



MODERN AESTHETICS AND DEMOCRATIC LIFE

The Struggle for Aesthetic Freedom

JÖRG SCHAUB

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Modern Aesthetics and
Democratic Life

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Dedicated to my parents, Gisela and Gerhard Schaub

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Introduction

The emergence of modern aesthetics in the first half of the eighteenth century is premised on the valorization and emancipation of three human capacities: sense perception, emotions and the imagination. Modern aesthetic discourses frame these capacities as valuable dimensions of human personhood and regard uses of these capacities as valuable even – or precisely – when they serve no obvious practical purpose. From the perspective of modern aesthetics, human beings are thus aesthetic beings because they explore the world with their senses, respond to their environment with emotions and imagine how things could be otherwise. To put it in one sentence: Modern aesthetics is underpinned by the idea that it matters how human beings perceptively disclose, emotionally respond to and (re-)imagine the world.

Given this outlook, the way in which a range of discourses have evolved since the eighteenth century appears as problematically incomplete from the point of view of modern aesthetics. Since the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination denote important dimensions of our personhood, one would expect them to widely be regarded as essential to our freedom or self-realization. Yet, these dimensions find little recognition in philosophical accounts of freedom. A wide range of conflicts and transformations in our democratic societies are driven by how human beings perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine the status quo. Yet, most normative political theories tend to pay little attention to these capacities and dimensions of our personhood. And while it is true that perception, emotions and imagination are well-established topics in philosophical aesthetics, these discussions have, at least until recently, typically focussed on art. But we don't stop being perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings the moment we step outside the art world. These art-centred approaches to aesthetics are therefore of little use when it comes to the question that is at the heart of this study: *What kind of consideration do we owe each other as (equal) aesthetic subjects, that is, as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings?*

To comprehensively address this important, yet neglected, question, I draw on and bring together three branches of philosophy: aesthetics, social and political

philosophy and critical theory. In a first step, I reappraise seminal contributions to the emerging field of modern aesthetics by Joseph Addison, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos and Alexander Baumgarten and develop, on this basis, a novel *capacity-based account of modern aesthetics*. According to this account, individuals engage aesthetically with the world whenever they explore how their senses disclose the world to them, explore their emotional responses to the world and imagine how the world could be otherwise.

In a second step, I argue that the insight that the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination denote valuable dimensions of our personhood has significant implications for our understanding of (individual and political) freedom and democratic life. To unpack these implications, I make recourse to the Hegelian notions of recognition and ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*. According to Axel Honneth's interpretation of these ideas in *Freedom's Right* (2014), democratic ethical life is composed of complementary recognition relationships of legal, moral, personal, economic and political freedom. In other words, Honneth frames recognition as 'a conceptual species' with different 'subspecies' (2002: 506). Each subspecies of recognition tracks different valuable capacities of persons and relates to a distinct social 'status' that licences persons to perform distinct kinds of 'acts' (Honneth 2014: 124). For instance, to be recognized as a moral subject I must be seen as possessing the capacity to deliberate about the moral appropriateness of norms and actions. And as someone who has the social status of moral subject, I am culturally authorized to question the moral appropriateness of any aspect of social life and expect relevant others to address any moral concerns I might have by giving me moral reasons. The theory of recognition is thus both a social theory and a theory of freedom. It accounts for democratic *Sittlichkeit's* differentiated character in terms of a conceptual and social differentiation of relationships of recognition. At the same time, the theory of recognition understands freedom as a form of self-realization that is enabled by valuable dimensions of human personality being tracked by relationships of recognition. What I am adding to this picture is an original *account of aesthetic recognition* that is underpinned by my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics. In other words, my notion of aesthetic recognition expands the range of recognition relationships that is familiar from Hegel and Honneth. And in doing so, it expands our understanding of freedom as self-realization, since the valuable dimensions of personhood that are tracked by aesthetic recognition, namely, sense perception, emotions and the imagination, are not taken into account by any of the familiar recognition relationships.

Finally, I outline a novel *critical theory of aesthetics* that is inspired by Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. The point of such a critical theory of aesthetics is, on the one hand, to acknowledge that the history of modern democratic life is also a history of struggles for equal aesthetic freedom. On the other hand, we need to develop theoretical tools that enable us to identify and criticize instances of aesthetic misrecognition and aesthetic misdevelopments.

This study is part of an intellectual tradition that systematically explores the significance of aesthetics for our personal and political lives. The first peak of this tradition is, arguably, Friedrich Schiller's (2005a) *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* from 1795. This tradition has stayed alive ever since, some even claim that 'the exploration of political life from an aesthetic perspective . . . has become so prominent and persistent' in recent years 'that we must speak of . . . an *aesthetic turn* in political thought' (Kompridis 2014: xiv).¹ My own contribution to this tradition is influenced by Hegelian ideas (like recognition and *Sittlichkeit*), however, my approach is not that of Hegel. And – apart from Chapter 2 – the aim of this study is not to offer a novel interpretation of Hegel's thoughts on aesthetics and modern ethical life.² As a matter of fact, the aesthetic plays no positive role whatsoever in Hegel's (1991) *Philosophy of Right* from 1821, that is, his mature account of modern *Sittlichkeit*. Neither Hegel nor any of his contemporary followers develop an account of aesthetic recognition; and, by implication, they also do not systematically explore the contributions the aesthetic makes to democratic life and freedom.³ This problematic marginalization of the aesthetic is, however, not just a feature of Hegelian approaches to social and political philosophy such as Honneth's. The most influential liberal and democratic theorist of our time that is inspired by Kant, namely John Rawls, also does not treat the aesthetic as a topic of significance.⁴ As a consequence, these

¹ In recent years, we can also witness a shift in the analytic tradition of aesthetics towards exploring our aesthetic lives beyond the art world. In other words, analytic aestheticians also highlight the need to scrutinize the interaction of the aesthetic with issues in 'moral and political philosophy' such as freedom and injustice (Riggle 2023: 58). See, for instance, Lopes (2024), Lopes, Nanay and Matherne (2023) as well as Matherne and Riggle (2020; 2021).

² Chapter 2 engages with Hegel's lecture on *Aesthetics* from 1823, offering a novel account of the transition from Hegel's ideal aesthetics to what I call his post-ideal aesthetics, which emerges after the dissolution of (ideal) romantic art. What is more, I explain why Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics remains relevant in modern ethical life. See Hegel (1975: 602–11).

³ The displacement of the aesthetic from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is astonishing, given that he is one of the most influential aestheticians of the nineteenth century. For a discussion of Hegel's reasons for displacing romantic irony (i.e. a variant of aesthetic freedom) from his mature account of modern ethical life, see Chapter 6. In Honneth's detailed account of contemporary democratic *Sittlichkeit* in *Freedom's Right*, aesthetics and aesthetic freedom are only mentioned in passing (2014: 87, 283, 384n476).

⁴ In fact, the term 'aesthetics' is not even mentioned in the index of his major works such as *A Theory of Justice* (1999a) and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001).

approaches generate incomplete accounts of democratic ethical life and freedom, since they fail to take into account that citizens are also aesthetic subjects and are therefore deserving of consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. With these introductory remarks behind us, I can now provide a brief overview of the contents of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 1 outlines my *capacity-based account of modern aesthetics*. It emerges from my reconstruction of structural similarities between three seminal contributions to the emerging field of modern aesthetics from the first half of the eighteenth century: Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions and Joseph Addison's aesthetics of the free play of imagination. According to my interpretation, the basic structure of modern approaches to aesthetics comprises two features: (1) such approaches are grounded in (one or more of) the following human capacities, namely sense perception, emotions and the imagination; and (2) they regard non-instrumental or explorative uses of these capacities as intrinsically valuable. This capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is free-standing from other familiar framings of aesthetics, since it neither grounds the aesthetic in a conceptual construct like art or beauty nor in a distinct type of experience or judgement, that is, aesthetic experience or judgements of taste.

Chapter 1 also sheds light on the cultural significance of modern aesthetics beyond the art world. For my capacity-based approach reveals that all human beings are aesthetic beings, since they all possess the relevant capacities. What is more, it is a modern aesthetic idea that it matters how individuals perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagining the world. Finally, it is an upshot of this capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics that the perceptual, emotional and imaginative exploration of the world is part of human freedom or self-realization (even if it does not directly serve moral, practical or theoretical purposes). My capacity-based account thus brings to light that modern aesthetics interacts in important ways with the two values that underpin modern ethical life, namely freedom and equality.

In Chapter 2, I outline an original interpretation of what happens to art and aesthetics, according to Hegel, after the dissolution of ideal romantic art. I claim that in his *Aesthetics*, a work based on his *Lectures on Fine Art* from 1823, Hegel delineates a *post-ideal conception of aesthetics* and art which integrates all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics: sense perception, emotions and the imagination. Hegel thus goes beyond the seminal aestheticians of the eighteenth century by sketching an innovative *synthesis* of the modern capacity-based approach to aesthetics. Hegel also provides a novel account of the *substantive purpose of post-ideal aesthetics*, for he suggests that the point of

engaging aesthetically with the world is the exploration of what it could mean for us as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings *to be (more or differently) at home* in our world.

I also show in this chapter that my interpretation of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art sheds a new light on the so-called 'end of art' debate, since the shift from an ideal to a post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics has so far not been appreciated by interpreters of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. A case in point is Lydia Moland's *Hegel's Aesthetics: The Art of Idealism* (2019), the most comprehensive and up-to-date study on this topic. Moland provides insightful interpretations of the three forms of ideal (symbolic, classical and romantic) art and how they manifest themselves in individual arts (sculpture, painting, etc.). However, she fails to recognize that Hegel does not only describe the disintegration of ideal romantic art but also the transition from an ideal to a post-ideal conception of art. Like others, Moland overlooks that Hegel draws a *distinction between the concept of art and conceptions of art*.⁵

Hegel's (1975: 48) '[c]oncept of art' has a three-partite structure, consisting of art's substantive purpose, content and form. Different *conceptions of art* provide different interpretations of these three parts. Symbolic, classical and romantic art are all versions of the ideal conception of art, since they are all underpinned by the same interpretation of art's purpose, content and form. The post-ideal conception of art, which I uncover in this chapter, is grounded in a different understanding of these three parts. What comes to an end is, according to my reading of Hegel, therefore not the concept of art itself, but the ideal conception of art which is superseded by a post-ideal conception of art in modern societies.

Against this backdrop, I argue that the two dominant positions in the 'end of art' debate are both misguided: Hegel neither holds on to (a pared-down version of) the ideal conception of art nor does he claim that subsequent to the disintegration of ideal romantic art 'anything goes', since such a conception of art is incompatible with Hegel's concept of art.

Finally, I give an account of the role that Hegel's post-ideal conception plays in modern ethical life. According to my interpretation, modern ethical life's aspiration to be a life of equal freedom for all cannot be achieved without the distinct and significant contribution that the aesthetic makes. I highlight, for example, that Hegel democratizes the subject position of the artist. He also suggests that the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination denote valuable dimensions of our personhood that matter for our freedom or self-realization.

⁵ For another case in point, see Houlgate (1997).

Against this backdrop, I argue in Chapter 3 that standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* – as outlined by Hegel (1991) in his *Philosophy of Right* and updated by Honneth (2014) for contemporary (Western) liberal democracies in *Freedom's Right* – are *unsatisfactory and incomplete because they do not identify and integrate the dimension of aesthetic recognition*. These standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* are *unsatisfactory*, since they fall short of outlining a life of freedom. They are marred by two dimensions of unfreedom: The first dimension of unfreedom is *individual unfreedom*, since the recognition relationship of aesthetic freedom, which is missing from standard accounts of modern and democratic ethical life, is essential for cultivating and realizing our individuality; the second dimension of unfreedom is *scope unfreedom*, which results from exercises of legal and moral freedom being unable to underpin transformations of the status quo that go beyond rendering existing social institutions, roles and norms less biased. According to standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*, citizens are therefore not free in relation to these institutions, roles and norms, since they encounter them as unalterable ‘facts’ that they are ‘constantly compelled to antecedently recognize’ (Honneth 2014: 111). By integrating aesthetic recognition into the standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*, we can expand the scope of citizens’ freedom, since their status as aesthetic subjects licenses them to re-imagine and transform social institutions, norms and roles based on how they perceive and emotionally experience them.

The standard accounts of modern and democratic ethical life are also *incomplete* due to them omitting a conceptually distinct and socially effective variant of recognition: aesthetic recognition. To back up this claim, I invoke several case studies: the early socialists’ critique of capitalism, feminist consciousness-raising in the 1960s, the increasing openness of social roles to interpretations based on individuals’ aesthetic explorations and Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) account of how capitalism has morphed into an ‘aesthetic capitalism’ by co-opting the aesthetic critique of capitalism since the 1970s (Reckwitz 2017: 2).

I thus reach the conclusion that *the standard accounts of modern and democratic Sittlichkeit must be expanded*: aesthetic recognition needs to complement the familiar relationships of moral, legal, personal, economic and political recognition.⁶ I argue that this adjustment leads to *a more comprehensive understanding of human freedom and democratic ethical life*.

⁶ See also Schaub (2019a).

Having explained why recognition relationships of aesthetic freedom are an integral part of democratic ethical life, I develop in Chapter 4 my novel account of *aesthetic recognition* by linking the Hegelian notion of recognition with my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics. I frame aesthetic recognition as a recognition relationship of (individual) freedom (along the lines of Honneth's understanding of legal and moral freedom), delineate the distinct social status of an (equal) aesthetic subject that is linked with aesthetic recognition and identify the valuable dimensions of personhood that underpin aesthetic recognition, namely the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination.

I also clarify what is involved in aesthetic relating in terms of our agency, highlight that my account of aesthetic recognition integrates all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) and provide an overview of all the ways in which my account of aesthetic recognition bears on freedom. My account of aesthetic recognition thus contributes to aesthetics as well as social and political philosophy. In addition to expanding the range of relationships of recognition familiar from Hegel and Honneth, this account of aesthetic recognition sheds light on the *social and normative life of the aesthetic*. My recognition-theoretical approach to the aesthetic thus puts us in a position to overcome two problems affecting other framings of the interaction between aesthetics and politics: it can explain how the aesthetic becomes effective in democratic life and how we can integrate the aesthetic into our accounts of democratic ethical life.⁷

In Chapter 5, I then turn my attention to the flipside of aesthetic recognition: *aesthetic misrecognition*, that is, instances in which (groups of) individuals are not given adequate consideration as equal aesthetic subjects or sensing, feeling and imaginative beings.⁸ I illustrate this with the case study of demands for 'safe spaces' on university campuses. Against this backdrop, I then explain how the notion of aesthetic (mis-)recognition helps us to better understand a range of controversial phenomena (such as gender transitioning) and demands (for instance, neurodiverse students demanding adjustments to their learning conditions). I also show that the notion of aesthetic misrecognition enables us to recognize and criticize instances of a distinct kind of injustice, namely aesthetic injustice.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, outlines the research programme of a *critical theory of aesthetics* in a recognition-theoretical key. This chapter identifies key

⁷ For instance, it is a familiar critique of Rancière that he fails to explain how the aesthetic can bring about (lasting) political transformations. See, for example, Hallward (2009) and Norval (2014: 190).

⁸ See also Schaub (2024).

tasks for a critical theory of aesthetics and illustrates how we can go about engaging in them. I maintain that the point of a critical theory of aesthetics is to spot and criticize all the ways in which aesthetic recognition's potential to contribute to democratic ethical life becoming a life of equal freedom for all has been, and continues to be, (unnecessarily) undermined. *The first task of a critical theory of aesthetics consists in identifying and criticizing pathological conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition.*

I first consider two examples of conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition that are pathological because they undercut aesthetic recognition's potential to promote our *freedom*, namely romantic irony (as Hegel understands it) and 'mere creativity' accounts of the aesthetic which have become increasingly popular and socially effective in contemporary capitalist societies in recent decades. I then turn my attention to three conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition that go against the normative aspiration of democratic ethical life to be a life of *equal freedom*: first, I discuss two versions of aesthetic dictatorships that attribute the status of aesthetic subject solely to a political leader, before reconstructing Kant's (2011) racist aesthetic inferiorization of Non-European subjects in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* from 1764; finally, I consider, drawing on Jacques Rancière's (2012) *Proletarian Nights*, the case of the joiner Gabriel Gauny who challenged classist prejudices in nineteenth-century France and attempted, as a proletarian, to assert himself as an equal aesthetic subject.

I then briefly consider the *second task of a critical theory of aesthetics*, namely, to *reflect on the propensity (even) of non-pathological conceptualizations of aesthetic freedom to set off dynamics that are problematic from the point of view of democratic ethical life's ambition to establish a life of equal freedom for all*, before moving on to the *third task: the identification of social pathologies of aesthetic recognition*, that is, (avoidable) social mechanisms or dynamics that lead to certain (groups of) individuals not being given adequate consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. To illustrate such a social pathology, I first invoke an example of *aesthetic oppression*, namely Simone Weil's (1946) description of the treatment of factory workers in the 1930s. I then discuss an example of *aesthetic heteronomy*, analysing how the free exploration and expression of emotions is disrupted and undermined in the contemporary world of employment. Finally, I consider whether the rise of aesthetic consumption amounts to an aesthetic misdevelopment, since it arguably tends to crowd out other, more meaningful variants of aesthetic relating in contemporary capitalist societies.

To conclude this chapter, I turn my attention to yet *another task of a critical theory of aesthetics: to unpack what it can mean to engage critically with others' exercises of aesthetic relating and what emerges from them*. Such a critique matters because individuals and groups often make demands on others that are grounded in how they perceive, emotionally respond to and (re-)imagine the status quo. A critical theory of aesthetics therefore also must systematically explore the question of *how we can adjudicate between conflicting aesthetic demands*. Furthermore, it has to put us in a position to *identify cases in which demands for aesthetic recognition unduly interfere with other variants of recognition* (such as moral and legal recognition) and vice versa. This research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key *expands the range of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. It adds an aesthetic dimension to Honneth's critical theory of recognition and counters the marginalization of the aesthetic that is a feature of Habermas and Forst's communicative and justificatory models of critical theory. My approach also *overcomes the art-centredness* of much of critical aesthetic thinking that is inspired by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), while continuing to critically engage with how contemporary capitalism shapes how the aesthetic manifests itself in contemporary social life.

Like other variants of critical theory, my critical theory of aesthetics is not a neutral or disinterested endeavour but motivated by an emancipatory interest. My approach aims, on the one hand, to draw attention to past and present instances of aesthetic misrecognition and aesthetic misdevelopments and, on the other hand, to lend legitimacy to past and ongoing emancipatory aesthetic struggles to overcome them. The research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics thus belongs to a long tradition of contributing to 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age', as Marx put it in a letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843 (1975: 209).⁹

To bring this introduction to a close, I would like to briefly outline how my approach fits into two debates: The sociological debates about the role that the aesthetic plays in modern and contemporary social life, on the one hand, and the contemporary philosophical debate about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, on the other hand.¹⁰

⁹ Each chapter of this book systematically explores a topic that is significant for shedding light on the role and importance of aesthetics in democratic ethical life. The individual chapters can be read independently of each other, even though each chapter represents a step in an overarching line of argument.

¹⁰ To be clear, my ambition is not to provide a comprehensive introduction to these complex and multifaceted debates. I simply want to bring into relief what my approach adds to, and how it differs from, some influential positions.

'Classical' sociological accounts of societal modernization put forward by theorists like Durkheim, Weber, Hegel and Marx hardly make any 'reference to the aesthetic' (Reckwitz 2017: 17); and if they do, they tend to characterize the aesthetic as a (pre-modern) remnant with a precarious future in modern social life or assign it to a distinct societal sub-sphere, that is, the art world. This 'classical' approach is influential to this day and shapes how mainstream social theorists from Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth to Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann understand societal modernization and its impact on the aesthetic.¹¹ My own approach challenges this 'classical' view of how the aesthetic interacts with societal modernization processes. For I claim that the aesthetic underpins a conceptually distinct and socially effective dimension of recognition that, like morality and law, is germane to all spheres of modern and contemporary democratic life.

'Classical' theorists of modernization all share a particular understanding of modernization processes that encompasses two features: 'functional differentiation' or the 'strict separation between spheres of activity', on the one hand, and rationalization, on the other (Reckwitz 2017: 17). As a result of these processes, spheres of action are increasingly guided by rational standards that are geared to their 'specialized functions' (Reckwitz 2017: 17). And since such processes of functional differentiation and rationalization marginalize, in the view of 'classical' theorists, aesthetic considerations, they are tantamount to a large-scale process of '*de-aestheticization*' (Reckwitz 2017: 17). From this perspective, individuals who relate aesthetically to the world by perceptively and emotionally exploring and (re-)imagining a phenomenon threaten to undermine the rational organization of a sphere of action. For instance, the operation of an airplane requires that all crew members always stick to a protocol that makes no room for individuals' aesthetic explorations. According to 'classical' modernization theories, attempts to (re-)aestheticize spheres of action are therefore always misguided, dangerous or pathological.

One implication of understanding societal modernization along the lines of 'social differentiation' and 'formal rationalization' is that 'any remaining aesthetic practices and elements' within spheres of action start to appear as 'mere leftovers of a pre-modern past' (Reckwitz 2017: viii, 16). 'Classical' theories of societal modernization thus fail to generate a positive interpretation of the persistence of the aesthetic in modern social life, despite the fact that

¹¹ See, for instance, Niklas Luhmann's *Art as a Social System* (2000). For a discussion of the role that the aesthetic plays in Habermas, see Duvenage (2019).

'the de-aestheticization' of social life can 'never' be 'complete' as long as those who keep these functionally differentiated and rationally organized spheres of action running are sensing, feeling and imaginative beings (Reckwitz 2017: 18).¹² Further, since modern subjects inhabit a world that has been shaped by the modern aesthetic discourses that emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century, they are aware, although perhaps in an inchoate fashion, that these dimensions of their personhood are valuable and relevant for their freedom. Aestheticization processes are, in short, as much a part of modern social life as the de-aestheticization processes highlighted by 'classical' theorists of functional differentiation and rationalization.

In contrast to 'classical' modernization theories, my approach provides a positive account of the contributions that the aesthetic continues to make to all social spheres and rejects the relegation of the aesthetic to a 'special sphere' (Reckwitz 2017: 18). At the same time, my approach acknowledges the need to differentiate between different relationships of recognition that underpin different social spheres. I am, in short, in no way opposed to generating a differentiated account of modern social life. What I deny is the suggestion that embracing a differentiated account of modern life is necessarily linked with endorsing the view that the only legitimate place for the aesthetic in modern societies is the art world. This idea that the 'proper place of' the aesthetic in modern social life is 'modern . . . art' chimes with the framing of 'classical' theorists of modernization for a number of reasons (Reckwitz 2017: 18): firstly, this view takes into consideration that aesthetic practices are unlike all other practices, that is, they are non-rational and non-functional;¹³ secondly, relegating the aesthetic to its own sphere amounts to a way of taking individuals seriously as aesthetic beings while protecting all other spheres of action that are rationally organized to efficiently discharge a specific function from aesthetic interferences.¹⁴ In other words, the tendency of 'classical' theorists to 'separat[e] . . . the aesthetic and the rational' is connected with the way in which they conceptualize processes

¹² In fact, contemporary sociologists of the aesthetic teach us that 'the whole history of modernity contains at various places and times numerous concrete instances of aestheticization, of aesthetically dominated practices, as well as mixtures of the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic (as aesthetically mixed or permeated practices)' (Reckwitz 2017: 18). Andreas Reckwitz identifies a number of '*agents of aestheticization*' that run alongside and counter the 'de-aestheticization' processes that are also a 'characteristic for modernity': '[t]he expansionism of art', '[t]he media revolution', '[t]he rise of capitalism', '[t]he expansion of the world of objects' and '[t]he rise of the subject' (2017: 19–21).

¹³ See Kompridis (2014: xvii).

¹⁴ The family or personal relationships are, arguably, the only other societal sub-sphere in which emotions, especially love, play an important role in terms of shaping their internal organization. It would therefore be interesting to explore how the aesthetic, in the way I understand it, bears on these family or personal relationships.

of societal modernization (Reckwitz 2017: 18). ‘Classical’ theories of societal modernization have therefore helped to prop up the idea of art’s autonomy by ‘creat[ing] legitimate art and secur[ing] the independence of the artistic’ from all other societal spheres (Reckwitz 2017: 18).¹⁵

The two main problems with this ‘classical’ way of conceptualizing the role and place of the aesthetic in modern social life are the following: firstly, the aesthetic ends up being equated with, or reduced to, (the reception and production of) art; secondly, the aesthetic is (theoretically and institutionally) separated from the rest of social life, that is, relegated to art institutions (such as museums, concert halls, theatres as well as venues for art education and art criticism). Those in the grip of ‘classical’ accounts of societal modernization therefore tend to frame the debate about aesthetics and politics in terms of a debate about art and politics. There is, of course, nothing wrong with exploring the relationship between art and politics. However, we must appreciate that the domain of aesthetics is wider and therefore not coextensive with the domain of art. The scope of approaches that only look at art is therefore too narrow to capture all the ways in which the aesthetic shapes modern and contemporary social life. What is more, from the point of view of a ‘classical’ approach to societal modernization, it is impossible to make sense of the fact that the aesthetic has become, according to contemporary sociologists of the aesthetic, the ‘structural blueprint for late modern society as a whole’, not just for the art world (Reckwitz 2017: viii). ‘Classical’ theorists who associate modernization processes with processes of de-aestheticization cannot explain why we have seen a continuous intensification of aestheticization processes in almost all areas of social life, up to the point at which the aesthetic is now regarded by some as ‘a crucial organizing principle of Western societies’ (Reckwitz 2017: 2).¹⁶ The main driver of current aestheticization processes is, according to most contemporary sociologists, the co-optation of the aesthetic by capitalism in response to a crisis of legitimacy and ‘governability’ in Western societies in ‘the 1970s’ (Chiapello 2004: 593). In line with this diagnosis, Boltanski and Chiapello identify a *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) and Reckwitz speaks of ‘aesthetic capitalism’ (2017: 2).

¹⁵ For the same reason, ‘classical’ accounts of modernization can be invoked to underpin the familiar demands that all members of our democratic societies ought to be provided with a basic artistic education and access to art institutions (like museums and concert halls). For such demands presupposes that art and the art world is *the only* or main domain in which subjects can realize themselves as aesthetic beings.

¹⁶ In the German context, the ‘aestheticization of the life-world’ is a popular topic of debate among philosophers and sociologists since the late 1980s. See, for instance, Bubner (1989: 143–56), Welsch (1997: 1–32), Honneth (1994: 29–38) and Schulze (1995).

The challenge arising for my project from these contemporary sociological analyses is different from the one associated with ‘classical’ approaches. My response to ‘classical’ approaches is that the aesthetic has always been and remains an integral part of modern social life. Furthermore, by generating an account of aesthetic recognition that complements relationships of legal, moral, personal, economic and political recognition, I show how the aesthetic can be integrated into a differentiated account of modern social life. The works of contemporary sociologists of the aesthetic put into question a different premise of my project, namely that the aesthetic can still play an emancipatory role and still has the potential to contribute to democratic ethical life becoming a life of freedom for all. According to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, the ‘themes of “artist critique”’ (Chiapello 2004: 593), namely individual freedom and authenticity, which had gained more and more traction from around ‘1800 to 1968’ (Reckwitz 2017: 5), have now effectively been incorporated ‘into the dominant capitalist discourse’ (Chiapello 2004: 593). Consequently, we are witnessing a profound ‘crisis of “artist critique”’, which is, in their assessment, ‘weakened in every respect’ (Chiapello 2004: 593).¹⁷ In sum, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that ‘the co-optation of “artist critique”’ by contemporary capitalism has robbed this mode of critique of its emancipatory potential and severed its link with freedom (Chiapello 2004: 593). And Andreas Reckwitz warns from a Foucauldian perspective that the aesthetic is at the centre of our current mode of being governed and subjectivized. It is therefore naïve to continue to ascribe to the aesthetic, as I do in this study, a potential for emancipation, freedom and (radical) self-transformation.

I take seriously the picture that these sociologists paint of the role that aesthetics plays in contemporary capitalist societies. In fact, their diagnosis serves as my starting point. My study can be seen as a sustained reflection on how we can respond to the predicament described by these contemporary sociologists of the aesthetic. My first move consists in going back to the eighteenth century to recover what modern aesthetics was originally about and to elucidate how it bears on our freedom. In this way, I try to avoid the risk of uncritically adopting potentially problematic contemporary notions of the aesthetic. For instance, I am thinking about the currently popular ‘rhetoric of creativity’ that conditions the aesthetic in such a way that it becomes compatible with the capitalist agenda of generating ‘economic value’ and promoting ‘entrepreneurship and innovation’ (Mould 2018: 17). Based on my interpretation of seminal contributions to eighteenth-century aesthetics, I then develop my account of aesthetic recognition

¹⁷ See also Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 419–82).

that shows that the aesthetic underpins a dimension of our (individual and political) freedom. Finally, I draw on this notion of aesthetic recognition to lay the groundwork for a critical theory of aesthetics that critically evaluates how the aesthetic is framed and the roles it plays in contemporary capitalist societies.¹⁸ Instead of turning our backs on the liberating potential of the aesthetic and lamenting aesthetics' co-optation by capitalism,¹⁹ we should, in my view, focus our energies on preparing the ground for a new wave of aesthetic social critique.

Having contextualized my approach with regard to the sociology of aesthetics, I can now move on to the question of how it interacts with contemporary philosophical debates about aesthetics and (democratic) politics.²⁰ Firstly, my approach resists the historically dominant framing of the debate that equates the relationship between aesthetics and politics with the relationship between art and politics. To fully appreciate the role and relevance of the aesthetic in modern democratic life, we need a notion of the aesthetic that is wider than the notion of art, for a narrow focus on art leads to countless non-artistic manifestations of the aesthetic falling from view. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the venerable tradition of reflecting on the relationship between art and politics should be abandoned. This tradition of thought remains relevant as long as the idea of art in the singular remains relevant.²¹ The popularity of art-focussed framings of the aesthetic since the nineteenth century also led to a preoccupation in philosophy with distinct sets of questions (and other questions being sidelined). For instance, philosophers were keen to find out what art is, shed light on the nature of art's autonomy and explore how art and politics can interact, given art's assumed autonomy.²² These questions take a backseat in a study like mine that works with an understanding of the aesthetic that is from the outset much wider than art. Consequently, I am asking different questions: what is (modern) aesthetics? What does it mean to relate aesthetically (rather than, for instance,

¹⁸ See Chapter 6.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Mould (2018).

