

# Aesthetics

KIVEN STROHM

National University of Singapore, Singapore

In recent years, disciplines across the social sciences and humanities have gone through an “aesthetic turn”: political theory (Kompridis, 2014; Shapiro, 2012), philosophy (Rancière, 2004), literature (Breger, 2012; Felski, 2015), international relations (Bleiker, 2009), sociology (Bourdieu, 1984; Born, 2010), and, sometime earlier, anthropology (Marcus and Fischer, 1986). A quick glance across these writings would suggest that the idea of aesthetics has returned after the announcement of its death in the 1980s and early 1990s. In what follows I map out the figure of the aesthetic since the 1990s, a period that has seen a veritable explosion of research and writing about the aesthetic as a concept for thinking about a range of issues, from art and media to popular culture and politics. As we find ourselves presently within this “aesthetic turn,” what does it ask of us?

The aesthetic, we will recall, was the object of impassioned critique throughout the 1980s and 1990s, most famously in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984). For Bourdieu, the aesthetic, here understood as a theory of art and aesthetic experience, is not transcendental but a social practice riddled with issues of class, power, and prestige. The aesthetic, in other words, is a mode within the production of cultural capital that works to keep the cultural elites in the know and the rest as philistines; in short, it is “a mode of class domination” (Born, 2010: 177). Of course, Bourdieu’s reading of the aesthetic is largely directed at Kant’s third critique (*The Critique of Judgment*) where aesthetic judgment is framed as disinterested, a pleasure in the beautiful that is not bound to the satisfaction of any desire or interest. While Bourdieu’s negative assessment of the aesthetic is more nuanced in his later work on cultural production, his critique undoubtedly has had an enduring impact in thinking about the aesthetic across the social sciences – most notably in the debate in anthropology about aesthetics

as a cross-cultural category, with those against the motion taking up a largely Bourdieu-inspired position (Ingold, 1996).

By the early 2000s, discussion began to shift to a more capacious consideration of the aesthetic. Returning to an older usage stemming from the Greek *aisthesis* and sensory experience, the emphasis was placed on the relation “between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas” (Eagleton, 1990: 13). Indeed, for those supporting the motion of aesthetics as a cross-cultural category, aesthetics is “the human capacity to assign qualitative values to properties of the material world” (p. 208). One of the key voices in this aesthetic “return” has been the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. In reference to Kant’s first critique (*The Critique of Pure Reason*), Rancière asks that we think of aesthetics as “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (2004: 13). These *a priori* forms are not, however, transcendental coordinates but social and historical relations between what can be thought and what can be sensed – of who can speak, what can be said, and so forth. As such, there is “an aesthetics at the core of politics” (p. 13) insofar as every political order is a distribution or *partage* of the sensible.

While the capacious notion of the aesthetic outlined by Rancière has been a strong undercurrent within the wave of various disciplinary aesthetic turns, it is important not to lose sight of Bourdieu’s critique of the aesthetic as a cunning relation of power. If Rancière’s project invites a reconfiguring of the sensible, and thus an invitation to be other than what we are, to be otherwise, it is paramount to maintain a critical project that aims to reveal and expose material and symbolic relations of power, to confront those forces that constitute us and what we are, if only because domination works by hiding itself. Thus, rather than see these two ways of thinking about the aesthetic as opposed, and thus a matter of for/against, perhaps the aesthetic turn in the social sciences must embrace how uses of the aesthetic can underline modes of domination and exclusion, while simultaneously allowing for an

appreciation of the social and historical relations between sensations and thought that generates possibilities for their reconfiguring.

SEE ALSO: Bourdieu, Pierre (1930–2002); Distinction; Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804); Politics

## References

---

- Bleiker, R. (2009) *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Born, G. (2010) The social and the aesthetic: for a post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production. *Cultural Sociology*, 4 (2), 171–208.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London.
- Breger, C. (2012) The return to aesthetics in literary studies. *German Studies Association*, 35 (3), 505–509.
- Eagleton, T. (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell, London.
- Felski, R. (2015) *The Limits of Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Ingold, T. (ed.) (1996) *Key Debates in Anthropology*, Routledge, London.
- Kompridis, N. (ed.) (2014) *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Marcus, G.E. and Fischer, M.M.J. (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Rancière, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London.
- Shapiro, M.J. (2012) *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, Routledge, London.