “Aesthetics at the Heart of Community: On Aesthetics and Education,” *Wassard Elea Rivista* 4, no. 3 (Mar 20, 2017), 145–158.
- 2 G. W. F. Hegel, “Rede zum Schuljahrsabschluß am 14. September 1810,” in *Werke 4: Nürnberger und Heidelberger Schriften 1808–1817*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 330, quotation trans. Rachel Silverbloom, emphasis in original.
- 3 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1974; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 14ff.
- 4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 6th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960/1990), 87ff.
- 5 Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 74.
- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 66ff. In lack of an English translation of this text I use the *Halbbildung* in German. Discussions of Adorno in English often keep the German but also sometimes translate to half-education which may create confusion as education should be the translation of *Erziehung* and formation of *Bildung*.
- 7 Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).
- 8 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 2.
- 9 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 1ff., emphasis in original.
- 10 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 5.
- 11 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 67.
- 12 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 68.
- 13 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 68.
- 14 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 51.
- 15 Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics*, 74.
- 16 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution*, 63.
- 17 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968; from the French original of 1964); Gernot Böhme, *Aisthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre* (München: Fink, 2001).
- 18 Hoshiar Nooraddin, “Al-fina’, In-Between Spaces as an Urban Design Concept: Making Public and Private Places Along Streets in Islamic Cities of the Middle East,” *Urban Design International* 3, no. 1–2 (1998), 65–77; Published online Nov 5, 2010, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/135753198350532>.
- 19 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958; Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), 28. On the change of how public and private have been understood since 18th century see also Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (1977; Re-Issued New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992).
- 20 For a brief discussion on this see Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 21 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.
- 22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 113.



- 
- 23 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
- 24 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 71.
- 25 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 92.
- 26 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 212, see also 86.
- 27 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 72.
- 28 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 97, emphasis in original.
- 29 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 142.
- 30 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 188ff.
- 31 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 205.
- 32 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7 and 136ff.
- 33 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 95; see also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 163.
- 34 Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, 14.
- 35 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 124. This characterization of Arendt may bare similarities to what is later called biopolitics by Michel Foucault however without referring to Arendt. For the missing link between Arendt and Foucault see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 36 Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Milan-Udine: Mimesis International, 2017). In previous writings he called it aesthetic economy: Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 62ff.; and “Contribution to the Critique of the Aesthetic Economy,” *Thesis Eleven* 73, no. 1 (May 1, 2003), 71–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513603073001005>.
- 37 Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock (1971; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 52.
- 38 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and revolt*, 17.
- 39 Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, 14 and 50.
- 40 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.
- 41 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 36.
- 42 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 40ff.
- 43 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 44ff.
- 44 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 48. See also Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, 45ff.
- 45 Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, 29, 48ff., 66ff.
- 46 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 49.
- 47 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 115.
- 48 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 115.
- 49 Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 52.
- 50 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 321.
- 51 E.g. Böhme, *Atmosphäre* and *Aisthetik*. A short English introduction is “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics,” *Theses Eleven* 36 (1993), 113–126. Despite the apparent identity in words it is, for a proper understanding of the phenomenological concept of atmosphere, crucial to be aware of how there “lies a critical structural difference between the semantic capacities of the German word ‘*Atmosphäre*’ and the English word ‘atmosphere’ since the latter finds it much harder to leave its grammatical status as an object.” Friedlind Riedel, “Atmosphere,” in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, ed. Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (New York: Routledge, 2019), 85–95, 89, emphasis in original.

52 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963).

53 Wolfgang Iser, *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990), 48ff.

54 Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 51.

55 See e.g. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

56 Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 208ff.