²⁰ See also Kompridis (2014).

²¹ See, for instance, Adorno et al. (2007). For an overview of the network of institutions that are (still) underpinned by the notion of art in the singular, see Shiner (2001). The most sophisticated recent contributions to the art and politics debate are, in my view, Gabriel Rockhill's *Radical History & the Politics of Art* (2014) and Jason Miller's *The Politics of Perception and the Aesthetics of Social Change* (2021). Rockhill subjects the relationship between art and politics to a Foucauldian historicist analysis and distinguishes three influential ways in which the relationship between art and politics has been framed in the twentieth century (Rockhill 2014: 56–87): 'realism', 'formalism' and 'commitment'; he then illustrates each framework engaging with works by Lukács (1972), Marcuse (1978) and Sartre (1988). Miller's approach, by contrast, is inspired by Hegel's philosophy of art and focusses on how the recognition of cultural identities is negotiated in contemporary works of art.

²² For an overview of the philosophical debate on the definition of art, see, for instance, Adajian (2018) and Danto (2013). Art's autonomy is scrutinized, for example, in Hulatt (2013). For a reflection on what art's autonomy means for the interaction of art and politics, see Rancière (2010: 134–51).

morally) to the world? How does modern aesthetics bear on freedom? How to best conceptualize the social life and normative force of the aesthetic? What contribution does the aesthetic make to democratic ethical life? In short, the research agenda of this study that focuses on the aesthetic differs significantly from that of a work in the philosophy of art tradition.²³

Many contributions to the debate about aesthetics and politics reconstruct, compare and evaluate what philosophers have previously said on this topic. For instance, Frederick Beiser (2005b) and Samantha Matherne and Nick Riggle (2021) engage with Schiller's take on aesthetics and politics; Cecilia Sjöholm (2015) reconsiders how aesthetics and politics interact in Hannah Arendt's writings; and Michael Feola (2018) compares in *The Powers of Sensibility* the 'Aesthetic Politics of Adorno, Foucault, and Rancière'. My study, by contrast, offers a novel interpretation of modern aesthetics and develops on this basis an original account of how aesthetics and politics interact.²⁴

Unlike other approaches to aesthetics and politics, I am also not focussing on a particular issue, for example, Black aesthetics or feminist aesthetics.²⁵ My aim is, rather, to outline a *general framework that can be used to identify and evaluate a diverse range of aesthetic phenomena and misdevelopments* (from racist conceptualizations of the aesthetic to gender transitioning and the lack of consideration given to neurodiverse individuals).

Another way of categorizing contributions to the debate on aesthetics and politics is their normative orientation. My approach is grounded in an account of aesthetic recognition that is linked with a notion of aesthetic freedom. This normative focus on freedom sets my approach apart from others that only consider the instrumental value of the aesthetic in relation to politics. Such approaches ask, for example, how political activists can deploy aesthetic strategies more effectively to advance their political goals. For instance, by projecting a political slogan onto a famous building, aesthetic-political activists can attract the interest of the media and thus increase the visibility

²³ Of course, once we appreciate the differences between these two research agendas, we can then also explore how they interact. For instance, I am keen to think more about how my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics interacts with (the history of) art (since the eighteenth century).

²⁴ One of the reasons why Jacques Rancière is a key figure in the contemporary debate is that he develops original ways of conceptualizing art and aesthetics, on the one hand, and how they interact with (democratic) politics, on the other. Rancière (2013) distinguishes between different 'regimes of art' and develops a conception of aesthetics as 'distribution of the sensible', which forms the background for his reflections on aesthetics and politics. For a comparison between Rancière's and my own approach, see Schaub (2026).

²⁵ On the intersection of race and aesthetics, see, for instance, Gikandi (2011), Kelly and Roelofs (2023) and Taylor (2016). Korsmeyer (2004) is an influential contribution to the debate on gender and aesthetics.

of their political message.²⁶ Normative approaches in the debate on aesthetics and politics can be differentiated based on their underlying norms. Rancière's approach, for example, does not 'turn . . . on' freedom, like mine, but on 'equality' (Rancière 1999: ix).²⁷ Others argue, as I do, that attacks on the aesthetic in political life undermine 'democratic freedom' (Rebentisch 2016: 6). However, despite sharing this normative orientation, Juliane Rebentisch (2016) and I go about exploring the link between aesthetics and democratic freedom in a different fashion. Whereas I outline an account of aesthetic recognition and, based on this, an account of aesthetic freedom, she deliberately refrains from developing an account of the aesthetic or aesthetic freedom, since, in her view, 'the "aesthetic" in no way indicates a unified phenomenon' but 'functions as a general concept for a whole range of phenomena as diverse as pleasure, taste, irony, distance, mutability, cultural diversity or "colorfulness," staging . . . , rhetoric and semblance' (Rebentisch 2016: 2).

Finally, my way of conceptualizing the relationship between aesthetics and politics also makes it possible to *conceptually distinguish the aesthetic from other dimensions of democratic life and freedom*. This enables me to *clarify the distinct contribution that the aesthetic makes to democratic life*. Both advantages are missing, for instance, from Rancière's influential approach to aesthetics and politics.²⁸ Rancière understands the aesthetic in terms of a 'distribution of the sensible' (Rockhill 2004: 86). By this he means the delineation of 'places and forms of participation' through which 'a common world' and particular 'modes of perception' are established (Rockhill 2004: 89). The world we share with others is, for Rancière, therefore itself an aesthetic effect, since it emerges from distributing the sensible in a particular fashion. The 'distribution of the sensible' determines, in other words, what is part of a world and what isn't, 'what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done' (Rockhill 2004: 89). The 'sensible,' Rancière's most basic aesthetic term, thus stands both for what we can perceive and what we can make sense of or understand; and the word 'distribution' highlights that the aesthetic is concerned both with exclusion and inclusion by determining the ways in which objects have to appear and how subjects have to be like in order to become or remain part of a social order (Rancière 2004: 7).

²⁶ For an example of an instrumental framing of the aesthetic, see Boyd and Mitchell's *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution* (2012).

²⁷ See Hallward (2009).

²⁸ For a recent collection on Rancière's thought on aesthetics and politics, see Durham and Gaonkar (2019).

This framing of the aesthetic in terms of a ‘distribution of the sensible’ extends the reach of the aesthetic ‘beyond the strict realm of art to include the conceptual coordinates and modes of visibility operative in the political domain’ or any other domain of human life (Rockhill 2004: 86).²⁹ This definition thus turns the aesthetic into something fundamental, since all social formations are the effects of ‘forms of distributions of the sensible’ (Rancière 2009a: 26). Consequently, Rancière maintains that the talk of an “aestheticization” of politics’ makes no sense ‘because politics is aesthetic in principle’ (Rancière 1999: 58).³⁰ Yet, if *all* of social life is aesthetic, then it becomes impossible to distinguish the aesthetic from the moral, legal, economic or political, for all of these phenomena are aesthetic in the sense of resulting from a particular distribution of the sensible. Rancière therefore lacks the conceptual resources to ask the question that motivates this study: What is the distinct contribution that the aesthetic (as opposed to the moral, legal, economic or political) makes to democratic life and democratic freedom? For asking this question presupposes a framework that differentiates the aesthetic from other dimensions of democratic life.

This brings me to the last issue: Isn’t the aestheticization of politics (always) ‘dangerous’ and regressive (Kompridis 2014: xvi)? Doesn’t the aestheticization of politics (always) open the floodgates to irrationality and emotionality, that is, forces that ‘violate the integrity’ of rational deliberations of citizens in the public sphere (Habermas 1987: 340)? Aren’t citizens exposed to all kinds of manipulation if we allow and encourage the intrusion of perceptions, emotions and the imagination into democratic life?

It would be foolish to dismiss such worries given the role politically motivated processes of aestheticization played in National Socialism, fascism and totalitarian communism in the twentieth century. In Walter Benjamin’s now famous words: the fascists practised the ‘aestheticizing of politics’ and the communists responded ‘by politicizing art’ (Benjamin 2008: 42). Against this background, it is understandable that normative political theorists in the second half of the twentieth century developed the habit of denouncing the aestheticization of politics wherever they encountered it. The call to keep aesthetics, with its irrational and emotional power, out of politics as much as

²⁹ See also Rancière (2004: 8).

³⁰ The political is, according to Rancière, composed of two antagonistic elements: the police and politics. Both are manifestations of a ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Panagia 2010). Police is Rancière’s name for a social order; and a social order is a ‘configuration of the perceptible’ (Rancière 1999: 29) because it defines ways of being, seeing, acting, speaking and so forth. Politics, on the other hand, denotes an ‘activity antagonistic to policing’ (Rancière 1999: 29) that involves a ‘staging of equality’ (Hallward 2009) that aims at reconfiguring the existing police order. See also Rancière (2009b: 277).

possible also seems to be a reasonable response to the current resurgence of far-right political movements that spread hateful stereotypes and conspiracy theories (such as the 'Great Replacement') that capture the imagination of citizens and fuel highly problematic emotional responses (such as xenophobia and racialized hate).

Despite all of this, I argue that the aesthetic can make a distinct and valuable contribution to our (individual and political) freedom. For this reason, the aesthetic is an integral part of democratic ethical life. However, we must also take seriously and address the aforementioned worries: firstly, my approach acknowledges that the aesthetic can be dangerous and drive the debasement of democratic politics. Yet, at the same time, it insists that the aesthetic is not necessarily a regressive force in democratic politics. Secondly, my approach highlights that the aesthetic cannot be banished from democratic life, since we all engage in politics (also) as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. Thirdly, if the aesthetic is an ineliminable part of democratic life, then the question is not whether the aesthetic should play a role in democratic politics, but rather what role it plays or how the aesthetic manifests itself in democratic life. We therefore need to reflect *more* on the aesthetic dimension of our social and political life, not less. We must subject prevalent understandings of the aesthetic to an aesthetic critique as well as the ways in which citizens perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively engage with their world. That is why this study culminates in an outline of a critical theory of aesthetics. We need to develop a theoretical toolkit that enables us to recognize and criticize manifestations of the aesthetic that undermine its potential as a force that contributes to equal freedom for all.

Modern aesthetics

A capacity-based account

1.1. Introduction

Modern aesthetics is a multifaceted and extensive discursive field that, according to my understanding, emerges in the first half of the eighteenth century and continues to the present day. It is therefore not surprising that philosophers have proposed different interpretations of what modern aesthetics is about. Some argue, for instance, that what grounds the philosophical subdiscipline of aesthetics is a concern with art or beauty, while others maintain that the aesthetic is underpinned by a distinct kind of experience (i.e. aesthetic experience), judgement (i.e. judgements of taste) or pleasure (i.e. aesthetic pleasure). In this chapter, I outline yet another way of understanding what modern aesthetics is about. The point of doing this is not to replace these familiar framings of modern aesthetics or to show that they are philosophically unsound. Rather, my aim is to highlight that there is something else, something even more basic, going on with regard to the emergence of modern aesthetics, something that is missing or not made explicit by these familiar understandings of the aesthetic.

My claim is that modern aesthetics is, at its most basic level, concerned with a reappraisal, valorization and emancipation of three human capacities, namely sense perception, emotions and the imagination. These capacities are valorized, since they are treated as valuable dimensions of human personhood, and they are emancipated because their exercises are framed as valuable even – or precisely – when they serve no obvious practical purpose.¹ Modern aesthetic discourses thus frame explorative (or non-instrumental) uses of our capacities

¹ Schiller illustrates this revaluation and emancipation of the capacity of sense perception with an example of visual perception. Schiller states that '[o]nce' man 'does begin to enjoy through the eye, and seeing acquires for him a value of its own, he is already aesthetically free' (2005a: 167).

of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as valuable and they regard such exercises of these capacities as a significant aspect of a human life.

It matters to human beings that they can freely explore and assign value to how their senses disclose a phenomenon to them. Individuals are, for instance, engaging with the world in an aesthetic way if they pay attention to and explore the textures and tastes of something they eat, or if they let their gaze wander over a landscape to take in and appreciate everything there is to see. It also matters to human beings to be attentive and attach value to their emotional reactions to phenomena and situations. For example, individuals are engaging aesthetically with a person they have just met if they explore their emotional responses to them. Has meeting this person lifted their mood? Do they now feel more hopeful or insecure? Finally, it also matters to human beings that they can explore how things could be otherwise and attach value to how they re-imagine something. For instance, I am engaging aesthetically with the interior of a friend's home if I – inspired by how my perceptive and emotional capacities have disclosed this interior to me – imagine the kind of changes I would make to this place. In short, it is a modern aesthetic idea that it matters how human beings perceptively disclose, emotionally respond to and (re-)imagine the world.

According to my interpretation, the two most basic features of modern approaches to aesthetics are the following: (1) they are grounded in (one or more of) the following human capacities: sense perception, emotions and the imagination; and (2) they frame explorative (or non-instrumental) uses of these capacities as valuable in their own right. My *capacity-based account of modern aesthetics* therefore amounts to the claim that the interaction of these two features forms *the basic structure of modern aesthetics*.

Against the backdrop of this brief outline of my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics, I can now further specify how my conceptualization of modern aesthetics interacts with other, more familiar approaches to aesthetics. As I see it, there are two common ways of framing the aesthetic: according to the first framing, a *conceptual construct* such as art or beauty serves as aesthetics' ultimate point of reference;² according to the second framing, the

² For examples of approaches to aesthetics that focus on beauty, see, for instance, Santayana (1896), Sartwell (2004) and Scruton (2009). There is also a tendency among some philosophers to conceive of aesthetics as a domain that is ultimately concerned with truth. These philosophers thus ground the aesthetic in a non-aesthetic conceptual construct; and they turn to art in the hope that an engagement with art will help them to get a better grip on truth (Bubner 1989: 11). For example, Heidegger's (2002a) engagement with art in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which was originally published in 1950, is conditioned by his ontology that aims to make sense of (the truth of) being (as opposed to beings). And Hegel's (1975) *Aesthetics* famously frames art as one of three 'media' of absolute knowledge (Beiser 2005a: 285). In short, a range of philosophers since the nineteenth century

aesthetic is constituted by introducing a distinction into a domain, for instance, by distinguishing aesthetic experiences from other experiences, aesthetic judgements from non-aesthetic judgements or aesthetic forms of pleasure from other forms of pleasure. Each variant of these two framings has given rise to complex and ongoing philosophical debates.³

For illustrative purposes, let's consider one of these variants in a bit more detail. Hegel is one of the figures in the nineteenth century who, in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* from 1823, popularized the idea that 'the word "aesthetics" stand[s] . . . for . . . *Philosophy of Art*' (1975: 1). In other words, for Hegel the discipline of aesthetics is exclusively concerned with '*fine art*' (1975: 1). Due to figures like Hegel, philosophical aesthetics since the nineteenth century has been preoccupied with questions like the following: What is art? How to evaluate art? Is there a logic to art's historical development? When (and where) does art emerge?⁴

Of course, we have to keep in mind that my suggestion to distinguish between two kinds of framings and different versions of these framings is merely a heuristic one, for many of the seminal figures concern themselves with both framings and more than one variant of aesthetics.⁵ For instance, in his influential *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790, Immanuel Kant (2000: §§1–22) offers 'An Analytic of the Beautiful' that is linked with an account of judgements

equate aesthetics with philosophy of art and assume that art is ultimately concerned with truth. Adorno's aesthetics can also be read as being ultimately concerned with truth. See, for instance, the interpretations of Bubner (1989: 11–20) and Hulatt (2016). However, such approaches to aesthetics run the risk of conveying more about a philosopher's struggle with truth than about art or aesthetics. My capacity-based account of aesthetics avoids this risk because it is not shaped by a non-aesthetic philosophical concern.

³ For instance, the challenges involved in drawing a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences are discussed in Beardsley (1958, 1982), Dickie (1965, 1964, 1988), Iseminger (2003, 2004) and Levinson (1996).

⁴ There is a fascinating debate on whether art in the singular is, like modern aesthetics itself, an invention of the eighteenth century. Proponents of this view maintain that before the eighteenth century people distinguish between different arts or crafts, that is, practices involving skills and knowledge (such as shoemaking, painting or healing), on the one hand, and 'doings' of nature (such as an apple growing on a tree), on the other. It is only in the modern context that the notion of (fine) art (in the singular) emerges, a notion that is no longer juxtaposed to nature but to all sorts of useful arts such as shipbuilding (Shiner 2001: 5, 14). According to proponents of this view, in 'antiquity or the Middle Ages there was no conception of any essential connection' or unity 'between, say, literature and the visual arts' (Guyer 2014a: 4). The *locus classicus* for this view are two essays by Paul Oskar Kristeller (1951, 1952). For a recent critique of Kristeller's position, see Porter (2009, 2010). The idea that diverse phenomena such as a poem, a statue and a ballet are instantiations of one and the same conceptual construct, namely art, was, in the view of many, therefore not available before the eighteenth century. From the perspective of this view, a work like Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* (1823) that covers the 'art' of all historical periods (and cultures) is therefore problematically anachronistic.

⁵ Furthermore, the variants of these two framings of modern aesthetics that I have mentioned do not claim to be complete but serve merely as illustrations.

of taste as well as a distinctly aesthetic form of pleasure. What is more, Kant also develops a '[t]heory of [f]ine [a]rt' (Guyer 2014a: 447–51) and a theory of aesthetic experience that, according to Paul Guyer, gives us the key to understanding the phenomenon of modern aesthetics as a whole.⁶

Against the backdrop of this brief overview of various popular framings (and versions of framings) of aesthetics, we can now clarify how they relate to my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics. First, my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is *conceptually free-standing* from these other familiar ways of grounding the aesthetic. For it neither presupposes an account of art or beauty nor does it require us to distinguish between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences, pleasures or judgements. The reason why my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is free-standing from these other framings is that it stands in a special architectural relationship to them. My account is situated on a more basic level, namely the level of human capacities (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) and their explorative use. In other words, these other familiar framings are situated at a higher level and are, as a result, concerned with more specific phenomena (the determination of which requires the introduction of further conditions and distinctions).

The point of the capacity-based account is to make explicit the basic structure of modern aesthetics, that is, a structure that is presupposed in the background of these other familiar frameworks that add further differentiations into the domain of aesthetics. For example, judging whether the rebuilt façade of a museum is beautiful or not presupposes that you carefully look at it, that you are mindful of how it affects you and that you imaginatively consider what other options there would have been to fulfil this specific architectural task. However, to judge beauty, you must do more than just engage with it aesthetically.

In sum, my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is neither directed against nor in competition with these other, higher-level accounts of the aesthetic because it deals with the aesthetic at a more basic level. The capacity-based account is concerned with the *basic* structure of modern aesthetics, whereas higher-level framings introduce further differentiations and conditions into the domain of aesthetics, for instance, to be able to distinguish between art and non-art. The domain of aesthetics, as my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics understands it, is therefore wider than the domain of aesthetics according to any of the higher-level framings of aesthetics, precisely because these higher-

⁶ See Guyer (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) and Hindrichs (2016: 304). The Kantian notion of aesthetic experience remains influential in German aesthetics. See, for instance, Bubner (1989) and Menke (1991).

level framings come with further distinctions and preconditions. However, the capacity-based account is still an account of aesthetics, for the valorization of the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as well as their explorative (or non-instrumental) uses happens in modern aesthetic discourses. What is more, explorative uses of these capacities are (implicitly) presupposed by these higher-level accounts of the aesthetic.⁷

Having clarified the relationship between my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics and other, more familiar framings of the aesthetic, I now want to quickly indicate how, methodologically speaking, I go about generating this capacity-based account. My approach to modern aesthetics is historical and reconstructive. I reconsider texts on aesthetics from the first half of the eighteenth century and argue on this basis that a structural transformation pertaining to the thinking about the aesthetic happens during this period; a transformation that continues to shape our thinking about aesthetics and our aesthetic practices to this day. My claim is that the outline of this basic structure of modern aesthetics can already be recovered from Alexander Baumgarten's (1714–1762) aesthetics of sense perception, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's (1670–1742) aesthetics of emotions and Joseph Addison's (1672–1719) aesthetics of the free play of imagination. My focus on aesthetic discourses sets my approach apart from other historical-reconstructive approaches that consider artistic artefacts, such as Hegel's (1975)

⁷ For an alternative account of modern aesthetics, see Paul Guyer's (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) three-volume *A History of Modern Aesthetics*. Guyer maintains that a 'great deal of the history of modern aesthetics . . . can be captured by following the intertwining trails of the three ideas that aesthetic experience is an experience of key truths, of the most fundamental emotions of human experience, and the free play of imagination' (2014a: 27). His understanding of modern aesthetics thus also encompasses two features: firstly, he maintains that at the heart of modern aesthetics is a distinct kind of experience, namely aesthetic experience; secondly, Guyer claims that the diversity that is characteristic of modern aesthetics can be traced back to the fact that we have aesthetic experiences of truths, emotions and the free play of imagination (or any combination of these three substantive dimensions) (2014a: 27; 2014b: 8). By arguing that modern aesthetics is grounded in aesthetic experiences, Guyer invites the objection that he projects a Kantian notion onto the entire history of modern aesthetics. To put it differently, Guyer uses Kant's theory of aesthetic experience as a key to modern aesthetics as a whole, even though many pre- and post-Kantian authors do *not* develop an account of aesthetic experience (Hindrichs 2016: 304). This problem becomes apparent, for instance, with respect to Guyer's interpretation of Baumgarten. On the one hand, he claims that Baumgarten advocates a 'cognitivist approach to aesthetic experience' (Guyer 2014a: 323), while, on the other hand, he concedes that Baumgarten's approach 'does not contain any explicit reference . . . to a distinctive kind of experience' (Guyer 2014a: 5) that could be labelled aesthetic. Hegel can serve as an example of a post-Kantian aesthetician who does without a notion of aesthetic experience (Pippin 2008). The second key difference between Guyer and me pertains to modern aesthetics' three substantive dimensions. We both maintain that modern aesthetics has three substantive dimensions and thus constitutes a 'ternar' (Hindrichs 2016). However, in Guyer's view, these three substantive dimensions are: truth, emotions and the imagination. In my opinion, a concern with truth is not a specifically *modern* feature of aesthetics. By contrast, I claim that the emancipation of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as well as the valorization of their free use is a distinctly modern phenomenon (that underpins a wide variety of familiar framings of modern aesthetics).

Lectures on Fine Art from 1823. My method has even less in common with approaches that develop their understanding of the aesthetic in an (allegedly) ahistorical fashion through pure philosophical reflection. Think, for instance, of Kant's (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790.

To conclude my introductory remarks, I want to briefly consider what makes my capacity-based approach to aesthetics 'modern' and reflect on the sense in which it is historical. I use the label 'modern' to point out that the structural transformations of aesthetic thought that I am concerned with take place from 1709 onwards, that is, during a historical period often referred to as 'modernity'.⁸ Further, there is something distinctly modern about the character of the transformations that I associate with the emergence of modern aesthetics. The 'valorization' of the 'category of the person' is a key feature of eighteenth-century European intellectual history (Gikandi 2011: 4). Modern aesthetics is part of this development because it valorizes the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination and treats them as significant dimensions of human personhood. What is more, modern aesthetics involves the demand that these capacities be freed from arbitrary restrictions on their use. By the same token, modern moral philosophy valorizes the human capacity to deliberate about what is (morally) right and demands the removal of all dogmatic restrictions that impinge on the free exercise of this deliberative capacity. Finally, my capacity-based account also connects modern aesthetics with the rise of two values that underpin modern ethical life: equality and freedom. By grounding modern aesthetics in two capacities that all human subjects possess and ways of using these capacities that can be performed by all subjects, the capacity-based account democratizes the domain of aesthetics. To put it more carefully: the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics lays the foundation for struggles for aesthetic recognition, for it can be invoked by (groups of) individuals to demand recognition as equal aesthetic subjects. Moreover, by framing (free exercises of) the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as valuable dimensions of human personhood, the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics links the aesthetic with a (modern) notion of freedom as self-realization. In this and subsequent chapters, I will therefore explore the contribution modern aesthetics makes to modern ethical life, that is, to (the

⁸ Geographically speaking, these transformations happen first in Britain, France and Germany. See also Guyer (2014a). My claims about modern aesthetics are thus limited to (parts of) Europe. I am fully aware that this is a significant limitation in terms of the scope of this study, a limitation the reader needs to keep in mind whenever I speak of 'modern aesthetics'.

struggle for establishing) a form of social life that is underpinned by the modern values of freedom and equality.⁹

This brings me to the historicity of my approach to modern aesthetics. My understanding of modernity is not linked with a philosophy of history. For instance, unlike Hegel I am not endorsing a teleological understanding of history that unfolds according to a particular logic. By implication, I am also not claiming that modern aesthetics (as I understand it) could have only emerged, or had to emerge, in this way at this historic-developmental stage. I merely highlight that a new way of thinking about aesthetics emerges in the first half of the eighteenth century (and maintain that it remains influential to the present day).

I am also not maintaining that a historical self-understanding that distances itself from previous periods is constitutive of modern aesthetics. The famous *Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns* that erupted in France in the late seventeenth century can serve as an example of a view according to which modern art becomes modern by intentionally breaking with the art(s) of the ancients.¹⁰ This mode of thinking was still alive in the eighteenth century, especially in the German tradition, as Schiller's (2005b) distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry illustrates. However, it is not an essential feature of my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics that those who develop and endorse it understand themselves and their engagement with aesthetics as constituting a break with what went on in previous historical periods.¹¹

The capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is, of course, a child of its time. It belongs to a movement in eighteenth-century Europe that is characterized by a 'valorization' of the 'category of the person' and, by implication, the valorization of human capacities and their emancipation from arbitrary restrictions (Gikandi 2011: 4). As part of this development, we can witness new dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of (groups of) individuals from the status of equal or 'full persons' (Mills 2017: 101).¹² Of course, mine is not the only interpretation of how modern

⁹ For an outline of the Hegelian understanding of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*, see Chapter 3.

¹⁰ See also Hindrichs (2016: 309–10), Krauss (1966: 130–94), Moland (2019: 15, 56) and Norman (2011).

¹¹ There is a weaker sense in which a historical self-understanding can be said to underpin all approaches to aesthetics. Arguably, all aesthetic and cultural expressions are shaped, in one way or another, by the socio-historical context from which they emerge. For instance, Adorno (1997) emphasizes this point in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*.

¹² Hegel, for example, inferiorizes women on the grounds that they (allegedly) 'have limited rational capacities' and frames them as deficient aesthetic subjects by arguing that 'women are beings dominated by feeling' (Neuhaus 2022, 36), that is, they are seen as too emotional or emotional in a deficient way. For another example, see my discussion of Kant's racist aesthetic inferiorization of non-white individuals in Chapter 6.

aesthetics fits into its time or displays features that are characteristic of the mode of thinking of a particular historical period. Heidegger, for instance, provides us with an alternative interpretation in a 1938 lecture entitled 'Age of the World Picture' (2002b). For him, modern aesthetics is yet another manifestation of modern *Seinsvergessenheit*. Modern art is, in his view, no longer a site for the disclosure of being because it is also in the grip of the modern way of thinking that conceives of the world of beings in terms of objects for subjects.¹³

Finally, I would like to point out another way in which my account of modern aesthetics is historical. The way in which human capacities are conceptualized, bundled, categorized and linked with distinct social practices is itself something that can change over time. In other words, the aesthetic domain (like any other domain) can, in principle, undergo far-reaching re-conceptualizations and transformations.¹⁴

With these remarks behind us, we can now turn our attention to the reconstruction of three early paradigmatic articulations of the basic structure of modern aesthetics, on the one hand, and a reconsideration of how these articulations interact with the modern values of freedom and equality, on the other. I begin with Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception (Section 1.2) and then move on to Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions (Section 1.3) and Joseph Addison's aesthetics of the free play of the imagination (Section 1.4).¹⁵ In the conclusion (Section 1.5), I highlight some systematic challenges my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics faces and indicate how I will develop this account further in subsequent chapters.

1.2. The baptism of modern aesthetics: Baumgarten's emancipation of sense perception

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) is a name that appears in every history of modern aesthetics for a simple reason: this German philosopher was the first to use the term 'aesthetics' to denote this novel philosophical subdiscipline. Baumgarten (1954) mentions this term first in his 1735 thesis entitled *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* or

¹³ See also Hindrichs (2016: 303).

¹⁴ See Schaub (2026: 39–40).

¹⁵ My ambition in this chapter is not to offer a comprehensive introduction to the complex and multifaceted aesthetic theories of Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison. I focus exclusively on those aspects of their theories that pertain to the basic structure of modern aesthetics.

Reflections on Poetry. Later, he uses the title *Aesthetica* for his unfinished multi-volume *magnum opus*, on which he worked from 1750 to 1759 (Baumgarten 2007).¹⁶ However, Baumgarten's significance for modern aesthetics goes beyond christening the new discipline. This baptism was in any case a belated one. 'By the time Baumgarten coined that name' other contributions that are key for establishing 'the field' of modern aesthetics had already been made (Guyer 2014a: 7).¹⁷ And it is only during the nineteenth century that Baumgarten's term 'aesthetics' is widely adopted as the name for this new philosophical discipline.

What then is – apart from christening the new discipline – the significance of Baumgarten's aesthetics for the emerging field of modern aesthetics? The answer to this question is contested and mine diverges, for instance, from the one given by Guyer (2014a: 63–73). For Guyer, Baumgarten's is first and foremost a 'cognitivist approach' (Guyer 2014a: 232), since Baumgarten stresses aesthetics' connection with 'the art of thinking beautifully' (Baumgarten 2007: 11). However, what makes Baumgarten's aesthetics truly novel is obscured when he is simply classified as another representative of cognitivism in aesthetics. Guyer also remains a bit vague in terms of what he means by cognitivism in relation to aesthetics.¹⁸ In contemporary aesthetics, Nelson Goodman is seen as a paradigmatic proponent of aesthetic cognitivism, since he claims in *Ways of Worldmaking* that 'the arts' contribute to the 'enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding' (1968: 102). I have no interest in denying that our aesthetic engagements with the world contribute to our understanding of the world, broadly understood. We familiarize ourselves with the world (and ourselves) when we explore it with our senses, when we explore our emotional responses to objects and when we let our imagination play freely with objects. However, in philosophy, for instance in metaethics, cognitivism is often associated with a range of more demanding assumptions. Cognitivism in relation to aesthetics could be linked to the realist claim that there are distinctly aesthetic 'properties' or 'facts' 'out there' or that aesthetics is 'in the business' of generating propositional 'statements . . . which could be true or false in any substantial sense' (van Roojen 2018). More demanding cognitivist assertions such as these cannot be readily attributed to Baumgarten.

¹⁶ For a reliable and comprehensive introduction to Baumgarten's aesthetics, see Mirbach (2007: XV–LXXX).

¹⁷ Below I consider contributions by Joseph Addison and Abbé Jean-Baptist Du Bos that predate Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry*.

¹⁸ Guyer seems to use this term to characterize approaches that are, in one way or another, concerned with aesthetics' bearing on truth and knowledge.

According to my interpretation, Baumgarten's aesthetics makes two seminal contributions to the emerging field of modern aesthetics: firstly, it manifests the basic structure that is a distinctive of modern approaches to aesthetics; secondly, his approach complements other paradigmatically modern approaches to aesthetics (developed by authors such as Addison and Du Bos) by adding another substantive dimension to modern aesthetic discourse. Like other modern approaches, Baumgarten focuses on a particular human capacity and presents the free explorative use of this capacity as valuable. The human capacity at the heart of Baumgarten's approach is sense perception, whereas Du Bos focusses on emotions and Addison on the free play of the imagination.

The word Baumgarten picks as the name for this novel philosophical discipline and as the title of his *magnum opus* is derived from the ancient Greek word *aisthēsis*, which means both 'sensation' and 'feeling', as Hegel reminds us in the 'Introduction' to his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1975: 1).¹⁹ Other concepts that play an important role in Baumgarten's aesthetics, such as the Latin word *sensitivus*, are also directly related to sensory perception and feeling. The word *sensitivus* means being concerned with, or deriving from, the senses and is translated by Baumgarten's disciple Meier 'with the German term *sinnlich*' (Guyer 2014a: 322n32).²⁰ In his *Reflections on Poetry*, Baumgarten also distinguishes between 'objects of thought' and 'objects of sense' (Guyer 2014a: 321); the former being the subject-matter of our 'higher cognitive faculties', whereas '*things perceived* . . . are known by the inferior faculty' of the mind and are the subject-matter 'of the science of perception, or aesthetic' (Baumgarten 1954: 77–8).

My reading of Baumgarten's aesthetics takes seriously that sense perception (as opposed to logico-conceptual thinking) is at the heart of his approach and that he draws a distinction between sense perception, on the one hand, and logical or conceptual thinking, on the other. This has to be kept in mind when interpreting Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics as 'a novel field of inquiry, parallel to ordinary logic, that would have as its subject not your ideas . . . but sensory objects . . . in general, including both things present to the senses . . . and things imagined in the absence of present sensation' (Guyer 2014a: 5).²¹ How should we understand Baumgarten's characterization of aesthetics as a discipline

¹⁹ See also Moland (2019: 32). According to my reconstruction, perception and emotions denote two of modern aesthetics' three substantive dimensions. Baumgarten's name for the new discipline appears therefore rather apt to me.

²⁰ I follow Guyer, who translates *sensitivus* as sensible. However, it is important to keep in mind that for Baumgarten the word 'sensible' does not have the cognitive connotation of being reasonable. Sensible just means derived from or linked with the senses.

²¹ See also Baumgarten (1954: 77–9) and Mirbach (2007: XXV–XXXII).

based on sensory perception and running parallel to conceptual or logical thinking? According to my interpretation, Baumgarten thinks that aesthetics and logic are similar in some way, but they are not and cannot be identical – for what makes two lines parallel is that they keep their distance from each other constant, that is, they never meet. In short, for Baumgarten it is impossible to reduce aesthetics to logic or conceptual thinking, and vice versa.

The fact that conceptual or logical thinking and sensible cognition never converge poses a challenge for those who portray Baumgarten as a proponent of (a more demanding strand of) cognitivism (that associates aesthetics with conceptual thinking and propositional statements that can be true or false, etc.). For sensible cognition denotes a mental activity that is different from conceptual or logical thinking. I therefore agree with Guyer, who maintains that 'Baumgarten's . . . innovation' in relation to modern aesthetics is 'masked by his continuing use of rationalist idiom' (Guyer 2014a: 327).²² However, Guyer fails to identify what is, in my view, most innovative about Baumgarten's contribution to the emerging field of modern aesthetics. Let me explain why putting sense perception at the heart of his aesthetics amounts to a pathbreaking contribution to modern aesthetics.

The point of Baumgarten's likening of the capacity for logico-conceptual thinking (which rationalists regard as the highest human faculty) to the capacity for sense perception is to convey the (daring) idea that both denote valuable human capacities. What Baumgarten is *not* doing is to maintain that sense perception is a mode of logico-conceptual thinking. Rather, he is concerned with a re-evaluation and valorization of the *status* of sense perception (a human faculty that is not held in the highest esteem in the rationalist tradition). If sense perception is considered a valuable human capacity, it is only a small step to asserting that (some) exercises of this capacity must also be valuable. In short, the idea that exploring the world with one's own senses is a valuable activity represents an important step in the history of modern thought. And this idea has its origins in modern aesthetic discourse and finds one of its first paradigmatic expressions in Baumgarten's aesthetic writings.²³

Baumgarten is thus an innovator for two reasons: firstly, he places sense perception at the centre of his approach to aesthetics; secondly, he frames explorative exercises of this capacity as valuable. His approach thus embodies

²² Baumgarten's use of rationalist terminology is, in some sense, unsurprising, since his thinking is deeply rooted in the German rationalist tradition exemplified by Christian Wolff.

²³ However, Baumgarten's (1954: 78) talk of an inferior faculty of cognition implies that even for him, sense perception is not as valuable as the human capacity for logical and conceptual thinking.

the essential characteristics of what I call the basic structure of modern aesthetics. In my view, Baumgarten is like a Moses who set foot on the promised land of modern aesthetics but struggled to find the right words to describe this promised land, making the infelicitous choice to use (some of) the old rationalist vocabulary to convey what is different and new about the territory that he had just entered. For Guyer, by contrast, 'Baumgarten remained more a Moses who glimpsed the new theory from the shores of Wolffianism than a Joshua who conquered the new aesthetic territory' (Guyer 2014a: 319).

When it comes to Baumgarten, the only significant 'innovation' Guyer can think of consists in Baumgarten bringing us to the threshold of the free play of imagination, since he introduces 'an emphasis on the perfection of our representations rather than (or in addition to) objects' (Guyer 2014a: 327, 319). But Baumgarten does not develop an account of the 'free play' of the imagination (Guyer 2014a: 319).²⁴ Baumgarten's 'disciple' Georg Friedrich Meier then expanded the framework of Baumgarten's aesthetics to emphasize and integrate 'the emotional impact of art' (Guyer 2014a: 319).²⁵ In my assessment, the importance of Baumgarten for the emerging field of modern aesthetics neither turns on the free play of imagination nor on his treatment of emotions. I would argue instead that his significance lies in the central role and value he assigns to exploratory uses of sensory perception.

This framing then shapes other features of Baumgarten's approach to aesthetics. Baumgarten understands aesthetics as a general 'science of perception' (1954: 78). He thus endorses a 'definition' of the discipline of aesthetics that 'does not contain any explicit reference to art at all' (Guyer 2014a: 5).²⁶ Baumgarten would therefore have rejected the equation of aesthetics with the philosophy of art that became popular in the nineteenth century. For Baumgarten insists that anything that can be perceived (or imagined) can become the object of aesthetics. Like other seminal aestheticians of the eighteenth century, Baumgarten highlights that the field of aesthetics is much wider than art. From Baumgarten's perspective, the aesthetic cannot be relegated to the art world, for

²⁴ For the emerging field of modern aesthetics, it is not so important that Baumgarten knocked on the 'door' of an aesthetics of the 'free play' of the imagination, since Addison and others had already passed through this door at that point and inspired subsequent generations of aestheticians to further develop their accounts of the free play of the imagination (Guyer 2014a: 319, 327).

²⁵ See Meier's (1744) *Theoretische Lehre der Gemüthsbewegungen überhaupt* and Guyer (2014a: 324–5). However, as in the case of the free play of imagination, Meier opens a door through which Du Bos, for example, had already walked. Meier's work is therefore noteworthy for delineating a way in which emotions can be integrated into Baumgarten's framework, but he cannot be credited with being among the first to regard emotions as a key dimension of modern aesthetics. In fact, Baumgarten himself already integrates this emotional dimension into his account of 'sensible representations'.

²⁶ See also Baumgarten (2007: 106–7).

the aesthetic is in play whenever and wherever individuals explore the world with their senses. Furthermore, clarifying aesthetics' contributions to modern and democratic ethical life requires us to look beyond art, given this broad definition of aesthetics.

1.2.1. Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception and modern ethical life

How does Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception bear on the two values that underpin modern ethical life: freedom and equality? To outline an answer to this question, we must first familiarize ourselves with some additional features of Baumgarten's aesthetics that concern the interaction between sense perception and individuality.

A key notion in Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry* is 'sensible representation'.²⁷ Sensible representations of objects of sense are received by 'the lower part of the cognitive faculty' (Baumgarten 1954: 38) via sense perception and are made up of 'imagery' and 'words' (Guyer 2014a: 322). The 'imagery drawn from the senses' that Baumgarten calls sensible representations then provide the material for sensible discourse (Guyer 2014a: 322). Sensible 'discourse' explores connections between different sensible representations and blends them in a manner that is 'directed toward the apprehension' of the object that sensible discourse is about (Baumgarten 1954: 37–9).²⁸ In other words, sensible discourse integrates a range of sensible representations of an object of sense (e.g. a landscape or the face of an individual) with the aim of conveying different aspects that our senses disclose about it. In this fashion, sensible discourse leads us beyond mere sense perception.

The exploration of an object with our senses is, in principle, open-ended. Through sense perception, additional sensible representations can therefore (at least potentially) always be generated. Sensible discourse then synthesizes a range of these sensible representations into one sensible representation (e.g. a memory picture of a landscape or a painted portrait of an individual's face).

Against this backdrop, we can now appreciate why Baumgarten treats sensible discourse as 'a locus of perfection in its own right' (Guyer 2014a: 322).²⁹ For

²⁷ I am following Guyer's translation here rather than Aschenbrenner and Holther's, who suggest the term 'sensate representations' (Baumgarten 1954: 78).

²⁸ See also Guyer (2014a: 322).

²⁹ There are parallels between this view and Addison's, who maintains that we take aesthetic pleasure in skilful representations, not just in what they represent (Lubbock 1995: 186–7).

instance, we evaluate verbal descriptions of a landscape or a portrait painting according to how they integrate or interweave different sensible representations into one complex sensible representation (using words, imagery, colour, form, rhythm etc.), not just according to what they are about (e.g. a particular landscape or face). A sensible discourse is adequate, in Baumgarten's view, if it generates a 'clear rather than obscure' sensible representation, that is, one that has a distinct and discernible subject-matter (e.g. the rolling vineyards of my Swabian homeland or the face of my daughter) (Guyer 2014a: 323). However, even adequate sensible discourse remains 'confused rather than distinct' because it creatively and imaginatively integrates, blends, superimposes and combines several sensible representations into one (Guyer 2014a: 323). By contrast, 'scientific . . . discourse' is about 'neatly' or analytically disentangling and separating representations (Guyer 2014a: 323). Yet, despite being confused, Baumgarten associates adequate sensible discourse with a distinct kind of clarity, namely extensive clarity.

Sensible discourse discloses the world by generating extensive clarity, which must be distinguished from the intensive clarity generated by logico-conceptual discourse. Logico-conceptual discourse generates statements like: 'this liquid is water' or 'this is not a plant, it is a fungus.' Both aesthetic and logico-conceptual discourse promote understanding (and are therefore cognitive), yet they do so in different ways. The former excels in representing particulars or individuals by taking into consideration their manifold aspects or their inexhaustible 'overflowing fullness' (Guyer 2014a: 332).³⁰ Logico-conceptual discourse is unsuited to represent individuals, since individuals 'are more fully determined, or more fully characterized, than any abstraction' or the subsumption of a phenomenon under a general concept is capable of conveying (Guyer 2014a: 323). Successful sensible discourse, for instance, a verbal description of a distinct landscape or a painted portrait of an individual, generates a 'density of images' that represents 'individuals in particular circumstances,' whereas logico-conceptual discourse cannot avoid 'trafficking in generalities and abstractions,' for it conveys what is generally the case (Guyer 2014a: 323). In other words, logico-conceptual discourse tracks features that all exemplars of a kind share, whereas sensible discourse is about disclosing what is special about an exemplar. Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception thus turns 'what is a vice in scientific knowledge – connoting too many ideas without clearly distinguishing among

³⁰ See also Baumgarten (2007: 92–4).

them – into the paradigm virtue of poetry’ or aesthetic discourse in general (Guyer 2014a: 323).

As part of his discussion on sensible representations, Baumgarten himself gestures towards a way of integrating emotions (i.e. another substantive dimension of modern aesthetics) into his own approach. He maintains that our emotional responses to what we explore with our senses – whether it appears as ‘good or bad’ to us – can itself be turned into a sensible representation with the help of words or imagery (Baumgarten 1954: 47). Sensible representations of emotions can therefore be integrated with other sensible representations into one sensible representation through sensible discourse. Baumgarten states that ‘affects are . . . marked degrees of pleasure and pain’ and that ‘their sense representations are given in the representing of something to oneself confusedly as good or bad’ (Baumgarten 1954: 47). He even suggests that sensible discourse is improved by incorporating sensible representations of our emotional responses, for it renders this discourse ‘more poetic’ or aesthetic, since it renders the synthesized sensible representation ‘extensively clearer than if’ our emotional responses ‘were not so displayed’ or integrated (Baumgarten 1954: 47). In sum, sensible ‘representations’ that ‘are rousings of the affects’ are part of sensible discourse and ‘arous[ing] affects’ through sensible representations ‘is poetic’ or aesthetic, according to Baumgarten (1954: 47). Baumgarten therefore considers both meanings of the ancient Greek word *aisthēsis*, namely sensation and feeling. In short, Baumgarten frames the new discipline of aesthetics as a ‘science of sensation’ and ‘of feeling’ (Hegel 1975: 1).

We have established that Baumgarten distinguishes aesthetic discourse from logico-conceptual discourse and associates each with different human capacities and cognitive ambitions: logico-conceptual discourse relies on the capacity for logical and conceptual thinking and generates conceptual or logical truths. Aesthetic discourse, by contrast, is grounded in the capacity for sense perception and discloses the individuality of objects.³¹ The ‘higher cognitive faculties’ thus concern themselves ‘with a limited amount of . . . features’ of an object, ‘namely those that suffice to distinguish it from others as an exemplar of a distinct kind or type’ (Mirbach 2007: XLVIII–XLIX; my translation). As a consequence, logico-conceptual discourse generates statements like: ‘this animal is a cat’. Aesthetic discourse does not produce intensive conceptual knowledge of this kind but rather captures ‘the greatest possible wealth’ of a particular object’s ‘countless features that constitute its individual *haecceitas* drawing on the lower

³¹ See also Baumgarten (2007: §424).

cognitive faculties' (i.e. sense perception), 'even if these features cannot always be clearly discerned' (Mirbach 2007: XLIX; my translation). Aesthetic cognition is therefore irreducible to and autonomous from logico-conceptual cognition. The latter generates intensive clarity drawing on the capacity for logico-conceptual thinking; the former produces extensive clarity relying on sense perception (as well as words and imagery that express what the perceptual engagement with an object has disclosed about it). The aesthetic engagement with the world thus complements the logico-conceptual engagement with the world because each mode of engagement comes with its own limitations.

The insights generated by our higher cognitive faculties about 'an individual' are 'limited to those determinations' which can be 'recognized clearly and distinctly' (Mirbach 2007: LI; my translation). Logico-conceptual discourse thus remains unsatisfactory with regard to understanding the 'truth of an individual' (Mirbach 2007: LI; my translation). Aesthetic discourse, by contrast, is fuelled by the 'material' or 'concrete remainder' which the logical discourse is unable to process (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation).³² It is this concrete remnant 'that distinguishes' something 'as a distinct, unique individual' (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation). Relating aesthetically to an object therefore means using our senses and sensible representations to reveal (something about) its individuality. An aesthetic engagement with an object discloses the wealth of its 'inexhaustible . . . distinguishing features' which 'only appear to our senses' and thus 'necessarily always evade logical insight' (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation).

Against the backdrop of this reconstruction of additional aspects of Baumgarten's aesthetics, we can now come back to the issue of how his aesthetics of sense perception interacts with modern ethical life. By presenting aesthetics as an autonomous discipline that complements logic, Baumgarten conveys, on the one hand, that exploring the world with our senses is an activity that is valuable in its own right, on the other hand, he treats the individuality or particularity of objects as something worth disclosing.³³ *It is therefore modern aesthetics that puts individuality on the map as something to be explored, disclosed and valued for its own sake.*

What is more, this aesthetic notion of individuality transforms and expands what freedom means in modern ethical life. One implication of Baumgarten's aesthetics is that freedom as self-realization has a dimension of universality and a dimension of particularity. Realizing oneself involves one's rational capacities

³² See also Baumgarten (2007: §§440, 558–9).

³³ Our individuality also manifests itself in the objects that we feel drawn to explore with our senses. However, as far as I am aware, this is not a point that Baumgarten himself makes.

that one shares with all other subjects and that, ideally, generate the same outcomes for all subjects. My self-realization as a rational or moral subject is thus – as, for instance, Kant points out – not unique to me. For example, if I see myself as a moral subject, then I act in accordance with moral principles that apply equally to all other moral subjects in a similar situation. Modern aesthetic discourse also deals with capacities that all humans possess, namely sensory perception, emotions and the imagination. However, by valorizing the free use of these non-rational capacities, modern aesthetics discloses those aspects of our personality that make us unique individuals. Hence, modern aesthetics teaches us that a comprehensive notion of freedom as self-realization must make room for the dimensions of universality and particularity. For we are only truly free if we (can) realize ourselves as whole human beings, that is, as universal subjects *and* particular individuals. In this way, *modern aesthetics shapes and expands the modern understanding of freedom*. To put it differently, for modern ethical life to live up to its promise to denote a life of freedom, it must enable our self-realization as rational and non-rational beings, that is, as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings.³⁴

This interplay between individuality and freedom in an aesthetic engagement with the world, which is implicit in Baumgarten's approach, will later be made explicit by another seminal work of modern aesthetics: Friedrich Schiller's (2005a) *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* from 1795. Schiller systematically explores the contribution aesthetics makes to modern ethical life becoming a life of freedom. In Schiller's view, it is the task of modern aesthetics to (re-)shape our notion of modern *Sittlichkeit* by transforming and expanding our understanding of freedom, individuality and equality. In short, for him it is aesthetics that bears 'the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful, and of the still more difficult art of living' freely in community with others (Schiller 2005a: 131).³⁵

³⁴ The thought that our individuality and our individual freedom are cultivated and expressed through our aesthetic engagement with the world – since our rationality is what makes us like any other person – can also be found in Riggle (2023: 45–9). He therefore maintains that a world in which nobody engages in practices of aesthetic valuing, as he calls it, is 'a world where individuals don't exist' and 'where . . . freedom . . . is stifled' (Riggle 2023: 46).

³⁵ However, Schiller defends a model of aesthetic freedom that is different from the one I am developing in this monograph. As I see it, we can distinguish two ways of conceptualizing aesthetic freedom. According to the first (Hegelian) model – which I defend in this study – aesthetic freedom denotes a distinct dimension of freedom that complements other (moral, legal, personal, economic and political) dimensions of freedom. In other words, freedom is regarded as having multiple dimensions that all need to be conceptually distinguished and socially recognized if human beings are to be fully free or self-realizing. According to the second model, aesthetic freedom does not just denote one dimension of freedom among others but is (the name for) the freedom of the whole human being. This second, more radical view is proposed by Schiller (2005a) in his *Letters on the*

To bring my discussion of Baumgarten to a close, I now want to briefly discuss how modern aesthetics, as conceived by Baumgarten, interacts with the other value underpinning modern *Sittlichkeit*: equality. Baumgarten grounds his approach to aesthetics in a basic human capacity, namely sense perception. By doing this, he effectively democratizes or universalizes the position of aesthetic subject. For all it takes for an individual to assert itself as an aesthetic subject is to appear to others as someone who is capable of perceptively exploring the world.³⁶

Baumgarten's approach to aesthetics is inclusive or egalitarian for another reason: his approach turns all perceivable (and imaginable) objects into (potential) objects of aesthetic relating. In other words, his aesthetics of perception is democratic, since it does away with all hierarchies and exclusions with regard to objects with which we can engage aesthetically.³⁷

In sum, Baumgarten is a seminal figure in modern aesthetics because his approach instantiates, in a paradigmatic fashion, the basic structure that is distinctive of modern aesthetics: his approach is grounded in a basic human capacity, namely sense perception, and frames explorative uses of this capacity as valuable. Baumgarten also establishes sense perception as one of modern aesthetics' substantive dimensions. What is more, his aesthetics of sense perception also interacts in important ways with the overarching norms of modern ethical life: freedom and equality. Baumgarten treats the capacity of sense perception as a valuable dimension of human personhood and thereby suggests that it is important for our understanding of freedom as self-realization. Further, his approach to modern aesthetics values the disclosing of individuality, thereby prompting an expansion and transformation of our understanding of freedom: a comprehensive account of self-realization must encompass our self-realization as universal (e.g. rational and moral) subjects as well as particular (aesthetic) subjects, that is, as beings who perceptively explore and disclose the world.

Aesthetic Education of Man. I hope to be able to compare and evaluate both models in more detail in the future.

³⁶ This framing sets the stage for aesthetic struggles for recognition. For groups of individuals can demand to be recognized as equal aesthetic subjects, that is, as beings who can (and to whom it equally matters to) engage with the world aesthetically.

³⁷ This link between (inclusive or) egalitarian perception and democracy can be perhaps unpacked further with the help of the following example. As a democratic revolution, the French Revolution depended on an egalitarian revolution of perception. People were used to see their compatriots as being unequal, that is, as representatives of hierarchically ordered estates (i.e. aristocrats, clerics and common people). An egalitarian revolution of perception therefore is an integral part of a democratic revolution because people must learn to see each other as equals (i.e. irrespective of their social status in the previous and social standing in the current social order). Such an egalitarian transformation of perception is pre-figured in modern approaches to aesthetics like Baumgarten's, since they (re-) frame all perceivable objects as equally legitimate candidates for aesthetic engagement.

Finally, Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception also promotes equality. On the one hand, it democratizes the objects of aesthetics, since everything that can be perceived or imagined can become the object of our aesthetic engagement; on the other hand, Baumgarten paves the way for framing every subject as an (equal) aesthetic subject, since all human beings can explore the world with their senses (and find expression for how their senses disclose the world to them).

1.3. Exploring emotions: Du Bos's emancipation of human emotions

Even though the term 'aesthetics' was coined in 1735 by Baumgarten, modern aesthetics begins, systematically speaking, already in the period 'from 1709 to 1720 . . . with seminal contributions being made during this decade by' authors such as the English senior government minister, 'playwright, and essayist Joseph Addison' and 'the French diplomat, historian, antiquarian, and critic the Abbé Jean-Baptist Du Bos' (Guyer 2014a: 8). I count Du Bos (1670–1742) and Addison (1672–1719) among the first paradigmatically modern aestheticians, since their approaches, which I will now consider in turn, also embody the above outlined basic structure of modern aesthetics. Both place a particular human capacity at the centre of their approaches to modern aesthetics and regard explorative uses of this capacity as valuable. Du Bos's approach focusses on the capacity of emotions, while Addison emphasizes the free play of imagination.

As with Baumgarten, I will not provide a comprehensive overview of Du Bos's aesthetics. For instance, I will not mention his influential accounts of tragedy and genres of art. For the purposes of this study, it suffices to throw into relief Du Bos's 'central idea' that aesthetics is concerned with exploring 'the full range of human emotions' for the sake of exploring how human beings respond emotionally to objects and situations (Guyer 2014a: 78). I will also consider how Du Bos's approach interacts with the modern values of freedom and equality that provide modern *Sittlichkeit* with its normative horizon.

1.3.1. Du Bos's key idea

Du Bos is, alongside Lord Kames, one of the earliest proponents of the 'idea' that aesthetics is about exploring the 'full range' of human emotions (Guyer 2014a: 78). He maintains that such an exploration of human beings' emotional responses 'is a good thing, not a bad thing, whether it has any immediate

moral value or not' (Guyer 2014a: 9). This view, which Du Bos develops in his *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* from 1719, is among the first contributions to modern aesthetic discourse that *regards human beings' exploration of their emotional reactions to the world as intrinsically valuable*.³⁸ Modern aesthetics thus breaks away from two influential traditions of thought: the first treats emotions as a problematic feature of human nature, since they can instigate inappropriate and ungodly behaviour; the second is only interested in emotions for instrumental reasons. For instance, ancient rhetoric concerns itself with emotions because the ability to evoke and manipulate emotions is seen as a key skill, since it helps the orators to get their listeners to engage in certain desired behaviours (e.g. to vote for a particular policy or candidate in an election). Du Bos's approach to modern aesthetics emancipates explorations of our emotional capacities from such instrumental considerations.

According to Du Bos, we relate aesthetically to the world whenever we pay attention to, explore and express our emotional responses to an object or situation that our senses disclose to us (for the sake of exploring and expressing our emotional responses). One upshot of this understanding of modern aesthetics is that all human beings are framed as aesthetic subjects, not just artists, since we are all capable of being attentive to and finding expressions for our emotional reactions to the world. What is more, any aspect of the world, not just artistic representations, can become the object of aesthetic relating, since human beings are capable of responding emotionally to all kinds of aspects of the world.³⁹ Du Bos states:

[w]hen we give ourselves time to reflect on the natural sensibility of the heart of man, on his proclivity to be moved by the several objects, which poets and painters make the subjects of their imitations, we find it very far from being surprising, that even verses and pictures have the power of moving him. Nature has thought proper to implant this quick and easy sensibility in man as the very basis of society. (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 32)

Furthermore, since we can engage aesthetically with any aspect of life (for instance, by reflecting on how I feel about inhabiting a gendered social role like being a father), it makes no sense to relegate the aesthetic to a distinct social sphere (e.g. the so-called art world). The aesthetic, as framed by Du Bos,

³⁸ Du Bos would have also deserved to be mentioned in the next section dedicated to the free play of the imagination, since he emphasizes 'the idea of play with the full range of human emotions' (Guyer 2014a: 78).

³⁹ See also Guyer (2014a: 84).

therefore has no proper place, for no matter where we go, we remain beings who respond with emotions to what we encounter.⁴⁰

1.3.2. The relevance of Du Bos's approach for modern ethical life

How does Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions interact with the two values underpinning modern ethical life: freedom and equality?

In my discussion of Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception, I pointed out that modern aesthetics transforms and expands our understanding of freedom by way of valuing and disclosing individuality. Modern aesthetics thus shapes the modern culture of freedom by treating the cultivation and expression of individuality as a dimension of self-realization. Du Bos's approach complements Baumgarten's in terms of individuality, for disclosing our individuality requires more than being perceptively attentive to what 'distinguishes' something 'as a distinct, unique individual from all other exemplars of the same . . . kind' (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation). To give an account of ourselves as individuals, we must also explore and express how we react emotionally to the world and the lives that we are living.⁴¹

As part of his approach to aesthetics, Du Bos considers the emotional responses of human beings as species beings, members of communities and individuals. He first suggests that we can explore our emotional reactions 'in a twofold manner': 'in a general sense, as man; and . . . in a particular sense, as individuals' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 62). Du Bos seems to assume that human beings are hardwired to respond with certain emotions to certain phenomena, for instance, with shock and fear when experiencing an earthquake. However, to grasp what is 'particular' about us as individuals, we must pay attention to the ways in which our emotional responses to the same phenomena are diverging (Du Bos 1748: Vol. I, 62). For example, my emotional responses to observing my daughter Alma perform in a school musical are unique to me and intimately linked with who I am. The same is true of my emotional reactions when I saw her 'portrait' on display in our local Sentinel Gallery, due to my 'love for the original' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 62).

⁴⁰ Du Bos himself is especially concerned with one emotion: boredom. He argues that 'one of the greatest wants of man is to have his mind incessantly occupied' because *ennui* is 'very disagreeable to man' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 5). The 'human soul' is therefore always searching for 'external objects' that affect and emotionally stimulate it, 'which is what we call, a sensible impression' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 5). See also (Guyer 2014a: 79).

⁴¹ Our individuality is reflected in our emotional responses to objects and in our varying propensity to explore our emotional responses to certain objects.

According to Du Bos, our emotional responses are shaped by our shared human nature and our individuality. However, he also emphasizes that our emotional responses are shaped by the communities or societies to which we belong. This communal dimension is particularly important for an assessment of the political significance of Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions. He highlights, for instance, that if something that happened in the past is one of the 'principal events in the history of a particular people', then the emotional responses of those identifying with this people will (typically) be different from and more intense than those of members of 'any other nation', and it will also 'have much greater power of engaging their attention' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 62).

Du Bos does not deny that human beings are rational and moral beings, he merely emphasizes that they are also emotional beings. His modern aesthetics of emotions therefore insists that it matters how human beings emotionally respond to their social world and that they are socially encouraged to explore, express and playfully engage with their emotional responses to aspects of their lives.⁴² By highlighting that all of this matters in terms of cultivating and realizing our individuality, Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions also contributes (like Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception) to broadening the modern understanding of freedom as self-realization. What is more, he even suggests that a nation or community's political freedom is connected with its ability to work through the emotional legacy of past events.

This brings me to the issue of how Du Bos's approach to aesthetics bears on the modern value of equality. As in the case of Baumgarten, the upshot of Du Bos's framing of modern aesthetics is a democratization of the status of aesthetic subject. His approach also turns on a basic human capacity, namely the capacity for emotions. Furthermore, everyone can engage aesthetically with the world, according to Du Bos, since we are all capable of exploring and finding expressions for our emotional responses to a phenomenon. Du Bos even claims that human social life is based on this capacity. For he sees in 'the natural sensibility of the heart of man', that is, in human being's 'proclivity to be moved by . . . objects . . . the very basis of society' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 1, 32). Du Bos also emphasizes that societies can support the development of this emotional responsiveness to varying degrees. He mentions in this connection both social conditions and 'the nature of a culture' (Guyer 2014a: 92).⁴³ According to Du Bos, the challenge we

⁴² Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions is cognitive in a weak sense. For instance, I can learn something about myself or my individuality by being attentive to how I emotionally respond to aspects of my life and my social world.

⁴³ See also Du Bos (1748: Vol. 2, 95–106).

face if we want to provide everyone in society with adequate support for their emotional self-realization is therefore both material and cultural in nature.

Du Bos's inclusive framing of modern aesthetics also informs his understanding of aesthetic judgement. All that is required from individuals in terms of forming an aesthetic judgement is that they are capable of judging whether their 'own emotions have indeed been moved' (Guyer 2014a: 88). In Du Bos's view, aesthetic judgements do not presuppose any familiarity with the 'elaborate . . . rules' that have been the subject-matter of treatises on poetics from Greek antiquity to Du Bos's own time (Guyer 2014a: 88):

[a]s the chief aim of poetry and painting is to move and please us, every man who is not absolutely stupid, must feel the effect of good verses, and fine pictures. All men ought to be in possession of a right of giving their suffrage, when the question to be decided is, whether poems and pictures produce their proper effect. (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 2, 247–8)⁴⁴

An aesthetic judgement does require, however, that individuals pay attention to and reflect on their emotional responses to the contemplated object, since 'the object does not produce its effect through the medium of reasoning' or summaries (Guyer 2014a: 89). In sum, when it comes to aesthetic matters, Du Bos regards 'the public' as 'capable of judging right', even if they are not 'acquainted with the rules of poetry and painting' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 2, 243).⁴⁵

However, Du Bos is not free from classist prejudices, and these prejudices prevent him from fully embracing the democratic and inclusive implications of his aesthetics of emotions. This becomes apparent in passages like the following, in which Du Bos writes: 'I do not mean the lower class people by the public capable of passing judgement on poems or pictures, and of deciding the measure of their excellence. The word *public* is applicable here to such persons only, as having acquired some lights, either by reading or by being conversant with the world' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 2, 245). It remains obscure why Du Bos thinks the 'lower classes' are not 'conversant with the world' and not capable of paying attention to and responding emotionally to objects (including paintings or musical performances). There thus remains a tension between the inclusive or egalitarian framing of Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions and his classist outlook

⁴⁴ See also Guyer (2014a: 88).

⁴⁵ See also Guyer (2014a: 90).

that leads him to deny the status of (equal) aesthetic subjects to those who haven't received a good enough education.⁴⁶

Of course, Du Bos's personal prejudices do not prevent us from endorsing the inclusive and democratic upshot of his approach to aesthetics. Rejecting his classist views is also compatible with conceding that there are differences with respect to the quality of individuals' aesthetic judgements. For instance, in judging something aesthetically, we can be more or less attentive to the object and our emotional responses, more or less able to explore them and more or less capable of expressing them. The quality of our aesthetic judgements might also be improved by engaging with the observations and expressed emotional responses of others.⁴⁷ In this regard, Du Bos also highlights the importance of time. The 'public', as Du Bos puts it, 'does not finish in one day the trial of works that have real merit' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 2, 247).⁴⁸ Like Hegel, Du Bos seems to hold that the meaning and worth of works of art are revealed in an open-ended historical process of scrutinizing them. How these works are understood and evaluated may therefore change over time. Think, for instance, of how differently we now perceive and emotionally respond to colonial depictions of non-Europeans from the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Du Bos is also aware that a public's emotional responses to certain objects and events are conditioned by the culture of the 'time and place' (Du Bos 1748: Vol. 2, 257). This thought anticipates, systematically speaking, a concern that will later be picked up by the critical social theory strand in aesthetics that reflects on the social and ideological 'conditions under which human emotion takes place' (Guyer 2014a: 26).⁴⁹

To bring my discussion of Du Bos's approach to modern aesthetics to a close, I want to briefly consider how its democratizing tendencies bear on aesthetic production. Du Bos understands the 'genius of artists' as 'an unusual aptitude to move the emotions' with the help of media such as words or imagery (Guyer 2014a: 92). We are thus all artists, since 'genius', understood in this way, 'almost inevitably expresses itself', at least to some degree, in the lives of all of us (Guyer 2014a: 92). For we all have emotional responses to aspects of our lives as well as the capacity to reflect on and express them, since we all 'learn[. . .] to speak' (Guyer 2014a: 92).⁵⁰

⁴⁶ In Chapter 6, as part of my outline of a critical theory of aesthetics, I will return to the aesthetic inferiorization of individuals motivated by race, class and gender.

⁴⁷ See Du Bos (1748: Vol. 2, 283).

⁴⁸ See also Guyer (2014a: 91).

⁴⁹ See also Du Bos (1748: Vol. 2, XXIX, 288).

⁵⁰ Du Bos's remarks chime with the observations made by Hegel in connection with his outline of (what I call) his post-ideal aesthetics. See Chapter 2. Hegel claims that in modern societies the subject position of the artist is universalized, since 'reflection and speech have been developed' and

1.4. The free play of the imagination: Addison's emancipation of the imagination

The third and final substantive dimension of the basic structure of modern aesthetics is the imagination. To introduce the modern aesthetics of the free play of imagination, I will again engage with a seminal work that is among the first to present this novel substantive dimension in a paradigmatic fashion: Joseph Addison's (1965) essays 'On the Pleasures of the Imagination' that were published in the *Spectator* in 1712. Against the backdrop of my reconstruction of Addison's aesthetics of the free play of imagination, I will then consider once more the question of how it interacts with modern *Sittlichkeit's* core values: freedom and equality.

Addison's approach to modern aesthetics treats the free play of imagination as intrinsically valuable, that is, independently of whether it serves any (moral, practical or epistemic) purpose. Addison's aesthetics therefore has the same basic structure as Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception and Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions. In other words, all three approaches are grounded in a basic human capacity and frame explorative (or non-instrumental) exercises of this capacity as intrinsically valuable. What Addison adds to this picture is another substantive dimension: the imagination. The capacity of the imagination is different from the other capacities we have considered so far, namely sense perception and emotions, since it can also be brought to bear on other capacities. For example, Immanuel Kant (2000) famously concerns himself in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790 with the 'free play of the cognitive powers' of imagination and understanding (Guyer 2014a: 449). By contrast, the imaginative 'play with the full range of human emotions' is at the heart of Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's approach to modern aesthetics (Guyer 2014a: 78).

1.4.1. Addison's key idea

Addison's work introduces 'a new idea of fundamental importance for eighteenth-century and indeed much of modern aesthetics', namely the notion that the 'free play of our mental powers' is intrinsically valuable, that is, regardless of whether

'anyone may be struck in connection with most objects and circumstances by some fancy or other which he now has skill enough to express, just as anyone is capable of writing a letter' (Hegel 1975: 609; trans. modified).

it has ‘further cognitive and moral benefits’ (Guyer 2014a: 64). The free play of imagination is, according to Addison, ‘intrinsically pleasurable because it is free and freedom itself is a deep source of satisfaction for us’ (Guyer 2014a: 64). In Addison’s own words:

The Mind of Man naturally hates everything that looks like a Restraint upon it, and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of Confinement, when the Sight is pent up in a narrow Compass, and shortned on every side by the Neighbourhood of Walls or Mountains. On the contrary, a spacious Horizon is an Image of Liberty, where the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the Immensity of its Views, and to lose it self amidst the Variety of Objects that offer themselves to its Observation. (1965: Vol. 3, 540–1)⁵¹

Addison’s modern approach to aesthetics is based on the free play of the imagination. Against this backdrop, he distinguishes an aesthetic mode of engaging with the world from our normal participation in social practices. For in all ‘other aspects of our lives, namely, our ordinary employments, there necessarily is much constraint’, since we are typically involved in norm-guided practices that serve distinct purposes and require us to use our capacities in a purposeful and controlled manner (Guyer 2014a: 65); think, for instance, of a dentist who has to follow a clearly specified course of action when performing a root canal treatment. However, when we engage aesthetically with the world in a way that involves the free play of the imagination, we freely and creatively explore how things could be otherwise. That is, we re-imagine an aspect of the world by freely and creatively using our imagination.⁵²

For Addison, both ‘*Nature* and *Art* . . . are qualified to entertain the imagination’ (Addison 1965: Vol. 3, 548).⁵³ If ‘the imagination’ is ‘activated by looking directly at nature’, Addison speaks of ‘primary imagination’; if it is ‘exercised by representations of nature in the medium of words, pictures, statues, and music’, then we are dealing with ‘secondary imagination’ (Lubbock 1995: 186). Addison is, in other words, opposed to limiting the subject-matter of aesthetics to artworks and to relegating the aesthetic to the art world. For him, anything we encounter can be turned into the subject-matter of a free and creative activity that is underpinned by the imagination. And whenever we allow our imagination to play freely with an aspect of the world, we are engaging

⁵¹ See also Guyer (2014a: 65).

⁵² For an account of the ‘pleasures’ that are, according to Addison, associated with ‘imaginative activities’, see Lubbock (1995: 186–7).

⁵³ See also Guyer (2014a: 65, 69).

aesthetically with the world, according to Addison's modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination.

The world thus affords endless opportunities for the free play of the imagination. Addison is convinced that for individuals who cultivate this capacity, the world becomes a more interesting place.

A Man of Polite Imagination is let into a great many Pleasures, that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a Picture, and find an agreeable Companion in a Statue. He meets with a secret Refreshment in a Description, and often feels a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession. It gives him, indeed, a kind of Property in every thing he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated Parts of Nature administer to his Pleasures: So that he looks upon the World, as it were, in another Light, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms. (Addison 1965: Vol. III, 538)⁵⁴

1.4.2. The relevance of the free play of the imagination for modern ethical life

Let us first consider how Addison's approach to modern aesthetics interacts with the notion of equality. Like Baumgarten and Du Bos, he grounds his approach to aesthetics in a basic human capacity: the imagination. Furthermore, he assumes that all human beings are capable of letting their imagination play freely with the world. His approach therefore also democratizes the status of aesthetic subject. To put it differently: all human beings are aesthetic subjects. Addison even suggests that were it not for our involvement in all kinds of social practices that constrain us, our mind would naturally regress to a state of enjoyable imaginative play.⁵⁵

This brings me to the issue of how the modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination bears on the modern notion of freedom. Firstly, Addison's approach emancipates our faculty of imagination because it valorizes the free and creative use of this capacity. Modern aesthetics thus implicitly demands that society encourages its members to use their capacity of imagination in ways that are not 'restricted by the ordinary constraints of cognition and conduct', that is, 'by the demands of knowledge', 'morality' and expediency (Guyer 2014a: 23).

⁵⁴ See also Guyer (2014a: 71).

⁵⁵ I take it that human beings become aesthetic subjects before they become moral or legal subjects. For children explore the world with their senses, they can pay attention to their emotional responses to the world and they play freely and imaginatively with the objects they encounter (in fact, it is often difficult to stop them from playfully and creatively engaging with the world, for instance, to get them to concentrate on tying their shoelaces). However, like Du Bos, Addison shies away from fully embracing the inclusive and egalitarian implications of his own approach to modern aesthetics. See Addison (1965: Vol. 3, 538).

Secondly, the modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination therefore entails the demand that all aesthetic subjects should have socially granted opportunities to freely re-imagine their social world, that is, to playfully and imaginatively explore how things could be otherwise. In short, the modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination treats the capacity of the imagination as a valuable dimension of human personhood. By implication, it regards the free use of this capacity as (yet another) dimension of our (aesthetic) self-realization (alongside explorative uses of our perceptive and emotional capacities).

This (further) expansion of our understanding of freedom has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of modern *Sittlichkeit*, and the failure to take these implications into account is, in my view, a shortcoming affecting our accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* from Hegel to Honneth.⁵⁶ I therefore want to briefly elaborate on how the free play of the imagination bears on our freedom.

To appreciate what is at stake here, we must ask ourselves, according to Christoph Menke, what it means to be and become a subject of capacities. We are subjects of capacities or practical subjects if we can guide ourselves as participants in given social practices.⁵⁷ For example, I know how to comport myself as a university lecturer, that is, I know how to prepare and give lectures and run seminars, how to discharge a range of associated administrative tasks and how to pursue my own research. With this background in what it means to be a subject of capacities behind us, we can now consider two challenges to our freedom: firstly, we become subjects of capacities through being socialized into practices. These socialization processes subject us, as Foucault pointed out, to a range of relations of power and disciplinary techniques. Secondly, our capacities are always linked with existing, normatively constituted social practices. However, we remain unfree in relation to these social practices, since they typically predate us and we never freely chose to be socialized into them.⁵⁸

The free play of the imagination offers a way to deal with both challenges to our freedom. When we allow our imagination to play freely and creatively with aspects of the world, we generate some distance from ourselves as subjects

⁵⁶ In Chapter 3, I argue that the failure to integrate the aesthetic dimension of our freedom into standard accounts of modern or democratic ethical life renders them incomplete and unsatisfactory as accounts of a life of freedom. In this regard, I distinguish between two kinds of unfreedom: individual unfreedom and scope unfreedom.

⁵⁷ See Menke (2013b: 151).

⁵⁸ See Menke (2013a: 96).

of capacities or social participants, since we (attempt to) emancipate ourselves from the norms and expectations that are constitutive of extant social practices. What is more, by letting our imagination play freely with the (elements that make up) social practices, we bring these social practices themselves (i.e. the norms and roles that constitute them) within the scope of a practice of freedom that re-imagines and generates alternatives to them.⁵⁹ The aesthetics of the free play of the imagination is thus linked with a potential for self-transformation (i.e. we can become someone else than is anticipated by currently available social roles) and world-transformation (for we are playfully re-imagining the norms and roles that underpin extant social practices). In ‘aesthetic acts’ of free, imaginative ‘play’, we thus go ‘beyond our socially acquired capacities’ and, in doing so, we ‘again and again’ challenge and re-imagine the norms, roles and expectations that underpin extant social practices and institutions (Menke 2013b: 171–2; my translation).⁶⁰

Finally, our individuality expresses itself in the ways in which we re-imagine and experiment with elements of our social world, especially if our free and creative engagement with these elements is guided by how our perceptive and emotional capacities are disclosing them to us. The aesthetics of the free play of the imagination therefore tracks another dimension of our individuality and self-realization. It complements, in other words, the aesthetics of perception (*à la* Baumgarten) and the aesthetics of emotions (*à la* Du Bos), since all three approaches make a unique contribution to valuing, cultivating and realizing our individuality.

In sum, Addison embraces the basic structure of modern aesthetics that is already familiar to the reader from my reconstruction of the approaches of Baumgarten and Du Bos. Further, he adds a third substantive dimension, namely the (free play of the) imagination to modern aesthetics. Finally, we have seen that Addison’s free play of the imagination also shapes and expands the modern values of equality and freedom that form the normative horizon of modern ethical life.

⁵⁹ See Menke (2013b: 116).

⁶⁰ The modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination also contributes to our understanding of the world and is thus cognitive in the wide sense of the word. For the free, imaginative play with aspects of the world can reveal hitherto unrecognized possibilities in the world. It opens up, in other words, the status quo and encourages playful experimenting that might teach us something new about the world and ourselves.

1.5. Conclusion (and preview)

In this chapter, I reconstructed key features of three seminal contributions to the emerging field of modern aesthetics from the first half of the eighteenth century: Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics of sense perception, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions and Joseph Addison's aesthetics of the free play of imagination. I have also considered how these three approaches to modern aesthetics interact with the values of freedom and equality that underpin modern ethical life.

On this basis, I outlined a novel capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics. According to this capacity-based account, modern approaches to aesthetics have two features: they (1) are grounded in one or more of the following three basic human capacities: sense perception, emotions and the imagination; and (2) assign intrinsic value to non-instrumental, explorative uses of these capacities. The interplay between these two features constitutes the basic structure of modern aesthetics.

My capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is free-standing from two familiar ways of framing aesthetics, since it is neither grounded in a conceptual construct such as art or beauty nor is it based on a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences, judgements or pleasures. My approach is, however, not directed against these other familiar framings because it deals with aesthetics at a more basic level. The capacity-based account makes explicit the *basic* structure of modern aesthetics, whereas these other familiar framings operate on a higher level that requires introducing further differentiations and conditions (e.g. distinctions that make it possible, for instance, to draw a line between aesthetic and non-aesthetic pleasures). Consequently, my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is wider or more inclusive than these more familiar, higher-level interpretations of aesthetics. However, the capacity-based account is still an account of aesthetics, since the valorization and emancipation of the capacities that underpin it (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) happens in modern aesthetic discourses in the first half of the eighteenth century. What is more, these more familiar, higher-level accounts of aesthetics all (implicitly) presuppose the basic structure of modern aesthetics that my capacity-based account makes explicit.

I can now conclude this chapter by highlighting (some of) the systematic questions to which it gives rise (and which I will pick up again when I develop this capacity-based account further into my account of aesthetic recognition in

Chapter 4). I argue that modern capacity-based approaches encompass at least one of the three substantive dimensions or capacities of modern aesthetics: sense perception, emotions and the imagination. This raises the question of whether aestheticians should aim for 'a threefold synthesis' of these three dimensions (Guyer 2014b: 8). I think that they should because proper aesthetic relating involves an interplay of all three of them. Integrating these three capacities into one 'pluralistic approach' to modern aesthetics provides therefore 'a more satisfying basis for' a comprehensive account of aesthetic relating 'than any reductionist or monistic approach can do' (Guyer 2014a: 7). What is more, to fully appreciate all the ways in which modern aesthetics contributes to modern ethical life's aspiration to be a life of equal freedom for all, we must consider each of the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics as well as what it might mean for them to freely interact. My account of aesthetic recognition therefore incorporates all three capacities that are valorized by modern aestheticians.

Against the backdrop of this summary, I can now highlight a few further points that require closer examination. Let me begin with the issue of what exactly is regarded as intrinsically valuable by the modern capacity-based approach to aesthetics. The three authors whom I credit with giving shape to the emerging field of modern aesthetics (Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison) are not clear about this issue. Do they value the capacities themselves, any exercise of these capacities, exercises of these capacities of a particular kind or what emerges from such exercises?

These three authors also fail to provide a clear answer to the question of what renders the exercises of these capacities aesthetic. To flag up that there is an issue that needs further attention, I used terms like 'explorative', 'non-instrumental' and 'free' throughout this chapter. As I see it, an account of modern aesthetics ends up being too wide or too inclusive if, for instance, every instance of sense perception or every emotional response counts as aesthetic.⁶¹ In that case, we would all be engaging aesthetically with the world virtually all the time. In developing my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics further, I therefore must clarify which exercises of these capacities qualify as aesthetic and what exactly it is that modern aestheticians value in relation to sense perception, emotions and the imagination.

⁶¹ Baumgarten's framing is for this reason too wide, in my view, for he defines the discipline of aesthetics as 'a general science of perception' (Guyer 2014a: 322). See also Baumgarten (1954: 78).

Furthermore, I will draw on the Hegelian theory of recognition to shed light on the social and normative life of aesthetics in modern and contemporary democratic *Sittlichkeit*. To do this, I will develop an original account of aesthetic recognition that expands the range of relationships of recognition familiar from Hegel and his successors. This account of aesthetic recognition also enables me to explain how the aesthetic fits into accounts of democratic ethical life.⁶² However, first I want to examine in the next chapter how my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics interacts with Hegel's own views about aesthetics and art.

⁶² See Chapters 3 and 4.

Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics

2.1. Introduction

The topic of this chapter is Hegel's *Aesthetics*.¹ However, unlike most scholarly contributions, my focus is not his ideal aesthetics, or *The Art of Idealism*, as Lydia Moland (2019) recently called it, but the few pages of his voluminous *Lectures on Fine Art* from 1823 that hint at what happens to art after the disintegration of ideal romantic art.² I argue that in these brief remarks, Hegel provides us with an outline of (what I refer to as) his post-ideal aesthetics. The main task I set myself in this chapter is to recover the key features of Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics and art, that is, of the new kind of art that Hegel himself calls the art of 'most recent times' (Hegel 1975: 602/1986: Vol. 2, 231). In other words, we

¹ In this chapter, I develop an original account of Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics based on a careful interpretation of those passages in Hegel's *Aesthetics* in which he explains what happens to art and aesthetics after the dissolution of ideal romantic art. I work, for the most part, with Hegel's 1823 lectures, since these are the *Lectures on Fine Art* that were translated by T. M. Knox into English in 1975. However, as I will occasionally suggest alternative translations based on the German original, references to the Knox translation in this chapter will be immediately followed – after a forward slash – by a reference to the three-volume German edition of the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* (1986), which was edited by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel.

Hegel lectured on aesthetics first in Heidelberg in 1818 and then later in Berlin in 1820/21, 1823, 1826 and 1828/29. However, he did not produce a manuscript that was ready for publication before his death in 1831. 'After his death, Hegel's student Heinrich Gustav Hotho compiled materials available to him, including student notes on Hegel's [1823] lectures and Hegel's [now lost] notes themselves, into a fully explicated text' (Moland 2019: 18). 'These lectures were first published in [German in] 1835 . . . and published in English on the basis of T.M. Knox's translation in 1975' (Houlgate 2016). See also Gethmann-Siefert (1991). 'Transcripts of Hegel's lectures made by his students in 1820/21, 1823 and 1826' are now also available in German (Houlgate 2016).

² In the English two-volume edition of Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, only 9 out of more than 1,200 pages are dedicated to the elaboration of Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics and art (Hegel 1975: 602–611/1986: Vol. 2, 231–42). It is therefore unsurprising that these, for Hegel's standards, fairly unsystematic remarks are often completely ignored or only mentioned in passing in reconstructions of Hegel's aesthetics. See, for instance, Beiser (2005a: 282–306), Bubner (1980), Guyer (2014b: 119–43), Houlgate (2016), Moland (2019) and Pippin (2008). If these passages are invoked at all, then typically in connection with Hegel's (in-)famous 'end of art' thesis. My recovery of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics therefore also amounts to an original contribution to the 'end of art' debate.

are concerned with the art that emerges in modern social life after ideal art's dissolution and 'self-transcendence' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237).

Against the backdrop of my recovery of Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics, I then explore how it interacts with the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics (that I developed in Chapter 1). I argue that Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics is, unlike his ideal aesthetics, a paradigmatic and rare example of a comprehensive approach to modern aesthetics, since it integrates all three of modern aesthetics' substantive dimensions, that is, sense perception, emotions and the free play of the imagination. I also show that Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics, unlike his ideal conception of art, is an integral part of modern (and democratic) ethical life. Furthermore, I delineate the distinctly aesthetic contribution that post-ideal art makes to modern ethical life's ambition to be a life of equal freedom for all. Finally, I argue that my recovery of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art is a game-changer for the so-called 'end of art' debate.

I begin, however, by briefly introducing (some of) the key features of Hegel's ideal aesthetics (Section 2.2). I provide an overview of how Hegel's ideal aesthetics fits into his philosophical system, introduce fundamental concepts and consider the various forms that ideal art takes on. This overview of Hegel's ideal aesthetics then serves as a backdrop and object of comparison for my account of Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics and art that I recover in the next section (Section 2.3). In a first step, I reconstruct why and how ideal romantic art disintegrates in modern times and then demonstrate that Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics is a variant of a capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics. I then move on to evaluate his post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics (Section 2.4). By situating this conception of post-ideal art within the literature on the (alleged) 'end of art', I show that his post-ideal conception of art remains relevant in modern ethical life, since it makes a distinct contribution to modern *Sittlichkeit* living up to its aspiration to denote a life of freedom.

2.2. Hegel's ideal aesthetics

Hegel's *Aesthetics* from 1823 is a work of breathtaking ambition and scope that ranks among his 'most popular' and 'influential' (Beiser 2005a: 282).³ When people speak about Hegel's *Aesthetics*, what they typically have in mind is (what I call) his ideal aesthetics, namely his systematic account of ideal art's conceptual

³ See also Bubner (1980: 15–30).

and historical development (from symbolic to classical art and from classical to romantic art), which culminates in ideal art's '[d]issolution' (Hegel 1975: 593/1986: Vol. 2, 220).⁴

Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* are composed of three parts and offer a comprehensive philosophical and historical treatment of (ideal) art. The first part clarifies the 'Idea of Artistic Beauty, or the Ideal' (Hegel 1975: 91-298/1986: Vol. 1, 127-388). The second part provides an overview of the history of art that considers various cultures since the dawn of history and traces the transformations of ideal art by distinguishing between symbolic, classical and romantic forms of ideal art.⁵ It is the end of the second part of his *Aesthetics* that interests me particularly, since this is where Hegel discusses what happens to art after the 'dissolution of romantic' ideal 'art' (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). The final part of his *Lectures* offers a rich and well-illustrated discussion of the various 'Individual Arts', that is, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry and drama (Hegel 1975: 613-1238/1986: Vol. 2, 245-463, Vol. 3, 11-574).⁶

2.2.1. Hegel's narrowly cognitive account of ideal art (and its place in his philosophical system)

While Hegel's *Aesthetics* is undoubtedly a work of breathtaking breadth and ambition, the framing of his ideal aesthetics is rather narrow. According to Hegel, the philosophical discipline of aesthetics is exclusively concerned with the '*realm of the beautiful*', which he equates with '*fine art*' (1975: 1/1986: Vol. 1, 13). For Hegel, 'the word "aesthetics" stand[s] . . . for . . . *Philosophy of Art* and, more definitely, *Philosophy of Fine Art*' (1975: 1/1986: Vol. 1, 13). This framing of aesthetics, which Hegel has done much to popularize, implies that *only* works of art fall within the remit of the discipline of aesthetics. This represents a considerable restriction of the scope of aesthetics, since this is neither a characteristic of the pioneering works of the eighteenth century nor is this view shared by some of his immediate predecessors in the German context, such as Kant or Schiller, for whom nature, the individual human being and even the form of social and political life fell within the remit of aesthetics.⁷ This narrow

⁴ This Janus-faced character of Hegel's (ideal) aesthetics made it possible to see him both as 'the father of modern art history' (Beiser 2005a: 282; Gombrich 1977) and the prophet of the end of art (Beiser 2005a: 298-306).

⁵ See Hegel (1975: 299-612/1986: Vol. 1, 389-546, Vol. 2, 13-244) and (Beiser 2005a: 283).

⁶ Hegel's analysis of the 'System of Individual Arts' falls beyond the scope of this study. For an excellent discussion of this part of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, see Moland (2019: 151-301).

⁷ See Guyer (2014a, 2014b: 139), Kant (2000) and Schiller (2005a).

framing of aesthetics is also in tension with the literal meaning of the Greek word *aísthēsis*, which suggests, as Hegel is well aware, a philosophical discipline dedicated to the study ‘of sensation’ and ‘of feeling’ more generally (Hegel 1975: 1/1986: Vol. 1, 13).⁸

Compared with other approaches to modern aesthetics, Hegel’s ideal aesthetics is narrow in yet another sense. He endorses a ‘purely cognitivist aesthetics’ or an ‘aesthetics of truth’ and marginalizes two distinctly modern dimensions of the aesthetic, namely emotions and the free play of the imagination (Guyer 2014b: 5).⁹

Having clarified Hegel’s framing of aesthetics, we can now address the question of how his aesthetics fits into his philosophical system. To this purpose, we must introduce some basic concepts and assumptions underpinning Hegel’s system. Hegel understands ‘*being* . . . as self-determining reason or “Idea” (*Idee*)’ (Houlgate 2016). For him, all matter is rationally configured, albeit ‘living matter’ more so ‘than mere physical matter’ (Houlgate 2016). With respect to living beings, Hegel holds that they become ‘more explicitly rational and self-determining’ the more ‘self-conscious’ they are, that is, the more they ‘can imagine, use language, think and exercise freedom’ (Houlgate 2016). Hegel refers to self-conscious being as “spirit” (*Geist*) and argues that ‘[r]eason, or the Idea, comes to be fully self-determining and rational, . . . when it takes the form of self-conscious spirit’ (Houlgate 2016).¹⁰

Against this background, we can now determine the role that ideal art is playing within Hegel’s philosophical system. Art, alongside religion and philosophy, is one of three modes of absolute knowledge. All modes of absolute knowledge denote distinct ways or ‘media’ through which spirit attains self-consciousness (Beiser 2005a: 285). Art, religion and philosophy therefore arise from one and the same fundamental cognitive interest of spirit: to become fully self-conscious or ‘fully self-determining and rational’ (Houlgate 2016). In light of this, we can make sense of Hegel’s assertion that ‘art . . . has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy’, since it denotes ‘one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit’ (Hegel 1975: 7/1986: Vol. 1, 21).¹¹

⁸ See also Moland (2019: 32).

⁹ Even though Hegel claims, like proponents of the rationalist strand in aesthetics such as Wolff, that ‘beauty gives us access to truth’, his aesthetics does not simply continue the rationalist tradition, since his idealist understanding of truth marks a clear shift away from a notion of truth ‘as a pre-existing divine or rational order’ (Moland 2019: 28). See also Beiser (2009).

¹⁰ See also Guyer (2014b: 125) and Moland (2019: 23–7).

¹¹ See also Houlgate (1997: 2).

Appreciating that art, religion and philosophy are all driven by the same fundamental cognitive interest of spirit is key to understanding the rise and fall of Hegel's 'thoroughly cognitivist' (Guyer 2014b: 127) conception of ideal art, including his claim that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us' moderns 'a thing of the past' (Hegel 1975: 11/1986: Vol. 1, 25) and 'no longer fulfils our highest' spiritual 'needs' since '[t]hought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art' (Hegel 1975: 10/1986: Vol. 1, 24). What makes evaluations and comparisons like this possible is the framing of (ideal) art as one of the three modes of absolute knowledge that all have one and the same cognitive purpose.

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel is also looking backwards at how these three modes of absolute knowledge have evolved over time and arrives at the conclusion that (ideal) art is the least and philosophy the most adequate medium through which spirit can attain self-consciousness. Hegel defines artworks as man-made objects that have the distinct cognitive 'function' of making spirit appear or 'to show us what divine and human *freedom* look like' with the help of sensuous media such as stone, colour, sounds or words (Houlgate 2016).¹² Artworks instantiate 'true beauty' or the 'Ideal', if they succeed in giving a 'sensuous expression of spiritual freedom' (Houlgate 2016).¹³ The (deep) content of ideal art is therefore always free spirit itself, no matter what an ideal artwork happens to represent (e.g. a Greek goddess or a Madonna with child). Finally, the form of ideal artworks is geared to the 'appearance of the Idea to sense' (Hegel 1975: 111/1986: Vol. 1, 151). In sum, the purpose of ideal art is to provide us with an 'immediate and . . . sensible knowledge' (Guyer 2014b: 127) of spirit's freedom via a 'unity' of content and form, or 'meaning and shape' (Hegel 1975: 602/1986: Vol. 2, 231).¹⁴

One upshot of Hegel's philosophical reconstruction of ideal art's conceptual and historical development is that the medium of ideal art is constitutively incapable of giving a fully adequate expression to spirit's freedom, even if a work of art is beautiful.¹⁵ This inability of ideal art to fully live up to its purpose is due to the mismatch between art's sensory nature, on the one hand, and spirit's intellectual or conceptual nature, on the other. This limitation of ideal art as a medium through which spirit can attain self-consciousness is the reason why Hegel never speaks of 'the idea' in relation to ideal art (Guyer 2014b: 129).

¹² See Guyer (2014b: 127).

¹³ See also Moland (2019: 27–38).

¹⁴ See also Hegel (1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 237).

¹⁵ See Beiser (2005a: 287–8).

Instead, he speaks of ‘the ideal’, a term he uses to refer to the idea in ‘its sensory representation’ (Guyer 2014b: 129).

It is this (unsurmountable) shortcoming of ideal art that drives spirit’s developmental story. Spirit traverses the three forms of ideal art and then moves on to religion and philosophy. In religion, free spirit is no longer expressed in an inevitably deficient sensuous fashion but is instead *represented* through ‘images and metaphors . . . in which we put our *faith*’ (Houlgate 2016). Philosophy, finally, goes beyond religion and provides us with a ‘*conceptual* understanding of the nature of reason or the Idea’ (Houlgate 2016).¹⁶ Philosophy can achieve this due to its medium, that is, conceptual thought, which is fully adequate to spirit’s intellectual or conceptual nature.

This outline of how ideal art fits into Hegel’s philosophical system explains, on the one hand, why Hegel treats ideal art as a cognitive phenomenon and, on the other, how it is possible for ideal art to lose its cognitive significance in modern times. Hegel stresses that the ‘whole situation’ in which ideal art finds itself is ‘altogether altered’ during the later stages of (ideal) romantic art (Hegel 1975: 604/1986: Vol. 2, 234). This radical transformation of ideal art’s context is driven by two factors: on the one hand, there is the ‘progress of’ ideal ‘art itself’ that manifests itself in the historical progression from symbolic to classical art and from classical to romantic art (Hegel 1975: 604/1986: Vol. 2, 234). On the other hand, there are also significant developments pertaining to the other two modes of absolute knowledge, that is, religion and philosophy, which Hegel associates with an unprecedented ‘cultivation of reflection’ in the wake of processes of societal modernization (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). At the stage of late romantic (ideal) art, these two developments throw two things into sharp relief: firstly, the sensuous medium of ideal art is, in principle, unsuited to adequately manifest its (deep) content, namely spirit’s freedom. Secondly, religion (especially after the reformation) and philosophy have made significant steps towards the clarification of the absolute. Hegel even states that regarding the absolute ‘everything is revealed, and nothing obscure or inward is left over any more’ (Hegel 1975: 604/1986: Vol. 2, 234). In sum, (his) philosophy has completed the substantive task that underpinned ideal art as a mode of absolute knowledge.

As a result, there is no longer any point in ideal art continuing to belabour its original purpose. Ideal art’s ‘content is’, in other words, ‘exhausted’ (Hegel 1975: 604/1986: Vol. 2, 234). Consequently ‘almost all’ inhabitants of modern

¹⁶ See Guyer (2014b: 127).

societies, including 'the artists' themselves, have 'lost all absolute interest' in ideal art (Hegel 1975: 604–5/1986: Vol. 2, 234–5).

The upshot of Hegel's philosophy, which traces the conceptual and historical development of ideal art and the other two modes of absolute knowledge, is therefore that ideal art is best understood as a necessary developmental stage in spirit's quest for self-consciousness. It was through ideal art that spirit 'transcended' for the first time 'the spheres of nature and history and returned to itself', albeit in a fashion that is not fully adequate to spirit's own nature (Beiser 2005a: 285). For us moderns, ideal art's cognitive significance is merely a developmental and historical one: 'our world today . . . appears beyond a stage at which art is the supreme mode of our knowledge of the Absolute' (Hegel 1975: 10/1986: Vol. 1, 24).¹⁷ Ideal 'art' thus 'no longer fulfils our highest' spiritual 'needs' and, 'considered in its highest vocation', that is, as a medium through which spirit attains self-consciousness, ideal art 'is and remains for us a thing of the past' (Hegel 1975: 11/1986: Vol. 1, 25).

In short, for Hegel and his contemporaries ideal art's cognitive significance is already 'superseded' (Guyer 2014b: 120).¹⁸ This assessment, which is part of the prelude to Hegel's *Aesthetics*, raises serious questions about (ideal) art's (loss of) significance in modern life, questions that have fuelled a debate that is still going strong 200 years later: the debate about the (alleged) 'end of art' (to which I will come back below).

2.2.2. Hegel on the free play of the imagination and emotions

Before continuing my outline of Hegel's ideal aesthetics, I would like to briefly consider how it interacts with two substantive dimensions that are an integral part of my capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics: emotions and the free play of imagination.¹⁹ I would like to examine more closely what exactly motivates Hegel to exclude these two dimensions from his ideal aesthetics. However, we must keep in mind that Hegel's reasons for displacing emotions and the free play of the imagination from his ideal aesthetics might not apply to his post-ideal aesthetics. Indeed, I will argue below that Hegel embraces both dimensions as part of his post-ideal aesthetics, which he delineates in his remarks about what happens to art after ideal art's 'self-transcendence' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237).

¹⁷ See also Beiser (2005a: 283) and Guyer (2014b: 120).

¹⁸ See also Hegel (1975: 10, 55/1986: Vol. 1, 24, 82) and Beiser (2005a: 299, 304).

¹⁹ For an outline of my capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics, see Chapter 1.

Hegel mentions the free play of the imagination in his Berlin lectures on *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik* from 1826 in connection with his discussion of Kant's (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790. Kant's approach to aesthetics turns on the free play of two cognitive capacities: the faculty of understanding and the faculty of the imagination. Hegel takes issue with Kant's account of beauty and denies that the 'beautiful induces a free play of the powers of imagination' (Hegel 2004: 17–8).²⁰ The negative stance on the free play of the imagination that Hegel expresses here is linked with his framing of ideal art as a form of absolute knowledge. For the free play of imagination severs the link between artworks and 'that which is true', since integrating this dimension into his aesthetics implies, according to Hegel, that the truth of the artwork is a matter of 'contingency' or 'luck' (2004: 17–18).²¹ In other words, an ideal aesthetics that conceives of art as a form of absolute knowledge cannot endorse the view that 'the artist', allowing her imagination to play freely, 'has produced' artworks 'contingently and as a matter of luck' (Hegel 2004: 17–18).²² That is why Hegel 'contemptuously' and 'explicitly rejected Kant's theory that the free play of our cognitive powers is the essence of all aesthetic experience and free play with ideas the essence of the experience of fine art' (Guyer 2014b: 120).

The other substantive dimension of modern aesthetics that plays no role in Hegel's ideal aesthetics is emotions. In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel considers at some length the view that the 'aim' of art 'consists in awakening and vivifying . . . feelings, inclinations, and passions of every kind' and to enable human beings to explore, 'experience, and produce' whatever 'can move and stir the human breast in its depths and manifold possibilities and aspects' (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 71). Hegel discusses two arguments in support of the view that (the arousal of) emotions is an integral part of art and aesthetics.

According to the first argument, it is one of art's tasks to expand the horizon of our emotional experiences. Our engagement with art 'complement[s]' and broadens the qualitative and emotional 'experiences' that we have as part of our ordinary lives (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 71; trans. modified). For instance, by reading a novel or watching a film we imaginatively immerse ourselves into situations, contexts and characters that would otherwise not be part of our

²⁰ Quoted from Guyer (2014b: 120).

²¹ Quoted after Guyer (2014b: 120).

²² Quoted after Guyer (2014b: 120).

lives. What is more, we respond to these imagined encounters with unfamiliar emotions and ideas.²³

The second argument that is supposed to show that art's engagement with emotions is essential goes like this: art has the power to 'awaken[...]' our sensibilities in such a way that our 'experiences of life do not leave us unmoved' (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 71). By engaging with art, individuals thus 'acquire a receptivity for all phenomena' (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 71). In other words, art that makes room for emotions plays an important role in promoting our emotional receptivity, and this receptivity is in turn crucial for nurturing our commitment to our lives, our individuality and our relationships with others that go beyond the superficial. For all of this requires being attentive to our own emotional reactions as well as to the emotional self-expressions of others.

Interestingly, Hegel does not refute these two arguments. In other words, he does not deny that the dimension of emotions can make a significant contribution to the aesthetic. What Hegel does explicitly reject is, however, an understanding of art, according to which the 'aim' of art simply consists in arousing 'human passions of *every* sort' (Houlgate 1997: 16). It is not satisfactory, in Hegel's view, to provide a definition of 'art' in terms of 'a purely formal task', that is, a task that is not linked with a substantive 'aim' (1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72). We cannot 'stop at so formal a definition' of art, according to Hegel, because such a definition leaves completely open the question of the point and purpose of art's arousing of emotions (1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72).

A definition of art that simply states that the point of 'art' is '[t]his arousing of all feelings in us' or 'this drawing of the heart through all the circumstances of life' is thus unacceptable to Hegel (1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72). Such a definition does not provide us with a substantive purpose and therefore amounts to a disorienting 'empty form' that encourages 'every possible kind of content', from the 'noblest ideals' to the 'most . . . selfish feelings', thus 'imposing on the heart . . . good and bad alike' (Hegel 1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72). In Hegel's view, such a formal definition of art would encourage the production of a great 'variety of material' that arouses 'different feelings' that 'counteract one another, contradict and reciprocally cancel one another' (Hegel 1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72). What is more, it would purposelessly intensify the already 'contradictory character of [our] feelings and passions' and make us 'stagger about like Bacchantes' (Hegel 1975: 47/1986: Vol. 1, 72).

²³ Richard Rorty's *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* (1989) can be read as an attempt to unpack the importance of such aesthetic-emotional encounters for an aesthetic politics of solidarity.

In sum: the upshot of Hegel's critique is not that emotions must be eliminated from our accounts of art. He merely stresses that accounts of art that incorporate emotions need to do more than provide a formal definition of art, since the concept of art has, according to Hegel, a three-partite structure which consists of art's substantive purpose, content and form. Any defensible conception of art therefore must encompass an account of art's 'higher *substantial* end' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). What Hegel takes issue with is, in other words, that definitions of art that invoke emotions as essential fail to link the artistic arousal and exploration of emotions with a substantive purpose.

However, it remains true that Hegel's account of ideal art does not assign any essential role to emotions. This is due to ideal art's narrowly cognitive 'substantial end' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). After all, there is no need to resort to emotions if art is understood as promoting absolute knowledge or spirit's consciousness of freedom. If ideal art delivers anything 'to feeling', then it is 'the Idea' itself, that is, 'the splendour of the noble, eternal, true' (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 70–1). But this emotional aspect is not essential to ideal art's purpose, namely to convey 'immediate and . . . sensible knowledge' of spirit's freedom (Guyer 2014b: 127). Emotions are, in short, not an integral part of Hegel's ideal aesthetics. However, nothing about the three-partite structure of Hegel's concept of art rules out a conception of art that makes room for the dimension of emotions. In fact, I argue below that Hegel himself integrates emotions – and the free play of the imagination – into his post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics.

2.2.3. Hegel on the history and forms of ideal art

To fully appreciate why and how ideal art disintegrates, we must familiarize ourselves with Hegel's account of ideal art's conceptual-historical development. Hegel distinguishes three *Kunstformen* or forms of art and maintains that each is characterized by a distinct relationship between ideal art's (deep) content (i.e. the idea) and the form of ideal art (i.e. its 'mode of presentation of free spirit (Houlgate 2016)).²⁴ Ideal art's traversing through these various forms is propelled, according to Hegel, by the fundamental cognitive interest of spirit to achieve self-consciousness, on the one hand, and the distinct shortcomings of each of these forms of ideal art with respect to ideal art's fundamental cognitive interest, on the other.

²⁴ See Guyer (2014b: 130), Houlgate (1997: 2–15), Moland (2019: 55–125) and Pinkard (2007) for discussions of the symbolic, the classical and the romantic form of ideal art.

Symbolic art, the, historically speaking, first form of art, denotes a form of 'pre-art' because it fails to 'realize the ideal of art' due to the fact that its content, free spirit, is at this stage not yet adequately grasped (Beiser 2005a: 301).²⁵ Symbolic ideal art therefore fails to 'adequately or fully' represent its content 'through the sensual media of art' (Beiser 2005a: 301). In Hegel's own words: 'at the beginning of art . . . spirit was not yet itself explicitly free for itself; it still sought for the Absolute in nature and therefore interpreted nature as in itself divine' (Hegel 1975: 602/1986: Vol. 2, 231–2; trans. modified). This constellation gives rise to symbolization or a 'separation of meaning and shape' (Hegel 1975: 395/1986: Vol. 1, 507). The arbitrary relationship between the presented form and the meaning of the representation is therefore a characteristic feature of symbolic works of art. For instance, an 'image' might have 'some of the qualities of its object' (Beiser 2005a: 301). Achilles, a strong hero, can, for example, be represented by a lion or any other powerful animal. But this still amounts to a form of symbolization that lacks beauty because what is presented comes in no way close to an adequate embodiment of 'the spirit of the individual hero' (Houlgate 2016).

Classical art, the subsequent form of art, denotes a significant step beyond symbolic art. Classical art instantiates 'true beauty' because it achieves a 'perfect sensuous expression of the freedom of spirit' as it was understood in ancient Greece: '[i]n true beauty . . . the visible shape is not a symbol of . . . a meaning that lies beyond the shape, but is the *expression* of spirit's freedom that brings that freedom directly into view. Beauty is sensuous, visible shape so transformed that it stands as the visible embodiment of freedom itself.' (Houlgate 2016)²⁶

For Hegel, there are three features of ancient Greek culture that make this possible: firstly, the Greeks conceived of their gods as 'self-determining' spirits (Houlgate 2016); secondly, these gods took on the 'form of *individuals*' who are 'embodied' and could thus be 'portrayed in sculpture and drama' (Houlgate 2016); finally, they identified 'the proper shape of free spirit' as 'the human body, not that of an animal' (Houlgate 2016).²⁷ While it is the case that in classical art the 'content and form of art are determinate' and both are 'fully adequate to each other', spirit ultimately also needs to surpass this form of ideal art, since it is not grounded in a 'completely adequate' understanding of the 'absolute' (Guyer 2014b: 130).

²⁵ See Hegel (1975: 443–75/1986: Vol. 1, 389–546).

²⁶ See Hegel (1975: 427–440/Vol. 1, 13–126).

²⁷ On this point, see also Beiser (2005a: 301–2).

‘Greek religion was so well suited to aesthetic expression because the gods were conceived as free individuals who were wholly at one with their bodies and their sensuous life. In other words, they were free spirits still immersed in nature’ (Houlgate 2016). Against this backdrop, Hegel arrives at the conclusion that ‘the vision of classical art represented the Greek gods as naïve and inspired, yet even so essentially as individuals burdened with the natural human form as with an *affirmative* feature’ (Hegel 1975: 602-603/1986: Vol. 2, 233). To develop a more adequate understanding of spirit’s freedom, spirit had to ‘withdraw[. . .] into itself out of nature and become[. . .] pure self-knowing interiority’ (Houlgate 2016). The site of this withdrawal of spirit into itself is (Christian) romantic art, the next stage in spirit’s quest to become more self-aware by traversing ideal art’s different forms.

Hegel calls the third and final form of ideal art, which is inspired by Christianity, romantic art.²⁸

Romantic art for the first time deepened the spirit in its own inwardness, in contrast to which the flesh, external reality, and the world in general was at first posited as a *negative*, even though the spirit and the Absolute had to appear in this element alone; yet at last this element could be given validity for itself again in a more and more positive way. (Hegel 1975: 603/1986: Vol. 2, 232)

The understanding of free spirit that inspires romantic ideal art is more adequate, since it takes into account spirit’s ‘profoundly *inward*’ character (Houlgate 2016). Given that romantic (ideal) art sensuously represents this deeper understanding of spirit’s freedom, it is ‘capable of genuine beauty’ (Houlgate 2016). But romantic art also faces a difficulty unknown to classical art: romantic ideal artists fully appreciate spirit’s inward character; therefore, they become aware of the fact that art’s inevitably sensuous media are constitutively unsuited to generate a fully adequate expression of spirit’s freedom.

This deeper insight into spirit’s freedom thus comes with the recognition that (ideal) art is less suited to give expression to the absolute than other media of absolute knowledge that rely less on sensuous representations, namely ‘more developed religion’ and ‘philosophy’ (Guyer 2014b: 130).²⁹ Houlgate illustrates this deficiency of ‘romantic art’ by comparing it ‘to the human face’ that is animated by and thus ‘*discloses* the spirit . . . *within*’, but the face is not, and should not be mistaken for, the animating spirit itself (Houlgate 2016).

²⁸ It is important not to confuse what Hegel calls romantic (ideal) art with romanticism, i.e. a prominent art movement that flourished around 1800. Romanticism is, according to my interpretation of Hegel, a form of the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art.

²⁹ See Hegel (1975: 80–1/1986: Vol. 1, 113) and Beiser (2005a: 301–2).

Romantic ideal art itself undergoes several transformations. It starts out as religious art inspired by Christianity. The focus of Christian romantic (ideal) art is Christ's life, since by representing it, romantic art gives expression to 'the idea that the truly *divine* life of freedom and love is at the same time a fully *human* life' (Houlgate 2016). The humanity of Christ is, for instance, highlighted in the countless depictions of the Madonna with child or in the portrayal of Christ's vulnerability and bodily suffering at the various stages of his passion. Christian romantic art thus conveys the 'deepest spiritual freedom', while emphasizing, at the same time, the humanity and vulnerability of Christ, for instance, by allowing us to see that even the 'suffering Christ' is 'imbued with a *profound inwardness* (*Innigkeit*) of feeling and a genuine sense of *reconciliation* (*Versöhnung*)' (Houlgate 2016).

Christian romantic art prepares the ground for a secular form of romantic ideal art which universalizes a feature and insight of Christian (ideal) romantic art, namely 'the truth of humanity as *individuality*' that in Christian romantic art is typically associated with Christ (Pinkard 2007: 19). Secular romantic art highlights that each human being is an individual with 'a rich inner life, an "infinite subjectivity"', and it is this infinite subjectivity 'that eventually detaches itself from its religious origins and comes to be concerned with itself in its prosaic, mundane world' (Pinkard 2007: 19). In other words, secular romantic art depicts 'secular "virtues" of the free spirit' such as 'romantic love', 'loyalty' and 'courage' (Houlgate 2016).³⁰ Secular romantic artworks typically engage with 'a commitment by the free individual to an object or person determined by the individual's contingent choice or passion' (Houlgate 2016).

The third and last variant of ideal romantic art 'depicts the formal freedom and independence of character' (Houlgate 2016), which Hegel calls 'firmness' (Hegel 1975: 577/ 1986: Vol. 2, 199). Works of this kind of secular (ideal) romantic art frequently represent individuals pursuing a self-determined 'course of action' in the face of adversity, that is, 'even at the cost of their own lives' (Houlgate 2016).

2.3. Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics: The key features

With this introduction to Hegel's ideal aesthetics behind us, we can now turn our attention to what are, for the purposes of this study, the key questions: Why and how does (romantic) ideal art disintegrate? Does Hegel provide us

³⁰ See Hegel (1975: 553–72, 607/1986: Vol. 2, 169–94; 2004: 143–4).

with an account of post-ideal art and aesthetics, and if so, what does he say about it? How does Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics interact with my capacity-based understanding of modern aesthetics? And, finally, is post-ideal art and aesthetics an integral part of modern ethical life, and if so, what is the contribution it makes to modern *Sittlichkeit*?

In order to lay the groundwork for sound answers to these questions, I must first make explicit a feature of Hegel's aesthetics that his interpreters have overlooked thus far: Hegel draws a distinction between the '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73) and conceptions of art.³¹ Hegel's *concept* of art denotes a conceptual structure with three variables, namely art's substantive purpose, (deep) content and form. What *distinguishes one conception of art from another* is that they offer different interpretations of these three variables that jointly make up the basic structure of the concept of art. *Different conceptions* of art are all conceptions of *art* because they all share the same (three-partite) concept of art.

Against the backdrop of this conceptual clarification, we can see that symbolic, classical and romantic art are all forms of the same *ideal conception* of art. For symbolic, classical and romantic art share one and the same account of the three variables that make up the basic structure of Hegel's concept of art. All three forms of ideal art regard the promotion of absolute knowledge as the '*substantial end*' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73) or 'vocation' (Hegel 1975: 603/1986: Vol. 2, 232) of art. All works of ideal art have the same (deep) content, namely 'the Absolute' or spirit's freedom, whatever it is they are about on the surface (Hegel 1975: 603/1986: Vol. 2, 232). And for all three forms of ideal art, the point of form is the 'sensuous' appearance or 'expression of the Idea' (Houlgate 1997: 16).³²

My claim is that Hegel outlines a *post-ideal* conception of art that emerges after (ideal) art's 'self-transcendence [*Hinausgehen . . . über sich selbst*]' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 237). To make good on this claim, I have to demonstrate that post-ideal art has a new substantive purpose (i.e. a purpose that is different from the one underpinning all forms of ideal art), a new (deep) content (i.e. a content that is different from the deep content of all forms of ideal art) as well as a novel (and matching) outlook on form. In short, if post-ideal aesthetics denotes anything, it denotes a novel interpretation of the three variables that jointly make up the basic structure of Hegel's '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). For if a novel conception of 'art' abandoned (the three-

³¹ For a discussion of the distinction between 'concept' and 'conception', see Rawls (1999a: 6) and Hart (1961: 155-9).

³² See also Hegel (1975: 111/1986: Vol. 1, 151) and Guyer (2014b: 127).

partite structure of) Hegel's concept of art, then we would no longer deal with a conception of *art* at all.

Clarifying the distinction between Hegel's concept of art and various conceptions of art proves useful with regard to tracking and making sense of the various transformations that art undergoes. For example, it helps us to appreciate that the transformation of art following the dissolution of ideal romantic art goes deeper than the changes that are associated with the transition from symbolic to classical ideal art and the transition from classical to romantic ideal art. Despite traversing through various forms, the *conception* of ideal art remains the same. By contrast, the transition from ideal romantic art to post-ideal art entails a transformation of the *conception* of art. However, it should be noted that this change in the *conception* of art does not mean the end of *art*, since the '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73) or the 'nature of art' (Pippin 2008: 395) remains intact in this transition from the ideal to the post-ideal conception of art.

2.3.1. The two forms of the dissolution of (ideal) romantic art

We can now pick up where we left off. We have already familiarized ourselves with the forces that drive the dissolution of romantic ideal art and can thus turn our attention directly to ideal art's disintegration.

According to Hegel, the 'dissolution of the romantic form of art' manifests itself in artworks that turn against the ideal conception of art (Hegel 1975: 593/1986: Vol. 2, 222). These works of art break with the way in which the ideal conception of art interprets the three variables that make up Hegel's concept of art. These works 'turn', for instance, '*against* the content that was alone *valid* hitherto' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 234). As a result, we encounter artworks that are getting 'rid of' ideal (romantic) art's 'content': the absolute (Hegel 1975: 604–5/1986: Vol. 2, 234). This emancipation of art or 'freeing art from' ideal art's 'content' then undermines the substantial purpose of the ideal conception of art and its engagement with form (Hegel 1975: 604/1986: Vol. 2, 234). In short, we are dealing with artworks that bring about the 'dissolution' of the 'ideal' of beauty which belongs to the ideal conception of art (Hegel 1975: 594/1986: Vol. 2, 220). For Hegel defines this ideal of beauty, invoking ideal art's form and content, as the adequate sensual appearance of spirit's freedom (1975: 111/1986: Vol. 1, 151).³³

³³ See also Hegel (1975: 602/1986: Vol. 2, 231).

Hegel distinguishes between two forms of the ‘dissolution of the romantic form of art’, that is, two different ways in which artworks turn against the ideal conception of art (1975: 593/1986: Vol. 2, 222). The distinctive feature of the first form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art consists in embracing ‘contingent externality’ (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240). Artists dedicate themselves to the skilful representation or ‘imitation of’ random external objects ‘in all’ their ‘contingent shapes’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). The second form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art unleashes ‘contingent subjectivity’ (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240). In this case, objects are seen by artists merely as an opportunity for showcasing the capriciousness of their ‘subjectivity’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). In other words, art is reduced to a celebration of ‘inner contingency’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). In what follows, I want to consider both forms of the dissolution of romantic ideal art in a bit more detail and explain why they denote forms of the *dissolution* of the conception of ideal art and *not* (yet) novel conceptions of art.

The first form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art is concerned with the ‘*artistic imitation of the existent present*’ (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 223). The content of such artworks is no longer the absolute or ‘the ethical and divine’ but the ‘prosaic objectivity’ of the ‘real world’ (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222). Any aspect of ‘common life and external reality’ can equally well become the content of this form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222). Unlike works of ideal art, such artworks no longer have a deep content (that they have in common with all other artworks), they only have a surface content. Recall that no matter what symbolic, classical or romantic ideal artworks are about on the surface (e.g. a statue of Athene or a painting of Christ), on the deep level works of ideal art are always about spirit’s freedom. By contrast, works associated with the first form of the dissolution of ideal romantic art simply depict the world in all its diversity, ‘mutability and finite transitoriness’, showcasing the ‘subjective skill’ of the artists (Hegel 1975: 595, 600/1986: Vol. 2, 222, 228).

In sum, this first form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art abandons ideal art’s deep content and purpose. Instead, it treats the most fleeting and insignificant aspects of the world as worthwhile subject-matters of art. This art thus teaches us to find ‘[s]atisfaction in present-day life, even in the commonest and smallest things’ (Hegel 1975: 597/1986: Vol. 2, 225); and to ‘be delighted and carried away by’ the ‘art of painting and of the painter’, even if ‘heart and thought remain dissatisfied by’ these random or exchangeable ‘subjects’ (Hegel 1975: 598/1986: Vol. 2, 225). As examples of this kind of art, Hegel invokes Dutch

genre paintings of 'grapes, flowers, stags, trees, sandhills, the sea, . . . the finery and decorations of the furnishings of daily life, . . . smoking, teeth-extraction, domestic scenes of the most varied kind, . . . casual flashes of glass, cutlery, etc.' (Hegel 1975: 598–9/1986: Vol. 2, 226–7).

However, this first form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art remains deficient as a conception of art, since it does offer an account of the substantive purpose and deep content of art (that dovetails with a distinct understanding of art's form). In short, it fails to provide an interpretation of all three variables of Hegel's concept of art. There is, ultimately, no (deeper) point to these skilful artistic representations of random aspects of 'prosaic objectivity' (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222). Although this form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art does not constitute a novel conception of art, it has, according to Hegel, an important emancipatory legacy: 'the entire material of the external world acquires freedom' in the domain of art for the first time (Hegel 1975: 594/1986: Vol. 2, 221).

The second form of the dissolution of ideal romantic art is neither about the artistic emancipation of the prosaic world nor about showcasing the artist's skills, but the '*subjectivity* of the artist' or the artist's 'subjective humour' (Hegel 1975: 595, 600/1986: Vol. 2, 222, 229). Artists of this kind engage with the world only to illustrate that everything can be 'dissolved' and transformed by 'subjective opinion, mood, and originality' (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222). This form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art 'leaves nothing in its usual context and in the validity which it has for our usual way of looking at things', for it is 'satisfied only' when 'everything' that is touched by its 'originality' 'proves to be inherently dissoluble' or malleable (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222).

This second form of the dissolution of ideal romantic art also does not amount to a novel conception of art. Even if one considers 'the *subjectivity* of the artist' (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 222) to be the deep content of artworks of this kind, they still lack a '*substantial* end' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). Artworks of this kind therefore always descend into mere imaginative capriciousness or capricious play. Hegel laments that the artist who embraces this second form of the dissolution of ideal romantic art 'lets himself go in the field of the contingency of his notions' and inevitably ends up trading in 'vagaries and jokes' (Hegel 1975: 601/1986: Vol. 2, 230).³⁴ Hegel associates artworks of this

³⁴ Hegel's reasons for considering this second form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art deficient as a conception of art foreshadow his critique of romantic irony, which I outline in Chapter 5. According to my interpretation, Hegel therefore regards romanticism and romantic irony as species

kind with ‘humour’, since humour is not about ‘shaping a topic objectively and in a way appropriate to the essential nature of the topic’ but about ‘destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective and win a firm shape for itself in reality, or that seems to have such a shape already in the external world’ (Hegel 1975: 600–1/1986: Vol. 2, 229). In short, art is reduced to mere capricious play.

This second form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art also has a valuable emancipatory legacy. What ‘acquires freedom’ in artworks of this kind is the expression of subjectivity itself (Hegel 1975: 594/1986: Vol. 2, 221). The ‘liberation of subjectivity’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239) that is a feature of this form of the dissolution of romantic art thus emphasizes the value of human imagination and the cultivation of individuality, albeit in a problematic fashion.

We have established that the two forms of the dissolution of romantic ideal art do not amount to novel conceptions of art, since they do not generate interpretations of the three variables of Hegel’s concept of art.³⁵ A post-ideal conception of art can also not be created by way of a synthesis of the two forms of the dissolution of ideal romantic art. For if these two forms were ‘combined’, we would still not have a conception of art with a substantive purpose (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240). Such a synthesis would also lead to a problematic grounding of art, for one is based on ‘contingent externality’ and the other is grounded in ‘contingent subjectivity’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). Yet, no valuable social practice, artistic or otherwise, can be established on the basis of mere contingency, according to Hegel.³⁶ To secure a future for art in modern life, that is, after ideal art’s ‘dissolution’ and ‘self-transcendence’, we must therefore identify or track the emergence of a novel conception of art (Hegel 1975: 593, 606/1986: Vol. 2, 222, 237).

2.3.2. The emergence of the post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics

The two forms of the dissolution of ideal romantic art have turned art into a ‘free instrument’ (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). Art has become free with regard to its content, since ‘any’ aspect of the world can now become the

of ‘subjective humour’ (Hegel 1975: 600/1986: Vol. 2, 229). That is why they embody the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art, not a new post-ideal conception of art.

³⁵ Works associated with the forms of the dissolution of romantic ideal art are, in my view, therefore not full-fledged works of art. For an opposing view, see Houlgate (1997: 10).

³⁶ See also my discussion of romantic irony in Chapter 5.

'subject-matter of art' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). Art has also become free in terms of its form or 'mode of representation' of its content: '[b]ondage to a particular content and mode of portrayal suitable for this content are for artists today something past.' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235) In other words, artists now 'retain within' their 'own power and choice both the subject-matter and the way of presenting it' (Hegel 1975: 601/1986: Vol. 2, 231; trans. modified).

Hegel's post-ideal conception of art inherits this double emancipation pertaining to 'the material and the form of' artistic 'productions' from the two forms of dissolution of ideal romantic art (1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). However, Hegel now links this double liberation of content and form with a new substantive purpose and deep content. That is why the post-ideal conception of art can lay claim to being a proper conception of *art*.

Before turning my attention to Hegel's post-ideal conception of art, I want to briefly unpack the far-reaching implications of this double emancipation. One implication of art becoming a 'free instrument' consists in it becoming impossible to distinguish art from non-art by pointing to modes of presentation and subject-matters (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). For art is now free both in terms of form and content. This predicament is similar to the one that Jacques Rancière associates with the transition from the representative to the aesthetic regime of art. According to Rancière, the

aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matters, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguishes ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. (Rancière 2004: 19)

Hegel's notion of art as a free instrument also foreshadows, at least as a possibility, what will later be called 'abstraction'. For if art is free in terms of its content and mode of presentation, then 'artists' are 'free' to turn (the presentation of) form and colour themselves into the subject-matter of their artworks (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235).³⁷

³⁷ I come back to the topic of abstraction below as part of my discussion of how the post-ideal conception of art bears on the so-called 'end of art' debate.

2.3.3. The content, purpose and form of the post-ideal conception of art

Hegel is committed to a historical-reconstructive method. He therefore must recover his conception of post-ideal art from the artistic practices of his own time, which he refers to as ‘our art’ (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). To put it differently: to determine the substantial end, the (deep) content as well as the formal features of post-ideal art, he must engage hermeneutically with the aesthetic practices of his own time. Unfortunately, Hegel does not pursue this task systematically in his *Aesthetics* or anywhere else. But my claim is that he provides us with enough clues to generate an outline of his notion of a post-ideal conception of art.

With regard to the three variables or elements of his concept of art, Hegel is most explicit about the (deep) content of the post-ideal conception of art. According to my interpretation, Hegel’s post-ideal conception of art embraces the freedom with respect to art’s content that emerged from the dissolution of ideal romantic art. However, Hegel has to show that despite this liberated diversity in terms of post-ideal art’s (surface) content, all works of post-ideal art share the same (deep) content that is linked with a substantive purpose.³⁸

The distinction between the surface content and the deep content of an artwork should be already familiar to readers from my discussion of Hegel’s ideal aesthetics. For instance, classical Greek statues depict (on the surface) different gods and goddesses or heroes and heroines, and Christian romantic paintings represent (on the surface) different episodes of Christ’s life, but since all these artworks are manifestations of the ideal conception of art, they all have the same deep content, namely ‘the freedom of spirit’ (Houlgate 2016).³⁹

What is the deep content that all post-ideal artworks have in common (despite the great variety of subject-matters that post-ideal artists engage with on the surface level)? Hegel’s original answer to this question is: ‘[h]umanus’, a term Hegel borrows from a poem by Goethe entitled *Die Geheimnisse* (Hegel

³⁸ Recall that the ‘contingent externality’ version of the dissolution of ideal romantic art entails that anything can become the subject-matter of art (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240). But to achieve this openness in terms of surface content, this form of the dissolution of ideal romantic art completely dispenses with art’s deep content. The deep content of the other variant of the dissolution of romantic ideal art is (arguably) ‘contingent subjectivity’ itself (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240). However, turning subjective capriciousness into the deep content of art is, according to Hegel, incompatible with a conception of art possessing a ‘substantial end’ (1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73).

³⁹ See also Hegel (1975: 427–42/1986: Vol. 2, 13–29).

1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237).⁴⁰ *'Humanus'* is the deep content or the 'new holy of holies' of post-ideal art (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237). By this, Hegel means

the depths and heights of the human heart [*Gemüt*] as such, mankind in the joys and sorrows, its striving, deeds, and fates. Herewith the artist acquires his subject-matter in himself and is the human spirit actually self-determining and considering, exploring and expressing the infinity of feelings and situations: nothing living in the human breast remains alien to this human spirit. (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237–8; trans. modified)⁴¹

The deep content of the post-ideal conception of art is thus the concrete human being or, to be more precise, how concrete individuals perceive and emotionally respond to aspects of their lives. In other words, the content of post-ideal art is not the human being as such or in the abstract but how it is for concrete, socially and historically situated individuals to live their lives as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. 'It is', in Hegel's words, 'the appearance and activity of what is imperishably human in its most many-sided significance and endless transmutation which in this reservoir of human situations and feelings now constitutes the absolute content of our art' (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239; trans. modified).

Whereas ideal art is concerned with human beings only to the extent that they are spiritual beings who, through their artistic productions, advance spirit's quest for attaining self-consciousness, post-ideal art is concerned with how concrete human individuals perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively respond to and interact with their concrete socio-historical context. Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics thus heeds Schiller's recommendation (or critique of Kant) that, when it comes to aesthetics, we must ensure that 'living feeling too has a voice' (Schiller 2005a: 93).⁴²

In short, whatever it is that post-ideal art deals with on the surface level, it is (and ought to be) always also about giving expression to what emerges from individuals exploring how they perceive, emotionally respond to and (re-) imagine the world. This move makes it possible for the post-ideal conception of art to embrace the emancipation of art that strips away from art all the fixed restrictions to a specific range of content and treatment, while holding on to a deep shared content. According to the post-ideal conception of art, artists freely engage with a freely chosen aspect of the world. However, it requires

⁴⁰ On the notion of 'humanus', see Donougho (1982) and Houlgate (1997: 16).

⁴¹ Translation amended, my emphasis.

⁴² See also Beiser (2005b: 137–9; 184–9).

them to 'descend into' their 'own breast' and explore ways of expressing how they perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine the world (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237).

Having identified the deep content of post-ideal art, we can now look for clues about how Hegel relates this deep content to an interpretation of post-ideal art's '*substantial end*' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). Before giving a positive account of the substantive purpose of the post-ideal conception of art, Hegel broaches this issue first indirectly or negatively, that is, by criticizing features that render instantiations of post-ideal art deficient. I will deal with these two ways of approaching this issue in turn and then explain how the two answers that he provides interact.

Hegel evaluates as deficient artworks from his own time that merely re-combine and re-arrange existing 'resources' supplied by 'earlier forms of art' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). He takes issue with such artistic productions (that share a striking similarity with a popular understanding of post-modern art) because even if the artists put their 'genius into' these artworks, they fail to engage the artists' own '*Gemüt*' or 'heart' in any depth (Hegel 1975: 605, 607/1986: Vol. 2, 235, 237). He also considers it problematic if 'the topic' of such artworks 'comes to the artist from the outside', typically because the artists are forced to work on 'a commission' to make a living (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236). For Hegel, such artworks ultimately remain external to the artists producing them. He conjectures that 'however much' the artist tries and 'puts his heart into the given topic', if the artist is not free to choose his (or her) topic, 'that topic . . . always remains to him [or her] a material which is not in itself directly the substance of his [or her] own consciousness' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236).

In sum, Hegel criticizes whatever undermines post-ideal art's potential to be a medium for the free cultivation and expression of (the) individuality (of the artist). From this we can infer that Hegel regards the cultivation and realization of *individual freedom* as the purpose of the post-ideal conception of art. Post-ideal art is, for Hegel, a free medium for the 'individualization' of the artist (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). To put it differently, the post-ideal conception of the aesthetic is about cultivating and realizing individuality because it encourages individuals to freely explore and express how they perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine a freely chosen phenomenon that is part of their lives. This understanding of post-ideal art and aesthetic relating as a practice of individualization and individual freedom underpins

Hegel's critique of other features that render manifestations of post-ideal art deficient.⁴³

Hegel mentions, for instance, that too 'many' romantic artists such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis have 'in recent times . . . for art's sake . . . adopted again . . . past world-views' (1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236). In Hegel's view, they re-immersed themselves into 'Roman Catholic' religion 'in order to give stability to their mind and to give the character of something absolute to the specifically limited character of their artistic product' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236).⁴⁴ Artists who follow this trend are doomed to produce lifeless replicas of ideal art, according to Hegel, since their desperate attempts to hold on to the ideal conception of art that trades in the absolute are ultimately futile. The ideal conception of art is for Hegel and his contemporaries already beyond retrieval, 'a thing of the past' (Hegel 1975: 11/1986: Vol. 1, 25). What is more, this pseudo-ideal art goes against the spirit of post-ideal art. For the post-ideal artist 'need not be forced first to settle his accounts with his heart [*Gemüt*] or to worry about the salvation of his soul' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236; trans. modified). The 'free development' of post-ideal art is, in other words, incompatible with embracing 'superstition' and 'faith' as 'absolutely sacrosanct conditions for' art (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236). The post-ideal artist's 'free soul must know and possess its own ground, must be sure of itself and feel confident in itself' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 236; trans. modified). In short, for post-ideal art to come into its own and become a practice that cultivates and gives expression to free individuality, post-ideal artists ought (to feel free) to focus on how their senses, their emotional responses and their imagination disclose the world to them.

We have now identified Hegel's first answer to the question of the '*substantial* end' of post-ideal art (1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73): the substantive purpose of post-ideal art consists in (promoting) the 'individualization' or individual freedom of the artists (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). However, Hegel then goes on to offer another account of the substantive purpose of post-ideal art. This time, he broaches this issue by reminding his audience that the fundamental purpose of (each of the three forms of) ideal art consisted in giving sensuous expression to the level of self-consciousness that spirit had already achieved at the various

⁴³ This link between an aesthetic engagement with the world and freedom is the topic of Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I then develop a notion of aesthetic recognition and explain how aesthetic recognition fits into democratic ethical life as a life of equal freedom for all.

⁴⁴ See also Moland (2019: 146).

stages in spirit's historic-developmental journey of self-discovery. Against this backdrop, Hegel frames the substantial end of the ideal conception of art in terms of 'being at home'. The point of ideal art at each of its 'specific stages' is to 'represent what is absolutely at home' in these developmental stages (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238).

Having set the stage in this way, Hegel suggests that the post-ideal conception of art is, like the ideal conception of art, also concerned with 'being at home', albeit in a different way. Hegel indicates that there is a shift with regard to the substantial end of art that tracks the transition from the ideal to post-ideal conception of art. In other words, Hegel argues that there is a *continuation cum transformation* (and in doing so he adds another layer to his explanation of why ideal and post-ideal art are both manifestations of *art*, but of *different conceptions* of art).

How is the post-ideal conception of art connected with the purpose of 'being at home'? Hegel maintains that the substantive task of post-ideal art is to explore and represent 'everything in which man as such is capable of being at home' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). The point of post-ideal art's exploration of the perceptions and 'feelings' that concrete individuals have in the 'infinity of' ever-changing 'situations' in which they find themselves, is thus *the exploration of what it might mean for (sensing, feeling and imaginative) beings like us to be (more or differently) at home in our world* (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237–8). This exploration, which is undertaken by engaging in post-ideal art, also includes the re-imagining or the free and playful transformation of the situations in which we find ourselves. This is, in a nutshell, Hegel's positive account of the fundamental purpose of the post-ideal conception of art.

Having established post-ideal art's purpose, Hegel emphasizes post-ideal art's link with freedom. Post-ideal aesthetic relating denotes a practice of freedom, since what is at stake here is the aesthetic dimension of our 'self-determin[ation]' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). In short, whether we feel alienated from or at home in our world is the litmus test for our aesthetic freedom. There is no other way for us as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings to tell whether we are aesthetically free than to engage in post-ideal aesthetic relating, that is, to explore what it might mean for us to be more or differently at home in our world as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings.

The post-ideal conception of art is thus turning its back on the absolute and 'makes itself at home in the finite things of the world' (Hegel 1975: 594/1986: Vol. 2, 221). However, at the same time, it is engaged in the free receptive-creative exploration of how we can transform and be (more or differently) at home in our world. This is how Hegel's post-ideal conception of art links the

deep content of post-ideal art (i.e. how it is for concrete individuals to live their lives in their concrete contexts) with the substantive end of exploring what it could mean for us to be (more or differently) at home in our world. Hegel's post-ideal conception of art thus explains why modern artists are so preoccupied with the (often negative) qualitative and emotional experiences with which they respond to the social world they inhabit: their experiences of alienation, instrumentalization, commodification, humiliation, unfreedom etc. In sum, Hegel's post-ideal conception of art accounts for why modern art has always been, and continues to be, the site of indefatigable attempts to explore why we don't feel more at home in our world, on the one hand, and to (re-)imagine and creatively transform the status quo, on the other.

Given that Hegel provides two different accounts of post-ideal art's 'substantial end', I want to briefly consider how these two accounts of the purpose of post-ideal art interact (1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). As I see it, the free cultivation and expression of individuality, on the one hand, and the free exploration of what 'being at home' might mean for us, on the other, do not denote two different purposes, but different aspects of, or perspectives on, the same purpose (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238).

In his first answer, Hegel adopts the point of view of the individual (artist) or the first-person singular: for individuals to cultivate their free individuality, they must explore and express how they perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine their world. In his second answer, Hegel frames the purpose of post-ideal art as the exploration of what it might mean for us to be (more or differently) at home in the world. In other words, he shifts the perspective from the first-person singular to the first-person plural. A home is, after all, a place we inhabit or share with others. The point of this shift of perspective is to stress the connection between the first-person singular and the first-person plural. The very framing of a place that we share with others as a home only makes sense if one conceives of this world in common as one in which we all can be and continue to become ourselves (by way of engaging in post-ideal aesthetic relating); and this requires that we are attentive to and take into consideration how others perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine the place we share with them. Our sense of *being at home* is, in short, *how aesthetic or individual freedom manifests itself phenomenologically*.

The aesthetic notion of being at home also has a political thrust, since it encourages us to re-consider whether the societies that we inhabit are adequately supporting the *cultivation and integration* of the individuality of all their members. The being at home perspective is therefore an aesthetic-political

we-perspective. It denotes a perspective from which we collectively reflect on what it might mean for our social world to be (more of) a home to all the individuals who belong to it. The aesthetic notion of being at home is thus linked with the political aspiration of becoming a community that sees all its members (also) as aesthetic subjects and takes their aesthetic mode of engaging with the world and the demands that emerge from this aesthetic engagement seriously (i.e. demands that are grounded in how individuals perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine the status quo).⁴⁵

When it comes to evaluating whether a social world is a home for all the individuals inhabiting it, it makes sense to distinguish between an intersubjective-recognitional dimension and an individual-substantive dimension.⁴⁶ The issue at stake with regard to the intersubjective-recognitional dimension is whether all individuals are recognized (and treated) as equal aesthetic subjects in our social world. The issue at stake with respect to the individual-substantive dimension is what emerges from one's own post-ideal aesthetic engagement with the world. For example, it is possible to be at home in one's social world in the first sense (since one is given adequate support to cultivate and express one's individuality), however, one's exercises of aesthetic relating bring to light a deep sense of alienation from (certain aspects of) one's social world (e.g. its relentless competitiveness or disregard for the environment).

In sum, individualization and being at home denote two perspectives on the same purpose of post-ideal aesthetic relating, since the cultivation and realization of one's individuality is always a social matter: we become alive to aspects of our individuality and grow as individuals by engaging aesthetically with the world and with what emerges from other individuals' aesthetic engagements with the world (i.e. their sharing with us how they perceive, qualitatively experience and re-imagine the world). Whether we are adequately supported in developing our individuality and whether we feel at home in our world depends to a large extent on the features of the social world we inhabit with others. That is why Stanley Cavell, for instance, argues that the 'possibility or necessity of transforming of oneself' is connected to the 'possibility and necessity of transforming . . . of one's

⁴⁵ For an illustration of an aesthetic-political conflict, see my discussion of 'safe spaces' demands on university campuses in Chapter 5.

⁴⁶ This distinction might also help explain Adorno's defence of liberal democracy in Germany in the post-WWII period. Perhaps he regarded it as a positive (recognition-related) feature of this political order that it does not suppress post-ideal aesthetic engagements with the world. In other words, this liberal regime is compatible with the exploration and expression of negative experiences (e.g. of alienation) with the extant social order which, in turn, might nurture an appetite for more radical political transformations. For an insightful and balanced discussion of Adorno's politics, see Freyenhagen (2014).

society' (1990: 2). For example, individuals might experience their social roles as limiting and 'redraw' them in attentive-creative exercises of aesthetic relating (Cavell 1990: 4). In doing this, they develop a vision of what it might mean for them to be freer and a vision for 'a transformation of society' (Cavell 1990: 7). In democratic life, 'anyone is entitled' to relate aesthetically to the world and to communicate to others how they perceive, qualitatively experience and (re-) imagine their social world (Cavell 1990: 10). What is more, as fellow citizens we must remain open to the possibility that others' aesthetic engagement with the world uncovers experiences that are 'representative of certain facts or conditions' that undermine individuals' sense of being at home (Cavell 1990: 24). Democratic *Sittlichkeit* as a life of freedom therefore requires, among other things, that we 'manifest for the other the other way' (Cavell 1990: 31). To do this, we not only have to pay attention to the negative experiences with which we respond to aspects of the world, but we must playfully and imaginatively generate objects of comparison and contrast to the status quo, so that others can aesthetically relate to and reflect on them as well.⁴⁷

Many emancipatory movements (e.g. the socialist movement of the nineteenth century, the feminist movement of the twentieth century and the LGBTQ+ movement of the twenty-first century) have an aesthetic dimension that links individuals' aesthetic engagement with the world with a concern for social-political transformation. The aesthetic task we face as a political community is to create a social world in which we all can be (and can continue to become) ourselves and in which everyone's individuality is treated as equally valuable. This requires us to attentively and considerately engage with what emerges from individuals' aesthetic engagement with the world. This is, of course, a task that points beyond the realm of art as we traditionally understand it. That is why Hegel insists that the post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics excludes no human 'interest' that arises in a concrete socio-historical context (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237). Furthermore, the 'content' of post-ideal art is no longer 'determined artistically in and of itself' but emerges from the engagement of individuals with their concrete circumstances and is then transformed in processes of 'elaboration' and 'imagination' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238; trans. modified).

⁴⁷ Cavell, for instance, understands Nora in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* as someone who (through relating to her life aesthetically) manifests problems that are both deeply personal and socially representative, since the problems that are revealed by Nora's aesthetic engagement with her life are linked with the limiting nature of the social roles that were available to women at the time. See also Cavell (1990: 109–12).

My reconstruction of the deep content and purpose of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art brings to light that this novel conception of art bears directly on issues of identity and diversity. From the perspective of the post-ideal conception of art, it is therefore not surprising that issues pertaining to identity and diversity play an (increasingly) central role in the art world since the nineteenth century. What is more, the centrality of these issues is not (necessarily) an indicator that external moral criteria are being imposed on the artistic or aesthetic domain. For the exploration and expression of individuality, on the one hand, and what it might mean to socially integrate the diversity that is disclosed and cultivated through post-ideal aesthetic relating, on the other hand, is directly linked with the purpose of the post-ideal conception of art.⁴⁸

However, it is important to note that post-ideal art is not directly concerned with cultural identities and is careful not to reify them. Post-ideal art deals with the level below cultural identities or the level from which these identities emerge, that is, if they are still representing a 'living feeling' (Schiller 2005a: 93). For post-ideal aesthetics encourages individuals to explore and share with others how they perceive, emotionally experience and (re-)imagine the world, including the cultural identities that are part of their world. In short, post-ideal aesthetics is not in the business of recognizing cultural identities.⁴⁹ To put it differently, post-ideal aesthetics is not engaging directly with identity politics but indirectly, that is, by highlighting that it matters to citizens' freedom that they are attentive to and take each into consideration how each of them perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively reacts to their shared world.

We have established how Hegel's post-ideal conception of art interprets two of the three variables of Hegel's '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). What we haven't considered so far is post-ideal art's interpretation of the variable of 'form' (Hegel 1975: 606/1986: Vol. 2, 237). The first thing to remember in this regard is that post-ideal art emerges from the emancipation from any constraints pertaining to the (surface) content and mode of presentation of artworks. The post-ideal 'artist' thus 'stands above consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely and on his own account' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). The only requirements that remain in place with regard to form are therefore those that originate from post-ideal art's (deep) content and substantive purpose. This

⁴⁸ For a work that is inspired by Hegel's understanding of art that explores how contemporary art interacts with issues of cultural identity, see Miller (2021).

⁴⁹ Unlike Miller (2021), my Hegelian account of aesthetic recognition is therefore not about recognizing cultural identities but concerned with the kind of consideration we owe each other as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. See also Schaub (2026).

means that artistic expressions must freely emerge from artists' free perceptive, emotional and imaginative explorations of objects. In this way, the post-ideal conception of art significantly broadens the scope of what counts as art. From the perspective of post-ideal art, all kinds of human expressions appear as manifestations of post-ideal art (whereas, according to the ideal conception of art, they would not be considered art). In connection with his remarks on post-ideal art, Hegel indicates, for instance, that 'writing a letter' can be a post-ideal aesthetic engagement with the world (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 241). So the 'form meant here displays itself only', according to Hegel, 'when' the expressive strategies deployed by a post-ideal artist are suitable for conveying the 'deep feeling . . . and . . . movement of imagination' with which the artist responds to a phenomenon, thereby 'vivifying and expanding even the smallest detail through grasping it poetically' (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240; trans. modified).

2.3.4. Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and modern aesthetics

How does Hegel's post-ideal conception of art interact with (my understanding of) modern aesthetics? According to my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics, the basic structure of modern approaches to aesthetics is composed of two features: (i) they are grounded in one or more of the following basic human capacities: sense perception, emotions and the imagination; and (ii) they assign intrinsic value to explorative (non-instrumental) uses of these capacities.⁵⁰ Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics thus qualifies as a modern approach, since it embraces both features. What is more, Hegel's post-ideal conception encompasses all three basic capacities, it thus achieves a rare feat in the history of modern aesthetics, namely the integration of all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics into one approach. The shift from Hegel's 'purely cognitivist' ideal conception of aesthetics to his post-ideal conception of aesthetics therefore amounts to a significant change of course, since the former, in contrast to the latter, displaces emotions, makes no room for the free play of the imagination and entertains an ambivalent relationship to art's sensuous nature (Guyer 2014b: 5).

What does Hegel say about the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics in relation to his post-ideal conception of art? Hegel highlights that a post-ideal aesthetic engagement with the world involves the exploration of 'the object and its configuration' with one's senses, which brings about an 'intimacy

⁵⁰ I develop this capacity-based account of modern aesthetics in Chapter 1.

with the object' (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240).⁵¹ The post-ideal conception of aesthetics combines this outwardly directed perceptual attentiveness with an inwardly directed attentiveness that is concerned with exploring how one emotionally experiences the contemplated object. '[T]he heart's deeper immersion in the object' or 'subjective inwardness' thus also denote an 'essential feature' or moment of his post-ideal conception of aesthetics (Hegel 1975: 609, 594/1986: Vol. 2, 240, 221).

Hegel makes it clear that 'nothing that can be living in the human breast' is 'alien to' post-ideal art (1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237). Post-ideal aesthetics denotes a practice that is about exploring the 'infinity of . . . feelings' with which concrete individuals respond to the ever-changing 'situations' and constellations in which they find themselves (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238).⁵² In short, the post-ideal conception of art is concerned with exploration of 'the object and its configuration within its subjective reflection' (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240; trans. modified). This is implied by the (deep) content of the post-ideal conception of art that focusses on how concrete individuals perceive and emotionally respond to aspects of their lifeworld.

The post-ideal conception of aesthetics also embraces the dimension of the 'freedom of imagination' (Hegel 1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 242). This dimension of post-ideal aesthetic relating involves turning an aspect of the world into the subject-matter of a practice of freedom that is grounded in a free and creative play of the imagination (which, in turn, is based on how individuals perceptively and emotionally disclose an aspect of the world). Hegel speaks in this regard of a 'subjective spirited movement of imagination and the heart' (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240).

⁵¹ This serious perceptive engagement with the object sets apart post-ideal aesthetic relating – or, in Hegel's parlance, 'objective humour' – from 'subjective humour' (Hegel 1975: 609, 600/1986: Vol. 2, 240, 229). The latter approach, which Hegel frames as a form of the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art, takes no real interest in the object and how it appears to the individual. When it comes to 'subjective humour', the object is treated merely as an opportunity to 'emphasize the subjective wit' of the artist (1975: 600–1/1986: Vol. 2, 230). Paying close attention to objects and their configuration is a feature of another form of the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art, namely, the '*Subjective Artistic Imitation of the Existent Present*' (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 223). What is missing from this second form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art is, from the point of view of modern aesthetics, the embracing of the emotional dimension. For '[i]t is not the reflex of the heart that wishes to display itself' in such artworks, but 'the subjective skill of the artist' (Hegel 1975: 599–600/1986: Vol. 2, 228).

⁵² Hegel thus makes room for the famous dictum by Terence: 'nihil humani a me alienum puto' as part of his post-ideal conception of aesthetics (Hegel 1975: 46/1986: Vol. 1, 70). He mentions this dictum already in the 'Introduction' to his *Lectures on Fine Art* as part of his discussion of the role that emotions play in art, but he ultimately dismisses emotions as non-essential for his ideal conception of art.

All three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics are thus in play in post-ideal aesthetic relating. Hegel gives expression to this 'threefold synthesis' (Guyer 2014b: 8) in the following statement, in which he maintains that post-ideal aesthetic relating encompasses 'an idea [*Einfall*], . . . which is not purely accidental and capricious but an inner movement of the spirit devoted entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest' (Hegel 1975:609/1986: Vol. 2, 240; trans. modified).⁵³ Looking at the agential structure of post-ideal aesthetic relating will enable us to understand better *how* Hegel integrates these three substantive dimensions.⁵⁴

Post-ideal aesthetic relating encompasses three agential moments. The first moment is (mainly) passive-receptive and turns on sense perception. It consists in the exploration of the perceivable features of the object of aesthetic relating. The second agential moment of post-ideal aesthetics is also (mainly) passive-receptive and pertains to emotions. It involves being attentive to and finding expressions for how one emotionally experiences the contemplated object. These two (mainly) passive-receptive dimensions then inform the (mainly) active-creative moment of post-ideal aesthetic relating that is linked with the free play of the imagination. Hegel refers to this dimension that re-imagines and playfully transforms the contemplated object as 'play' or the 'inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination' (1975: 611/1986: Vol. 2, 242).

This overview of the agential structure of post-ideal aesthetic relating explains in a straightforward fashion how the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics interact and why it is possible to integrate them within one account. Our emotional responses supervene on how our senses disclose an object to us, and the free play of the imagination that transforms the object is guided by how we perceive and emotionally experience the object in question. The transformed object can then be turned again into the object of our perceptive exploration,

⁵³ The German original, beginning a bit earlier, reads: ' . . . ein empfindungsvolles Sich-Ergeben des Gemüts in dem Gegenstande, das wohl zur Entfaltung kommt, aber eine subjektive geistreiche Bewegung der Phantasie und des Herzens bleibt, ein Einfall, der aber nicht bloß zufällig und willkürlich, sondern eine innere Bewegung des Geistes ist, die sich ganz ihrem Gegenstand widmet und ihn zum Interesse und Inhalt behält'. The imaginative play of post-ideal aesthetic relating thus differs from the capricious play associated with 'subjective humour' since only the former is grounded in the artist's thorough perceptive and emotional engagement with the object. The free play of the imagination also replaces the focus on the 'artist's subjective skill' (Hegel 1975: 599/1986: Vol. 2, 228), which is at the heart of the '*Subjective Artistic Imitation of the Existent Present*' (Hegel 1975: 595/1986: Vol. 2, 223). In other words, this form of the dissolution of romantic ideal art is deficient because it turns the 'means of the portrayal' of something into 'an end in itself' (Hegel 1975: 599/1986: Vol. 2, 228).

⁵⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the agential structure of exercises of aesthetic freedom, see Chapter 4.

thus kicking off an iterative, open-ended process of aesthetic relating that involves all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics.

However, delineating how such ‘a threefold synthesis’ can be achieved is not the only original contribution that Hegel’s post-ideal conception of aesthetics makes to the tradition of modern aesthetics (Guyer 2014b: 8). He also offers an original response to a systematic question left unaddressed by the theorists whom I credit with establishing the modern field of aesthetics: Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison. All three embrace the basic structure of modern aesthetics and treat explorative uses of sense perception, emotions or the imagination as intrinsically valuable. But they do not tell us much about what renders such explorative uses of these capacities intrinsically valuable.

Hegel’s post-ideal conception of art provides an answer to this question because his ‘[c]oncept of art’ requires that a conception of art must encompass an account of art’s ‘substantial end’ (1975: 48/1986: Vol. 2, 73). As part of outlining his view of post-ideal art, Hegel therefore offers us two (interconnected) accounts of the purpose of a post-ideal aesthetic engagement with the world. He argues, on the one hand, that we cultivate and realize our individual freedom by engaging aesthetically with the world.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he suggests that post-ideal aesthetic relating is about exploring what it might mean for us to be (more or differently) at home in our shared world, thereby pointing to a dimension of our political freedom. Both accounts thus offer different perspectives on the same purpose, namely to explore ways of turning our social world into a place in which we all can feel (more) at home and are able to realize ourselves as the sensing, feeling and imaginative beings.

2.4. Hegel’s post-ideal aesthetics, modern *Sittlichkeit* and the (alleged) ‘End of Art’

My recovering of Hegel’s post-ideal conception of art, which, historically speaking, is linked with a transition from an ideal to a post-ideal conception of art in modern social life, amounts to a game-changer for one of the most notorious debates that Hegel’s *Aesthetics* ignited, namely the debate about the (alleged) ‘end of art’; a debate that is, ultimately, about the (alleged loss of) art’s role and place in modern social life. Following a summary of my own view on

⁵⁵ See also Hegel (1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 238).

the 'end of art', I outline in this section what my take adds to, and how it differs from, other contributions to this debate.

According to my reconstruction of art's conceptual and historical transformation, we need to clearly distinguish between Hegel's '[c]oncept of art', on the one hand, and distinct conceptions of art, on the other (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73).⁵⁶ While there is only one concept of art, there can be multiple conceptions of art. Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that *all contributions to the 'end of art' debate that simply equate (the concept of) art with (the) ideal (conception of) art are problematic*. It is also problematic to infer from the fact that *ideal art* denotes a *conception of art* that has (once) been developmentally and historically relevant and effective, that the ideal conception of art is the only conception of art that can be historically relevant and effective.

The distinction between the concept and various conceptions of art casts a new light on Hegel's account of the conceptual and historical development of art. A large part of Hegel's *Aesthetics* portrays the emergence of the ideal conception of art in the form of ideal symbolic art. He then expounds how and why ideal symbolic art transforms first into ideal classical art and then subsequently into ideal romantic art. At this point, the ideal conception of art is confronted with a challenge or crisis that cannot be dealt with by way of transitioning to yet another variant of (the) ideal (conception of) art. At the later stages of ideal romantic art, which coincide with the emergence of modern social life, we are witnessing a *crisis of the ideal conception of art as a whole*. This crisis results, according to my interpretation, in the disintegration, 'dissolution' or '*end*' of the ideal conception of art, since ideal art is, for reasons discussed above, no longer capable of making further contributions to the substantive purpose it is supposed to serve (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239).

This crisis of the ideal conception of art manifests itself within the domain of art in the guise of two forms of the '*Dissolution of the Romantic Form of ideal 'Art'*' (Hegel 1975: 593/1986: Vol. 1, 220). By means of these forms of the dissolution of ideal romantic art, ideal 'art proceeds to self-destruction [*die Kunst geht fort zur Selbstvernichtung*]', as Hegel puts it in his *Lectures on Fine Art* from 1820 and 1821 (1995: 306).⁵⁷ However, this self-destruction of ideal art is, at the same time, a transitional and creative event: ideal 'romantic art is the self-transcendence of art' (Hegel 1975: 80/1986: Vol. 1, 113). Hegel emphasizes that art's self-transcending takes place 'within' art's 'own sphere and in the form

⁵⁶ On the distinction between concept and conception, see Rawls (1999a: 6) and Hart (1961: 155–9).

⁵⁷ Hegel quoted after Houlgate (1997: 14).

of art itself' (Hegel 1975: 80/1986: Vol. 1, 113). In sum, Hegel maintains, on the one hand, that the ideal conception of art faces a crisis under modern conditions that cannot be addressed by a new variant of the ideal conception of art and, on the other hand, he claims that the overcoming of this crisis takes place within the domain that is opened up by the '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). The 'self-transcendence of art' can therefore only refer to a *transition from one conception of art to another conception of art* (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237). In other words, Hegel is committed to the view that a novel, post-ideal conception of art has already emerged.

This novel interpretation of Hegel's account of the conceptual and historical development of art has the following upshot: we are *not* dealing with the 'end of art' in modern life, but with *the end of the ideal conception of art* (that manifests itself in the disintegration of the ideal conception of art). The 'dissolution' of the ideal conception of art was a transitional phenomenon that led, in Hegel's own lifetime, to the emergence of a novel, post-ideal conception of art (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239). Since the emergence of this post-ideal conception of art, it has played (and continues to play, in my estimation) an important role in modern and democratic ethical life.⁵⁸

I will now compare my take on the 'end of art' debate with other influential views. To this purpose, I suggest an (admittedly simplified) taxonomy of this debate on the alleged 'end of art'.⁵⁹ I distinguish between two ways in which the contributors to this debate have approached the 'end of art'. Approaches of the first type jump straight into an analysis of (a conception of) art, to then evaluate its potential to (continue to) make contributions to its substantial purpose under modern conditions. Approaches of the second type, by contrast, begin with an analysis of modern ethical life and assess whether freedom is already fully realized in modern ethical life, before considering what contributions, if any, art can still make to modern ethical life becoming a life of freedom.

2.4.1. The (alleged) 'End of Art' Part I: A modern conception of art

With regard to the first kind of approach, almost everything depends on what kind of conception of art we are left with, according to Hegel's interpreters, after the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art. I therefore distinguish approaches of this

⁵⁸ For a systematic outline of the role and relevance of post-ideal aesthetics in modern ethical life, see Chapters 3 and 4.

⁵⁹ A whole range of authors cannot be easily placed within this taxonomy, for instance, because they distinguish between various senses of art's end. Donougho (2007) is a case in point.

kind according to the conception of art that Hegel is said to endorse (due to it having become hegemonic in his own time). In total, I consider four versions of this first kind of approach to the 'end of art' debate: my own and three positions that are influential in the literature.

As far as I am aware, I am alone in arguing that Hegel maintains that *a full-fledged, non-ideal conception of art has already emerged (or is emerging)* after the dissolution of the (romantic) ideal conception of art. I therefore think that all the other contributions to the 'end of art' debate get off on the wrong foot for two reasons: firstly, they overlook that Hegel distinguishes between the concept and conceptions of art; secondly, they fail to appreciate that Hegel provides us with an outline of a post-ideal conception of art and holds that 'our art', that is, post-ideal art, flourishes in modern social life (1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239).

Having outlined my own view, we can now move on to the second version of the first kind of approach. Proponents of this second version hold that Hegel still endorses a full-fledged ideal conception of art.⁶⁰ Against this backdrop, they then arrive, in one way or another, at the conclusion that (the ideal conception of) art has come to an end under conditions of modernity because it has become superfluous.⁶¹ For instance, some argue that 'philosophy takes over' the 'mission' of (the ideal conception of) art and thereby 'makes' it 'redundant' (Moland 2019: 6n10).⁶² Some even maintain that from this predicament arises a kind of ideal art that becomes indistinguishable from philosophy (because it is no longer aesthetic but conceptual) or dominated by philosophy.⁶³ In any case, the general view is that ideal art's 'ambition and importance' is 'greatly diminished' in modern life, since ideal art is, as Hegel himself already pointed out, constitutively incapable of making further significant contributions to its own (still unchanged) substantive end (Bubner 1980).⁶⁴ However, what proponents of this second version completely overlook is that, according to Hegel, not ideal but post-ideal art is the art of 'our' modern times (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239).

The third version that I want to consider is an offshoot of the second, which equates art with (the) ideal (conception of) art and holds that ideal art has come to an 'end'. According to this third take, we are now living in an era in which 'art' continues to be produced, but we no longer have a concept or conception of art.

⁶⁰ I assume that proponents of this view think that there is nowhere else to go for Hegel, since they (problematically) equate Hegel's concept of art with the ideal conception of art.

⁶¹ See, for example, Henrich (1985: 200–1) and Danto (1986: 115).

⁶² See also Hegel (1975: 13/1986: Vol. 1, 28) and Houlgate (1997: 2).

⁶³ See Danto (1986: 1–22) and Harris (1984).

⁶⁴ Bubner quoted after Moland (2019: 144). Stephen Bungay (1984: 7), for instance, argues that art is no longer of interest to us moderns, since it no longer fulfils any spiritual need. See also Houlgate (1997: 15).

The forms of the dissolution of (ideal) romantic art have successfully undermined the three elements that up to this point have given shape to the concept and the ideal conception of art. In short, we are left without an interpretation of art's substantive purpose, content and form, since 'art' has emancipated itself from any 'rules' and conceptual requirements that were once 'binding' for art (Moland 2019: 6n10).⁶⁵

For proponents of this third version, 'art' has become a completely 'free instrument' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). As a result, 'art' is now free 'to become whatever it chooses to be' (Moland 2019: 6n10). From the point of view of my interpretation of Hegel, this third version is problematic for two reasons: firstly, it fails to appreciate that a new, post-ideal conception of art emerges after the dissolution of the ideal conception of art; and secondly, this empty conception of 'art' is no conception of art at all, since it fails to provide an account of the three variables that make up Hegel's '[c]oncept of art' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). What is more, the question of whether this kind of 'art' still plays a significant role in modern ethical life cannot even be properly addressed with reference to an 'anything goes' notion of 'art', since nothing about this notion of 'art' is settled.

This brings me to the fourth version of this first approach, which neither embraces an orthodox understanding of the ideal conception of art nor an 'anything goes' view of 'art'. Proponents of this fourth version are closest to my own view, since they notice that Hegel himself gestures at a transformation of the conception of ideal art under modern conditions. For instance, Stephen Houlgate argues in his insightful article 'Hegel and the "End" of Art' that '[w]e now belong to a different world with a different understanding of the role of art' (Houlgate 1997: 2).⁶⁶ Authors like Houlgate end up ascribing to Hegel a pared-down version of the ideal conception of art, which puts them at odds with my own take. They fail to recognize that the disintegration of the ideal conception of art does not just lead to a pared-down or less demanding version of the ideal conception of art, but brings in its wake a post-ideal conception of art that provides novel (not just less ambitious) interpretations of all three elements that make up Hegel's concept of art.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See also Danto (2014).

⁶⁶ Note that Houlgate states that there has been a change pertaining to our 'understanding of the role of art', not a change to our understanding of art (Houlgate 1997: 2). It would therefore be interesting to hear more about how he sees the relationship between the former and the latter.

⁶⁷ Moland (2019: 6–12, 134–47) can also serve as an example of this position.

Allow me to bring out the differences between my view and the position of proponents of the fourth version by engaging with Houlgate's interpretation of the 'end of art'. Let me begin with a few similarities: we both maintain that after the dissolution of romantic (ideal) art, we are confronted with a 'new-resurrected-form of modern art' (Houlgate 1997: 15). We both hold that this novel kind of modern art must be 'genuine *art*', which means, in my parlance, that it must meet the requirements associated with Hegel's concept of art (Houlgate 1997: 15). Furthermore, Houlgate identifies a number of characteristics of this new type of modern art, which are also part of my description of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art. For instance, he suggests that this modern conception of art must track that 'we are *sensuous, imaginative* beings', for it to remain relevant in modern ethical life (Houlgate 1997: 18). What is more, Houlgate appreciates that '[*h*]umanus', that is, 'the depths and heights of the human heart', is what this new conception of art is about (Hegel 1975: 607–8/1986: Vol. 2, 237–8).

Despite these interpretative overlaps, there remain significant differences between Houlgate and me. Houlgate's interpretation ultimately boils down to the idea that Hegel adopts a pared-down version of the ideal conception of art, whereas I claim that Hegel's post-ideal conception of art amounts to a break with his ideal conception of art, since the post-ideal conception offers novel interpretations of all three variables of the concept of art. This fundamental disagreement becomes apparent in relation to Houlgate's characterization of the substantive purpose of Hegel's modern (conception of) art. Houlgate maintains that 'modern art . . . must still' aspire to 'be the sensuous expression of the Idea, that is, of concrete . . . human freedom' if it wants to be 'genuine art'; and modern art therefore also 'must still create animated, harmonious, *beautiful forms*' (Houlgate 1997: 15–16). In other words, the '*substantial end*' (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73) of this 'new-resurrected-form of modern art' (Houlgate 1997: 15) is, according to Houlgate, still identical with the substantive purpose of the ideal conception of art. For it is a distinctive feature of all forms of the ideal conception of art to regard the 'sensuous expression of the Idea', which is linked with a distinct notion of beauty, as the substantive purpose of art (Houlgate 1997: 16). Modern art is thus framed as a pared-back version of the ideal conception of art, since art no longer aims to give sensuous expression to the absolute or spirit's freedom as such. It is now geared to giving 'sensuous expression to concrete human freedom' (Houlgate 1997: 2). In other words, we are dealing with a transition from an understanding of spirit's freedom with a capital 'S' to one with a lowercase 's'.

What is overlooked here is that Hegel's post-ideal conception of art provides us with a novel account of art's purpose that is linked with a distinctly aesthetic dimension of freedom. Post-ideal aesthetic relating is essential for the cultivation of individual freedom and the exploration of 'everything in which man as such is capable of being at *home* (*heimisch*)' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). What is at stake with regard to the post-ideal conception of art is therefore our freedom to transform the social world that we inhabit together into one in which every individual feels (more) at home as a sensing, feeling and imaginative being.

Houlgate, by contrast, regards the exploration of 'everything in which man as such is capable of being at *home* [*heimisch*]' not as the purpose of modern art, but as a constraint on what modern art can engage with and how it can go about portraying what it engages with (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). As a result of this (mis-)reading, Houlgate argues, for instance, that Hegel's conception of modern art is incompatible with artworks that 'deliberately seek[. . .] to disturb, provoke, elude or disorient the viewer' because such artworks are unlikely to elicit in the recipients cosy, homely feelings, or afford them an opportunity to 'find' themselves 'at home' in these works (Houlgate 1997: 16).

There is, in my view, an irreconcilable tension between Houlgate's claim that the purpose of the modern conception of art is still to give 'sensuous expression to concrete human freedom' and to, thereby, 'create beauty', on the one hand, and his account of what I call the (deep) content of the modern conception of art, on the other (Houlgate 1997: 2, 16). For if the content of modern art really is, as Houlgate also admits, the exploration of 'the depths and heights of the human heart [*Gemüt*]' by 'considering, exploring and expressing the infinity of feelings and situations' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237–8; trans. modified), then it is difficult to see how Houlgate can argue that '[t]his does not mean that art should now portray human passions of *every* sort' (Houlgate 1997: 16). For that it is exactly what seems to be implied.

Hegel himself doubles down on this by stressing that when it comes to the conception of art that emerges in modern social life, 'nothing can be living in the human breast [that] remains alien to' it (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). For instance, if individuals feel disturbed by and disoriented in modern societies, then modern art is exactly the site to explore and express such perceptions and feelings (and what evokes them). Houlgate's displacement of such explorations and expressions from his conception of modern art is thus incompatible with his own interpretation of the (deep) content of modern art; and what motivates this displacement is his failure to appreciate the fundamental shift in terms of the purpose of art from Hegel's ideal to this post-ideal or modern conception of art.

Recognizing that the novel purpose of the modern or post-ideal conception of art is the exploration of what it might mean for human beings to be (more or differently) at home in their world resolves this tension between modern or post-ideal art's 'substantial end' and (deep) content (Hegel 1975: 48/1986: Vol. 1, 73). Unlike Houlgate's conception of modern art, my post-ideal conception of art can also account for why the exploration and expression of individuals' concrete negative experiences (of alienation, unfreedom, disorientation, etc.) is such an important theme within the arts from the eighteenth century to the present. If the exploration of what it could mean for us to be (more or differently) at home in the world denotes the substantial purpose of the post-ideal conception of art, then making room for all of individuals' perceptions of and emotional responses to their concrete socio-historical circumstances, including the negative and disturbing ones, within post-ideal art itself is essential.

My disagreements with Houlgate are not limited to his views about modern art's purpose and content; they also pertain to his interpretation of artistic form. A case in point is Houlgate's treatment and rejection of abstraction. Houlgate states that Hegel's account of modern art commits artists, on the one hand, to the 'depiction of concrete human freedom and life' and, on the other, to refrain from 'abstraction' (Houlgate 1997: 12).⁶⁸ According to Houlgate, Jan Steen's realistic depiction of *Children Teaching a Cat to Dance* (1660–70) is therefore a paradigmatic example of (Hegelian) modern art.

On this basis, Houlgate then proceeds to denounce broad swathes of modern art as deficient and misguided, since they fail to live up to the requirements of his pared-down conception of the ideal art. For example, he maintains that it is 'hard to think of the work of Georg Grosz or Francis Bacon or Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock as giving aesthetic expression to concrete human freedom and life or *Humanus*' (Houlgate 1997: 17). Evaluations like these are, in my view, the result of Houlgate's misunderstanding of the purpose of the post-ideal conception of art, on the one hand, and his too literal or art historical understanding of abstraction, on the other.

My post-ideal conception of art can easily accommodate the artists that Houlgate denounces as 'abstract artists' (Houlgate 1997: 12). From the point of view of my post-ideal conception of art, these works would not even count as abstract because they can be understood as growing out of individuals'

⁶⁸ See also Hegel (1975: 599–600/1986: Vol. 2, 228). The constraints that Houlgate's conception of modern art imposes on art are also incompatible with Hegel's assessment that '[b]ondage to a particular content and mode of portrayal suitable for this content are for artists today something past' (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235).

perceptive explorations of their world, their explorations of how they emotionally react to their world as well as their imaginative responses to what their senses and emotions disclose to them about their world. In short, Hegel's post-ideal conception of art encourages explorations like those of Georg Grosz and Francis Bacon, even if they give imaginative expressions to feelings of disgust for, and alienation from, the depicted social world or represent the tormented, deformed, paralysed and manipulated lives that individuals lead within their world.

The same holds true, albeit in a different way, for Rothko whose works emerge from attentive meditations on, and creative explorations of, how he perceives and qualitatively experiences fields of colour (which merge into one another). From the point of view of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art (which is a version of a capacity-based account of modern aesthetics), nothing is abstract about these works of art, for after the emancipation of art's content and mode of portrayal in the wake of the dissolution of ideal romantic art, there is nothing that keeps artists from perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively exploring and disclosing colour as an aspect of the world. To put it differently: if one wishes to call such paintings abstract, they are not abstract in a way that shows up as problematic from the perspective of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art.⁶⁹

I want to conclude my discussion of approaches of the first kind with some reflections on evaluating post-ideal art. How we evaluate art must track that art's 'self-transcendence' led to a transition from an ideal to a post-ideal conception of art – and not to a pared-down conception of ideal art or an 'anything goes' account of 'art' (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 237). In other words, when evaluating artworks, we need to invoke the relevant conception of art. While it is, of course, possible to evaluate modern artworks in terms of the aspirations associated with the ideal conception of art (that dissolved in modern social life), such an evaluation seems out of place; especially since the emergence of modern or post-ideal art is driven by the awareness that (the) ideal (conception of) art has come to an end. It therefore makes little sense to criticize manifestations of post-ideal art for falling short of the aspirations associated with the ideal conception of art.

Much of the evaluative confusion in the 'end of art' debate is therefore, in my view, due to three factors: firstly, contributors to this debate do not distinguish clearly between art's concept and various conceptions of art; secondly, they

⁶⁹ Romantic ironists who are not seriously engaging with objects but simply use them as an opportunity for capricious play are a much better example of abstraction, as far as Hegel is concerned, regardless of whether they are producing paintings that are figurative or abstract in the art historical sense of these terms. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Hegel's rejection of romantic irony.

evaluate manifestations of art that are linked with one conception of art according to the standards of another conception of art; and, thirdly, they overlook that a post-ideal conception of art (with its own unique evaluative standards) has already emerged. Of course, more needs to be said about how to go about assessing the contributions that post-ideal works of art make to disclosing what it could mean for us to be more or differently at home in the world; how to evaluate the quality of the perceptive, emotional and imaginative engagement of artists with an aspect of the world; and how to judge the appropriateness of formal features of post-ideal works of art.⁷⁰

2.4.2. The (alleged) 'End of Art' Part II: Modern ethical life

Up to this point, we have considered approaches to the 'end of art' debate that take as their starting point a distinct notion of art and then evaluate the potential of this notion of art to continue to contribute to art's purpose (as understood by the relevant conception of art) under modern conditions. The alternative strand that I want to consider now begins instead with an assessment of modern ethical life and then asks whether its aspiration to be a life of freedom has already been fully realized. The question of art's alleged end is, in other words, addressed via Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and not via his *Aesthetics*.⁷¹ Before providing my (again simplified) overview of approaches of this second kind, I need to briefly introduce Hegel's notion of modern *Sittlichkeit* or modern ethical life. With this background behind us, I can then explain how debates about modern ethical life interact with art's (alleged) end or art's (alleged) loss of significance in modern social life.

My claim is that Hegel's post-ideal conception of art makes a significant contribution to modern ethical life and that a similar case cannot be made with regard to other conceptions of art, which are invoked by other participants in this debate. In what follows, I therefore need to consider how various readings of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* interact with the various conceptions of art that I introduced in the previous section.

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of key features of the Hegelian account of modern *Sittlichkeit*: freedom provides the overarching normative horizon

⁷⁰ I hope to be able to come back to these important evaluative questions that are raised by my recovery of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art in my future work.

⁷¹ Aesthetics and art are, however, not among the topics that Hegel engages with in any detail in his *Philosophy of Right*. For my discussion of Hegel's displacement of romantic irony from modern ethical life, see Chapter 5.

of modern (democratic) societies.⁷² Modern ethical life is composed of all those institutionalized relationships that ‘do represent specific functional embodiments of the one universal value of individual freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 345n1). The differentiation of social institutions (i.e. the differentiation between legal, moral, personal, economic and political relationships) that is distinctive of modern social life is assumed to track the conceptual differentiation of the value of freedom itself.⁷³ The ambition of accounts of modern (or democratic) ethical life is to be comprehensive, that is, to encompass *all* conceptually differentiated and ‘socially valid’ dimensions or relationships of freedom (Honneth 2014: 63).

If we look at art from the perspective of modern *Sittlichkeit*, what really matters for art’s future is whether (any conception of) art that is present in modern ethical life still contributes (or harbours the potential to contribute) to realizing the aspiration of modern *Sittlichkeit*: to be (or become) a life of (equal) freedom for all. Before we look at various conceptions of art from this perspective, it is important to establish why exactly (ideal) art’s relevance becomes an issue in modern ethical life, according to participants in this strand of the debate about the (alleged) ‘end of art’.

Modern ethical life grows out of a conceptual and historical development in which spirit becomes increasingly aware of its own freedom. What is distinctive about the modern condition, according to Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, written from 1822 to 1823, is that it is for the first time widely acknowledged that ‘*all* human beings are intrinsically free, that the *human being as human* is free’ (2011: 88).⁷⁴ The modern condition thus amounts to a ‘*conceptual* end’ point of a ‘historical progression’, for ‘there is nowhere to go, conceptually, beyond “*all*”’ (Moland 2019: 9). The ideal conception of art (and the various forms through which it traverses) is bound up with, and belongs to, this historical ‘progress of the consciousness of freedom’ that culminates in the recognition that all humans are equally free (Hegel 2011: 88). The emergence of modern *Sittlichkeit* leads to a crisis of the ideal conception of art, since the ideal conception of art is an integral part of a conceptual and historical development that comes to an end with, or finds its realization in, the very establishing of modern ethical life.

⁷² See Honneth (2014: 64). See Chapter 3 for a more detailed overview of the Hegelian understanding of modern and democratic ethical life. For my critique of the displacement of the aesthetic from accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*, see Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷³ See Honneth (2014: 65).

⁷⁴ Hegel maintains that ‘the Orientals only knew that *one* is free, that in the Greek and Roman world *some* are free, and that we’ moderns ‘by contrast know that *all* human beings are intrinsically free’ (Hegel 2011: 88). See also Moland (2019: 9).

The end point of this conceptual-historical development is the beginning of another, distinctly modern conceptual and historical development, a development that is also, albeit in a different way, concerned with freedom. The former development establishes that all humans are (equally) free, the latter is about figuring out 'what we mean by', or what follows from, 'our claim that all humans are free' for our form of social life (Moland 2019: 9). The conceptual and social differentiation of freedom that is, according to Hegel, an essential feature of modern *Sittlichkeit* thus constitutes a (perhaps preliminary or still evolving) answer to the distinctly modern question of what it means for a form of ethical life to be a life of freedom.

How does all this affect art? If art is to remain relevant in this modern constellation, it must re-invent itself. The ideal conception of art is no longer needed, since we now inhabit, not least due to ideal art's developmental contributions, a world in which the equal freedom of all human beings is taken for granted and provides the normative horizon of the modern societies we inhabit. A modern conception of art therefore must be of a different cast. Unlike the ideal conception of art, a modern conception of art must be relevant *in* modern ethical life (as opposed to *for* its establishing). The only way a modern conception of art can achieve this under the conditions of modern ethical life is to turn itself into a conceptually distinct and socially valid dimension of human freedom that complements other dimensions or relationships of freedom that jointly make up modern *Sittlichkeit* (i.e. legal, moral, personal, economic and political freedom). This is exactly the project I am pursuing in this book. To put it in more general terms: to make the case that a modern conception of art is an integral part of modern *Sittlichkeit*, one has to show that this conception of art remains relevant for the realization of freedom *within* modern ethical life. From the point of view of modern ethical life, modern 'art is' thus 'essentially defined by our struggle to realize freedom' (Moland 2019: 8).

Against the background of these introductory remarks, we can now consider different assessments of Hegel's mature account of modern *Sittlichkeit* and how they bear on art's role and relevance in modern ethical life. Moland distinguishes between optimistic and less optimistic evaluations of modern ethical life. According to the optimistic reading, the form of modern ethical life that Hegel depicts (and that we inherited) denotes, by and large, 'the achievement of reconciled relations of genuinely mutual recognitional status' (Pippin 2014: 36).⁷⁵ For proponents of the optimistic interpretation of modern (or democratic)

⁷⁵ Pippin quoted after Moland (2019: 8).

Sittlichkeit, struggles for recognition and freedom are therefore a thing of the past, since there is nothing left to struggle for in terms of bringing about the social conditions for freedom's realization. As a result, 'there will be nothing else for art to accomplish' (Moland 2019: 7).⁷⁶

In my view, this is a *non-sequitur*. Even if the optimistic reading is correct and freedom is fully realized in modern ethical life, it only follows that there is no longer a need for struggles for recognition that aim at transforming the basic structure of modern social life. From this it does not follow that there is nothing left for art (or the aesthetic) to do. For even a form of free life that realizes freedom must reproduce itself. If this task of self-reproduction and self-elaboration involves us engaging in exercises of moral, legal, personal, economic and political freedom, then there is no reason to think that it does not also require us to continue to engage in exercises of aesthetic freedom (assuming for the moment, that the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom resulted in a distinctly aesthetic recognition relationship of freedom).

Most attentive readers of Hegel endorse, in any case, a less optimistic interpretation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. According to Moland, Hegel was fully aware that 'the institutions of modern ethical life that' he 'describes in the *Philosophy of Right* are . . . aspirational', since they 'did not exist in Hegel's Prussia or anywhere else' (Moland 2019: 8).⁷⁷ The social world Hegel himself inhabits is, in other words, not (yet) as rational as the rational reconstruction of this world that Hegel himself provides.

The same applies to the rational reconstruction that Axel Honneth develops in *Freedom's Right* (2014), the most sophisticated attempt to update Hegel's account of modern *Sittlichkeit* for contemporary liberal-democratic societies.⁷⁸ On the basis of this less optimistic reading of Hegel and Honneth, there is still a need for struggles for recognition, since there is still work to be done to render the social world we inhabit fully rational and hospitable to the demand for equal freedom for all. Furthermore, there is the additional issue of whether the rational reconstructions that Hegel and Honneth provide really depict a fully rational and free form of social life. I, for one, am inclined to deny that on the grounds that their accounts of ethical life make no room for aesthetic freedom.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See also Pippin (2014: 38).

⁷⁷ See also Pippin (2014: 61).

⁷⁸ See Schaub (2015).

⁷⁹ Others invoke other features that put into question the alleged rationality of Hegel's rationally reconstructed version of modern ethical life. Frank Ruda (2011), for instance, denies that modern ethical life is rational on the grounds that the modern market produces, despite functioning normally, 'the rabble'; and Hegel himself admits that modern ethical life does not supply us with

I count myself among those who maintain that there is a gap between the rational reconstruction of modern (and democratic) social life and how it actually is. Furthermore, I deny that the forms of ethical life that emerge from Hegel and Honneth's rational reconstructions are fully rational or free forms of life. Consequently, I think that we still inhabit a world that is very much in need of (different kinds of) struggles for recognition and freedom (in addition to exercises of freedom that maintain degrees of freedom that we have already achieved).

Against the background of these remarks on modern (and democratic) *Sittlichkeit*, we can shift the focus back to art. Having established that neither struggles for recognition nor exercises of freedom are a thing of the past, we must now address the question of what, if anything, art can (still) contribute to these ongoing struggles for the realization of freedom in modern ethical life. The answer one is inclined to give to this question will depend, however, on the *conception* of art that one has in mind. I therefore want to now consider in turn the same four conceptions of art that I invoked in the previous section.

I already explained above why it is difficult to see how an orthodox ideal conception of art could have any bearing on struggles for the realization of freedom that take place *within* modern ethical life. The ideal conception of art was important for the establishing of modern *Sittlichkeit*, that is, a form of life that aspires to be a life of equal freedom for all. But the ideal conception of art is of no use when it comes to spelling out what it would take to realize equal freedom for all. In short, under the conditions of modern ethical life, ideal art can at best remind us of how we arrived at a way of life that is committed to equal freedom for all.

By the same token, it is hard to imagine what a pared-down (Houlgate style) ideal conception of art can offer to ongoing struggles for recognition and freedom. According to Houlgate, the point of his pared-down version of the ideal conception of art consists in offering homely, naturalistic depictions of concrete human freedom, that is, representations of aspects of freedom that are already realized (or realizable) in modern ethical life (as it currently is). I am happy to concede that such '*beautiful*' representations of 'concrete . . . human freedom' might have a role to play with regard to the maintenance of already rational aspects of modern ethical life (Houlgate 1997: 15–16). Such artworks can strengthen and revitalize the commitment of their viewers to do their

part to preserve those aspects of extant social practices that make possible such moments of concrete freedom. However, the kind of artworks that Houlgate has in mind are of little help when it comes to struggling for not yet realized dimensions of freedom; especially since Houlgate, one of the most sophisticated proponents of this view, argues that it is not the business of a pared-down ideal conception of art to engage with, and present, what is unhomely, oppressive and alienating about the world we inhabit.⁸⁰

This brings me to the ‘anything goes’ notion of ‘art’ that arises, according to some commentators, in the wake of the two forms of the dissolution of ideal (romantic) art, which freed ‘art’ from any constraints in terms of purpose, content and form. It is impossible to form any view about whether this kind of ‘art’ can still contribute to ongoing struggles for recognition and freedom because it is a completely empty (and therefore, in Hegel’s view, deficient) conception of ‘art’.

In sum, neither the orthodox conception of ideal art nor the pared-down version of the ideal conception of art or the completely empty notion of ‘art’ as ‘anything goes’ remains relevant for the kinds of struggles for recognition and freedom that are needed to turn modern and democratic ethical life into a life of equal freedom for all. Hegel’s post-ideal conception of art is, in contrast, well placed to make a unique and distinctly aesthetic contribution to these ongoing struggles for recognition and freedom that take place *within* modern and democratic ethical life. For post-ideal art links (or points to a way of linking) the aesthetic with a distinctly aesthetic dimension of freedom and relationship of recognition. To put it differently: only aesthetic freedom or aesthetic recognition frame sense perception, emotions and the imagination as valuable dimensions of our personhood and thus as dimensions of human self-realization.⁸¹

Hegel’s post-ideal conception of aesthetics conceives of ‘art’ as a practice of ‘freedom’ (Hegel 1975: 605/1986: Vol. 2, 235). As a ‘free instrument’, post-ideal art has emancipated or ‘freed’ itself ‘from the earlier limitations’ associated with the ideal conception of art, without degenerating into a notion of ‘art’ as ‘anything goes’ (Hegel 1975: 605–6/1986: Vol. 2, 235–6). Post-ideal artists are free to engage with any aspect of the world in any way they want, as long as their aesthetic relating remains relevant for the cultivation of individuality and the exploration of ‘everything in which men as such is capable of being at home’ (Hegel 1975: 607/1986: Vol. 2, 238). Post-ideal artists meet this requirement

⁸⁰ See Houlgate (1997: 17).

⁸¹ I systematically develop my recognition-theoretical account of aesthetic freedom in Chapter 4.

if those who engage aesthetically with the world explore their freely chosen phenomena perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively.

Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics thus not only significantly widens the scope of (what counts as) art (or an artistic engagement with the world), it also democratizes the subject position of the artist. Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics underpins an art of equality, since every modern subject is an aesthetic subject or a post-ideal artist. For all modern individuals are, at least occasionally, engaging aesthetically with their world.⁸² To illustrate this, Hegel mentions, for example, that in modern life 'anyone may be struck in connection with most objects and circumstances by some fancy or other which' they 'now' have 'skill enough to express', for instance, by way of 'writing a letter' (Hegel 1975: 609/1986: Vol. 2, 240–1; trans. modified). Remarks like these indicate that post-ideal aesthetic relating denotes a common phenomenon that directly bears on the aspiration of modern *Sittlichkeit* to be a life of *equal freedom for all*.

2.4.3. Evaluating post-ideal art

I have argued that in modern life, everyone acquires the status of post-ideal artist or aesthetic subject. Furthermore, the post-ideal conception of art also leads to a dramatic dissolution of the traditional boundaries of art (what German speakers call *Entgrenzung der Kunst*). Art, as understood by post-ideal aesthetics, is always in play when individuals explore (and find ways to express) how their senses disclose the world to them, when they are attentive to (and find ways to express) how they emotionally respond to the world and when they freely, playfully and imaginatively explore how things could be otherwise (inspired by how their senses and emotions have disclosed an aspect of the world to them). Post-ideal art can thus bring within its scope 'every sphere of life, all phenomena, the greatest and the least' (Hegel 1975: 594/1986: Vol. 2, 221).⁸³

Considering this democratization of the subject position of the artist and the radical broadening of the scope of art by the post-ideal conception of art, the reader might wonder whether this conception also implies that all manifestations of post-ideal art are of equal aesthetic value. This is not the case. Allow me to explain why by invoking morality as an analogous case: to

⁸² Joseph Beuys's famous slogan from the 1960s that 'everyone human being is an artist [*jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*]' is thus not coming out of the blue but has a precursor in Hegel in German aesthetic thinking.

⁸³ Arguing that the place of post-ideal art is the art world is therefore as misguided as the claim that the proper place of morality is the seminar room.

claim that all individuals are moral subjects and that whatever emerges from their deliberations about what is right in relation to a particular phenomenon qualifies as a moral judgement, neither implies that all moral deliberations are equally thorough nor that all expressions of moral opinion are equally insightful or convincing. We therefore must evaluate the quality of instances of moral deliberation and post-ideal aesthetic relating as well as what emerges from them.

Unfortunately, Hegel does not address the question of how to evaluate post-ideal art in any detail in his *Aesthetics*. But the few asides that bear on this issue are compatible with drawing a distinction between two evaluative dimensions: the quality of the aesthetic engagement itself and the quality of what emerges from someone's aesthetic relating.⁸⁴

Hegel highlights that it is important that individuals who engage in post-ideal aesthetic relating 'immerse themselves fully into the constellations, the situation, etc.' (Hegel 1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 241; trans. modified). What matters for the quality of the aesthetic engagement is thus primarily the depth of the perceptive familiarization with the respective object, the depth of the exploration of how 'the heart, with its depth of feeling' (Hegel 1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 241), responds to the contemplated object and the free nature of the imaginative engagement with the object (that is informed by how an individual perceptively and emotionally discloses the object).

The move to the second evaluative dimension involves a shift from how the three agential moments of post-ideal aesthetic relating are actualized to what emerges from the post-ideal aesthetic engagement with the world. To evaluate such outcomes, we must ask ourselves, according to Hegel, whether they disclose 'something new . . . and intrinsically valuable' (Hegel 1975: 609–10/1986: Vol. 2, 241). Hegel does not elaborate on what he means by that, but it seems sensible to link the originality and 'valuableness' of 'products' of post-ideal aesthetic relating to the substantial purpose of the post-ideal conception of art. In other words, we need to ask two questions about such products: firstly, do they point to or open up a (previously overlooked) potential for individual freedom or the 'liberation of subjectivity' (Hegel 1975: 608/1986: Vol. 2, 239)? Secondly, do they tell us anything original about what it might mean for us to be more or differently at home in our social world? Perhaps Hegel had something like these two criteria in mind when he evaluated most instances of post-ideal aesthetic relating in his own time as repetitive, superficial and boring (Hegel 1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 241).

⁸⁴ I come back to the question of how one can critically engage with others' exercises of aesthetic freedom in Chapter 6 as part of my outline of a critical theory of aesthetics.

Allow me to conclude my interpretation of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art by drawing attention to yet another puzzling feature of Hegel's sparse elaborations. Many illustrations of post-ideal art that Hegel himself provides are not drawn from modern Western societies. He states, for instance, that a 'brilliant example of this' post-ideal art, 'even for the present and for the subjective spiritual depth of today, is afforded by the Persians and Arabs in the eastern splendour of their images, in the free bliss of their imagination which deals with objects entirely contemplatively' (Hegel 1975: 610/ 1986: Vol. 2, 241). Hegel then goes on to mention that the 'Spaniards and the Italians too have done excellent work of this kind', pointing, for instance, to Petrarch's love poetry (Hegel 1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 241). Only then does Hegel turn his attention to 'contemporary work inspired by this aesthetic tradition', highlighting, for example, the significance of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* that is 'inspired by and modelled on the work of the fourteenth-century "Persian poet Hafiz"' (Moland 2019: 142).⁸⁵

What are we to make of this list of examples of felicitous post-ideal works of art? In my view, Hegel invokes these examples to illustrate that his conception of post-ideal art is like a new set of glasses that provide us with a different perspective on past and contemporary cultural artefacts. In other words, if we look at cultural artefacts, past and present, from the perspective of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art (as opposed to the conception of ideal art), then we see and evaluate them differently. Our focus shifts to those works that exemplify a sustained perceptive engagement with an object, that disclose our emotional response to a contemplated object and that embody a free and imaginative transformation of an object. In short, the shift from the ideal to the post-ideal conception of art is also a shift of perspective and mode of evaluation.

There is, in other words, a (global) history of art that is underpinned by the ideal conception of art; and that's the story Hegel tells in his *Lectures on Fine Art*. However, what has been so far overlooked is that it is also possible to tell a different (global) history of art, according to Hegel, namely one that is inspired by his post-ideal conception of art. These different (global) histories of art are (most probably) different in scope, that is, they do not encompass the same set of artefacts. What is more, even if these two histories of art incorporate the same artefacts, they will evaluate them very differently because each conception of art is linked with a different interpretation of the substantive purpose, content and form of art. For instance, a paradigmatic work of the history of ideal art might be

⁸⁵ See also Hegel (1975: 610/1986: Vol. 2, 241–2).

disappointing when looked at from the perspective of the post-ideal conception of art and vice versa.

Hegel's list of examples also implies that he thinks that human beings have long explored and expressed how they perceive, emotionally experience and (re-) imagine the world in different cultures (perhaps throughout human history). What is a modern achievement is therefore, according to Hegel, the generation of the conception of post-ideal art itself. This conceptualization requires a notion of the human being as a free being and as a person that is endowed with a range of valuable capacities of which some (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) are tracked by the post-ideal conception of art. Once this post-ideal conception of art is made or becomes explicit in modern social life, we can invoke it to write another (global) history of art.

2.4.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined for the first time Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics and explained how it arises from (the decline of) his well-known ideal conception of art and aesthetics. I also explored how Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics interacts with my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics and argued that his post-ideal conception of aesthetics amounts to a paradigmatic example of a capacity-based account that synthesizes all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics, namely sense perception, emotions and the free play of the imagination. Further, I argued that Hegel provides a novel answer to the question of why we should assign value to (non-instrumental) explorative uses of these three capacities by linking them with a distinctly aesthetic dimension of freedom.

Finally, I have demonstrated that Hegel's distinction between the concept of art and conceptions of art, in conjunction with my rediscovery of his post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics, is a game-changer for the so-called 'end of art' debate. I show that what comes to an end in modern social life is the ideal *conception* of art, not (the concept of) *art* itself. In addition to outlining this original reading of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, this chapter also serves as a bridge between my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics, which I delineated in Chapter 1, and the two subsequent chapters: in Chapter 3 I outline my Hegelian understanding of the role and place of aesthetics in democratic *Sittlichkeit* and in Chapter 4 I develop my novel account of aesthetic recognition.

Recovering the displaced aesthetic dimension of democratic ethical life

3.1. Introduction

The topic of this chapter is democratic life or, to be more precise, a distinct way of conceptualizing democratic life, namely the (Hegelian) notion of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. In this chapter, I set myself three goals: the first is reconstructive and consists in providing a general outline of the most sophisticated Hegelian account of contemporary democratic ethical life, namely Axel Honneth's *Freedom's Right* (2014). This account, which I call the standard account of democratic ethical life, then serves as a backdrop for the remainder of this study. My second goal is critical. I argue that the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is *unsatisfactory*, since it fails to live up to its aspiration to delineate a life of freedom; it is also *incomplete*, since it omits a conceptually distinct and socially valid variant of freedom: aesthetic freedom. My final goal is constructive. I argue that by expanding the standard account and by integrating aesthetic freedom (i.e. a variant of individual freedom that complements legal and moral freedom) into our account of democratic ethical life, we can render it satisfactory and complete.

I begin with outlining the standard account of democratic ethical life, which encompasses relationships of legal, moral, personal, economic and political freedom (Section 3.2), before moving on to my two-step critique of it: in the first step, I argue that the standard account cannot deal with *scope unfreedom* (Section 3.3). Scope unfreedom denotes a conservatism that is built into the standard account of democratic ethical life, since the standard account treats the main features of extant relationships (of personal, economic and political freedom) as the fixed core of *Sittlichkeit*. In the second step, I highlight that the standard account also gives rise to the problem of *individual unfreedom*

(Section 3.4). The problem of individual unfreedom is closely linked with the issue of conformism and results from the fact that the standard account of democratic ethical life lacks the resources to account for the cultivation and realization of individuality. Based on this analysis, I argue that the standard account of democratic ethical life is *unsatisfactory*, since it fails to live up to its aspiration to denote a life of freedom.

This is, however, not the only shortcoming of the standard account of ethical life. This account is also *incomplete* because it makes no room for a conceptually distinct and socially valid notion of individual freedom (that complements moral and legal freedom), namely aesthetic freedom (Section 3.5). I illustrate the social effectiveness of aesthetic freedom in modern democratic life by invoking several case studies: the early socialist critique of capitalism, feminist consciousness-raising, the increasing openness of social roles and Boltanski and Chiapello's account of the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005).

In the Conclusion, I then show that we can overcome scope unfreedom and individual unfreedom by integrating aesthetic freedom into our account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* (Section 3.6). In short, I claim that my expanded account of democratic ethical life brings extant relationships of (personal, economic and political) freedom within the remit of sufficiently unrestricted practices of aesthetic freedom, which, in turn, can inspire processes of self-critique and (potentially radical) self-transformation. We thus end up with an understanding of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that accounts for the uniquely open character of the democratic form of life.

3.2. Democratic ethical life: The standard account

What is democratic ethical life? The notion of ethical life or *Sittlichkeit* is developed by Hegel (1991) in his pathbreaking *Philosophy of Right* from 1821. Hegel offers a compelling and multifaceted account of modern (Western) social life by way of integrating conceptual, normative and sociological-reconstructive analyses. In what follows, I will use Axel Honneth's *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (2014) as a backdrop, since this monograph is, in my view, the most sophisticated and systematic attempt to update the Hegelian project for contemporary (Western) liberal democracies. What is more, it preserves 'the model of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*' because it adopts its complex architecture of relationships of freedom (Honneth 2014: vii).

3.2.1. Equal freedom as normative horizon of democratic *Sittlichkeit*

To say that societies instantiate a distinct form of ethical life implies that they share a form of ‘practical meaningfulness’ (Pippin 2008: 6). ‘*Sittlichkeit*’ means ‘the achievement and maintenance of such a form of intelligible life’ (Pippin 2008: 6).¹ The study of ethical life is therefore a reconstructive-hermeneutic exercise that is geared towards comprehending what makes a form of life meaningful to those participating in it and how this meaning is embedded in the social institutions that contribute to the reproduction of this form of social life. The study of ethical life proceeds by way of a reconstructive elucidation of the norms that underpin social institutions (even if they are inadequately realized by them).² Honneth himself characterizes ‘Hegel’s strategy’ as follows: he is ‘picking up on values and ideas’ that are ‘already institutionalized’ (2014: 63). Reconstructively proceeding accounts of *Sittlichkeit* can thus be contrasted with ideal-theoretical approaches that aim at ‘justifying principles of justice without taking account of the facticity of social relations, in order to then re-establish a connection – at a second (or third) stage – with current social conditions by gradually introducing empirical circumstances’ (Honneth 2014: 63).³

There is another respect in which viewing societies in terms of ethical life sets apart Hegelian from mainstream approaches to political philosophy. The ‘point of reference’ of *Sittlichkeit* are ‘all institutional social spheres’, whereas mainstream liberal approaches to political philosophy tend to focus on the political sphere more narrowly conceived (e.g. the sphere of law-making and interpretation as well as the democratic public sphere) (Honneth 2014: 63). However, this difference in scope does not directly result from the fact that Hegelians adopt a normative-reconstructive methodology. Habermas, for example, endorses a normative-reconstructive method in *Between Facts and Norms* without adopting the more encompassing *Sittlichkeit* outlook. As a result, he sees no problem in

¹ On Hegel’s understanding of *Sittlichkeit*, see also Neuhaus (2022: 281–311).

² Unnecessarily inadequate realizations of norms that underpin social institutions are conceptualized in the Frankfurt School tradition as social pathologies or misdevelopments. See, for example, Freyenhagen (2015), Honneth (2009), Neuhaus (2022), Schaub (2015) and Zurn (2011).

³ The contrast that Honneth has in mind is, in my view, the following: both ideal-theoretical approaches and Hegelian reconstructive approaches articulate norms; however, only approaches of the latter kind work from norms that are already embedded in social institutions (even if in a deficient manner). The author Honneth associates with such an ideal-theoretical approach is John Rawls. However, this characterization is more fitting for the early Kantian Rawls (think of *A Theory of Justice* (1999a)), than for the later Rawls (think of *Political Liberalism* (1993) and *The Law of Peoples* (1999b)). In these later works, Rawls also proceeds, at least in my view, in a normative-reconstructive fashion (Schaub 2019b).

limiting the scope of his study of the ‘the modern constitutional state’ to the political and legal sphere (Honneth 2014: 345n1).⁴

Furthermore, unlike many contemporary political philosophers, Hegelians are value monists. They take it that the normative horizon of modern societies is formed by ‘one value’, namely ‘the ethical idea’ of freedom understood as self-realization (Honneth 2014: 64).⁵ As a theorist of democratic ethical life, Honneth stresses the egalitarian implications of this normative commitment: ‘all subjects must enjoy equal support in their striving for individual freedom’ (2014: 64, 15). The ethical idea underpinning democratic ethical life is thus *equal freedom*. In light of his view that equal freedom is the overarching value of democratic ethical life, Honneth holds that all key social institutions that jointly make up modern democratic societies ‘do represent specific functional embodiments of the one universal value of individual freedom’ (2014: 345n1). The differentiation of social institutions therefore tracks the conceptual differentiation of the value of freedom itself.⁶

It is implied by this outlook that working out an account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* entails a commitment to comprehensiveness or completeness. The aim is to reconstruct *all* conceptually differentiated and ‘socially valid’ dimensions of freedom (Honneth 2014: 63). The task of normative reconstruction is therefore to ‘gradually etch into relief those individual spheres of action in liberal-democratic societies in which the value of individual freedom has taken on an institutional shape’ (Honneth 2014: 66).

Finally, Hegelian theorists of *Sittlichkeit* are holists. They believe, on the one hand, that different social spheres realize different dimensions of freedom and, on the other, that these dimensions complement and depend on each other.⁷ In their view, the ‘social system of democratic ethical life . . . represents a complicated web of reciprocal dependencies, where the realization of freedom in one sphere of action depends on the realization of the principles of freedom underlying the other spheres’ (Honneth 2014: 330). For instance, ‘democratic will-formation presupposes’ that freedom is already sufficiently realized in the personal and economic sphere (Honneth 2014: 330). For unless individuals have already developed a sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and economic

⁴ See also Habermas (1996).

⁵ I am aware that value monism is a contested view and that, by adopting this Hegelian outlook, my approach conflicts with those strands in ethical and political thought that embrace value pluralism. For example, Isaiah Berlin (2013), a prominent proponent of value pluralism, would regard the very idea of a monist liberalism as contradictory.

⁶ See Honneth (2014: 65).

⁷ See Honneth (2014: 84, 86–96, 113–20, 128–9, 273).

independence, their ability to appear in the public sphere and to contribute to democratic will-formation will be undermined.⁸

3.2.2. Relations of individual and social freedom

Having introduced the key features that give shape to the standard account of democratic ethical life, we can now turn our attention to the substance of Honneth's account: the different institutionalized relations of freedom. Following Hegel's (1991) model from *Philosophy of Right*, Honneth asserts that the recognition relationships of personal, economic and political freedom form the core of democratic ethical life. They are complemented by recognition relationships of legal and moral freedom.

For Hegelians, all relations of recognition make distinct contributions to democratic ethical life being a life of freedom; and in order to give a differentiated account of modern *Sittlichkeit* one must understand how different recognition relationships, which underpin different social practices, complement each other. Each relationship of recognition is linked with different norms of recognition that structure interactions between individuals and the expectations they have of each other. Each relationship of recognition is grounded in valuable capacities or valuable dimensions of human personhood. For instance, the capacity to make decisions for oneself grounds the recognitional status of legal subject. The norms of legal recognition mediate and shape the relationships between legal subjects. For instance, as a subject of rights I am empowered to do certain things (e.g. make purchases) and others cannot interfere with me (e.g. stop me from using my right to make a purchase). Since human beings possess a range of valuable capacities, recognition 'represents a conceptual species' comprising different 'subspecies' (Honneth 2002: 506): legal, moral, personal, economic and political recognition. Each subspecies of recognition thus tracks different valuable capacities of persons and is linked with different kinds of interactions. Each subspecies of recognition is also associated with a distinct social 'status that entitles' individuals to different modes of 'consideration shown them by other subjects' and licences them to engage in specific ways with their social world (Honneth 2014: 124).⁹

Following Hegel's conceptual and sociological reconstruction of modern life, Honneth distinguishes between two kinds of relationships of recognition

⁸ See Honneth (2014: 332).

⁹ I unpack the basic structure of recognition in Chapter 4.

or freedom: relations of social freedom and relations of individual freedom.¹⁰ Each kind of relationship of freedom encompasses different variants of freedom. In the case of social freedom, we are concerned with social statuses that enable us to be (full-fledged) participants in different substantive contexts of action in which we realize a distinct dimension of our freedom through normatively mediated cooperation with others. Social freedom is, according to Honneth, therefore freedom in the modality of ‘reality’ (Honneth 2014: 124).

With regard to modern democratic societies, Honneth distinguishes (following Hegel) between three variants of social freedom: personal, economic and political freedom. In these three social spheres, relations between individuals are mediated by norms of recognition in such a way that their actions complement each other. In personal relationships of love and friendship, we enable one another, for instance, to ‘freely articulate’ and satisfy our ‘actual’ emotional ‘needs and interests’ (Honneth 2016: 89). In productive social cooperation, we relate to each other in such a way that we can satisfy our material needs and our desire to be esteemed for our productive contributions to social cooperation and shared social goals. Finally, in the sphere of democratic will-formation, we relate to each other in such a way that we can understand individual expressions of opinion as contributions to a common project of the ‘intersubjective exploration of a common will’ (Honneth 2016: 36).

In sum, modern democratic life emerges from processes of social-functional and normative-conceptual differentiation, for it is composed of different relations of social freedom that enable the cooperative realization of different dimensions of freedom. What relations of social freedom have in common is that they all denote substantive contexts of action that structure the relations between individuals such that they act for one another.¹¹ Social freedom is therefore freedom as realized in the social.

Relations of individual freedom are of a different kind as they denote a kind of socially granted freedom from the social. The point of the two variants of

¹⁰ I will adopt Honneth’s terminology despite it having an obvious disadvantage: this terminology makes it appear as if relations of individual freedom were not social, which, of course, cannot be the case, since all relations of recognition denote modes of social interaction.

¹¹ See Honneth (2014: 127–8). Honneth defends a particularly demanding and contested understanding of what it means to act for one another. For him, social freedom requires not just ‘mediating institutions that inform subjects in advance about the interdependence of their aims’ (Honneth 2014: 65). Participants in relations of social freedom must act with the intention of fulfilling each other’s aims. When it comes to the economic sphere, this means that participants are said to be ‘intentionally producing for each other on the basis of their mutual recognition of each other’s needs, thus performing their own actions for the sake of those needs’ (Honneth 2016: 20, 19). See also Brudney (2014: 454). For a critical discussion of whether such a demanding notion of social freedom is applicable to the capitalist economic sphere, see, for instance, Jütten (2015).

individual freedom that are an integral part of Hegelian accounts of ethical life, namely legal and moral freedom, is to ensure that we can *regard our participation in relations of social freedom itself as free*.¹² In Honneth's own words: 'the prerequisite for freely participating in these spheres' of social freedom 'is an entirely different category of freedom,' namely individual freedom (Honneth 2014: 71). Unlike relations of social freedom, relations of individual freedom do 'not generate any new substantial contexts of action,' but they are nonetheless concerned with the realization of distinct dimensions of freedom that are associated with distinct valuable capacities (Honneth 2014: 123). Relations of individual freedom denote a socially granted possibility to withdraw from or scrutinize extant relations of social freedom and the demands they make on us. Since freedom is cooperatively realized only in relations of social freedom, individual freedom is characterized by Honneth as freedom in the modality of 'possibility' (Honneth 2016: 69). For instance, the legal right that I have as a legal subject to quit my job makes it possible for me to take up another occupation, and for this reason it is associated with potentiality. However, my right to quit does not guarantee that I will be able to find another, more rewarding form of employment.

Legal freedom is underpinned, according to Honneth, by a 'negative conception of freedom' (Honneth 2014: 65). Being recognized as a subject of rights enables individuals to withdraw, at least temporarily, from their relationships of social freedom and to 'act on their own unreflected preferences' within the space opened up by their rights (Honneth 2014: 65). In other words, since we are subjects of rights, we can act in any way we want if we do not violate the rights of others. From a legal perspective, we do not owe others any justification. In terms of social ontology, legal freedom is strongly institutionalized because rights are typically enforceable.¹³

Moral freedom, on the other hand, is a reflexive variant of individual freedom.¹⁴ Individuals who are recognized as moral subjects are licenced to interrupt their ordinary involvement in relations of freedom to scrutinize whether 'social demands' originating from socially effective interpretations of norms and roles are 'unreasonable' – and to demand, if applicable, that less biased interpretations of these roles and norms are adopted (Honneth 2014: 98). Compared with legal

¹² Hegel (1991) himself does not use the terminology of legal and moral freedom in his *Philosophy of Right* but speaks of 'abstract right' and 'morality'.

¹³ See also Honneth (2014: 96).

¹⁴ See also Honneth (2014: 29–41, 65).

freedom, moral freedom is only weakly institutionalized, for we are dealing with a culturally granted opportunity that is typically not backed by state power.¹⁵

3.3. The shortcomings of the standard account I: Scope unfreedom

With this brief outline of Honneth's re-actualization of the Hegelian notion of modern ethical life behind us, I can now present my critique of the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. The first step of my critique proceeds in an immanent fashion and establishes that the standard view of democratic *Sittlichkeit* remains *unsatisfactory* according to its own terms, since it cannot deal with two (unacknowledged) dimensions of unfreedom: *scope unfreedom* and *individual unfreedom*. Having established that the standard account lacks the resources to address these two deficits of freedom, I switch from a critical to a constructive mode. I argue that we can address or overcome these two dimensions of unfreedom if we expand the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* by integrating an appropriately understood notion of aesthetic freedom (that complements the other relations of individual freedom, i.e. legal and moral freedom).¹⁶ The second step of my critique focusses on the incompleteness of the standard account. The standard account purports to track *all* dimensions of the value of freedom that are socially effective but omits aesthetic freedom from the architecture of relations of freedom, even though aesthetic freedom denotes a conceptually distinct and socially valid dimension of freedom. I then support my claim that aesthetic freedom has been part of democratic ethical life since its inception by invoking case studies.

3.3.1. The problem of scope unfreedom

The standard account of democratic ethical life claims to denote a life of freedom. Yet, there is a feature of this account that is in tension with this claim. Inhabitants of modern societies, in the case of Hegel, and liberal-democratic societies, in the case of Honneth, are socialized into social roles and practices that typically

¹⁵ I say "typically", since there are instances in which individuals' moral freedoms are backed by the power of the state, e.g. in the case of conscientious objection to universal military service.

¹⁶ For an outline of my recognition-theoretical account of aesthetic freedom, see Chapter 4.

predate them and which they encounter as ‘institutional facts’ which they are ‘constantly compelled to antecedently recognize’ (Honneth 2014: 111).

The standard account thus maintains, on the one hand, that we participate freely in relations of social freedom and, on the other hand, acknowledges the fact that we are permanently forced to accept pre-existing social roles and norms as unchangeable social facts with which we must come to terms in order to realize our freedom. This contradiction gives rise to the problem of scope unfreedom. If we simply have to put up with something, then we are not free in relation to it. Any account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that aims to avoid the problem of scope unfreedom therefore must encompass a variant of freedom that can bring extant social roles and norms, which give shape to established relationships of social freedom, within the scope of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom. For only then can individuals regard extant roles and norms as being expressive of their freedom, since they can see them as being, at least potentially, within the reach of a practice of freedom that is available to them as part of democratic ethical life.

Recall that in the Hegelian framing, relations of individual (moral and legal) freedom are tasked with ensuring that we are indeed ‘freely participating in these spheres’ or relations of social freedom (Honneth 2014: 71). My critique will proceed by way of demonstrating that moral and legal freedom (on their own) do not provide us with the resources to overcome the problem of scope unfreedom. This finding means that the standard account is unsatisfactory on its own terms, since it does not encompass all the resources that are required for democratic ethical life to amount to a free form of life.

3.3.2. The (too) limited scope of legal freedom

Why are the two variants of individual freedom that are part of Hegel and Honneth’s accounts of *Sittlichkeit* unfit to adequately deal with the problem of scope unfreedom? In considering this question, we have to take into account that Hegelians distinguish between benign and pathological versions of legal and moral freedom – and it is only the benign versions which, in their view, deserve to be integrated into the fabric of ethical life as complements of extant relationships of social freedom: ‘Hegel only permits both of these freedoms to the degree that they do not endanger the institutional structures of actual, social freedom. They are integrated as a supplement to the ordered system of ethical institutions, granting individuals the right to legitimately renounce the

demands these institutions make, without representing the source of a new order' (Honneth 2014: 58).

We can now turn our attention to the first of the two relations of individual freedom: *legal freedom*. Hegelians consider pathological any notion of legal freedom that attempts to construct the whole of social life in terms of legal freedom. Such a notion is pathological or anti-*sittlich*, since, on the one hand, it denies the differentiation of the value of freedom that shapes ethical social life and, on the other hand, because it frames all of social life in contractualist terms (thereby failing to appreciate how legal freedom depends on other relations of freedom). Hegelian approaches therefore deliberately and decisively break with the contractualist tradition in social and political philosophy. A benign account of legal freedom is supposed to acknowledge that the diverse relations of social freedom provide the 'core' of ethical life and that legal freedom merely complements this core by introducing 'negative . . . freedom' as a moment within ethical life (Honneth 2014: 61, 60). I do not want to deny that benign versions of legal freedom contribute to rendering our participation in relations of social freedom free. What I deny is the claim that legal freedom (on its own or in conjunction with moral freedom) suffices to address the problem of scope unfreedom and to provide democratic ethical life with a sufficiently 'dynamic, open and transgressive character' (Honneth 2014: 61).

As subjects of rights, we are empowered to do a whole range of things (such as entering contracts and owning property), including withdrawing from distinct relationships of social freedom (such as a friendship or a relationship of employment). It is only because we have the right to withdraw from concrete relationships of social freedom that we can regard our continued participation in such relations as free or freely chosen. For example, I can consider myself to be freely participating in my marriage because I could get a divorce.¹⁷

What matters for the purposes of my argument are the limits of such rights when it comes to the problem of scope unfreedom. Subjective rights enable individuals to enter into certain social relationships (e.g. an employment contract) and to withdraw from them (e.g. I can hand in my resignation at any point), but legal freedom does not denote a variant of individual freedom that empowers individuals to transform the very social roles and norms that underpin extant relations of social freedom.

¹⁷ Of course, for these rights to be more than formal, we need a range of social rights. Following T.H. Marshall (1950), Honneth (2014: 78–9, 258–9) distinguishes different types or generations of rights (i.e. civil, political and social rights), highlighting their distinct contributions to bringing about the social preconditions for individual self-realization.

For instance, I can resign from my position at the University of Essex because I feel increasingly alienated by the rapid commercialization and marketization of higher education and the hostility of recent governments towards the humanities, but this will have no impact on the norms that currently shape higher education in the United Kingdom. This makes quitting my job at Essex in some sense pointless, since virtually any other university in England where I could find, if I am very lucky, alternative employment, would manifest (albeit in different degrees) the same tendencies and developments that made me contemplate quitting my job in the first place.

In sum, while rendering our participation in relations of social freedom free in some sense, legal freedom provides no satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom that plagues the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. This is because my rights do not make the established social roles and norms that shape the extant relationships of social freedom in which I could participate the subject-matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom.

3.3.3. The (too) limited scope of moral freedom

This brings me to the other variant of individual freedom that the standard account encompasses. Does *moral freedom* provide us with an answer to the problem of scope unfreedom? Does it make it possible for us to regard our participation in extant relationships of social freedom itself as free by giving them a 'dynamic, *open* and *transgressive* character' (Honneth 2014: 61)?

Again, we must keep in mind that the (Kantian) version of moral freedom that is included in Hegelian accounts of *Sittlichkeit* is the benign, not the pathological one. In its pathological form, moral freedom regards itself as all there is to freedom, which again entails a denial of the differentiation of the concept of freedom that underpins modern *Sittlichkeit*. What is more, since pathological moral freedom disregards the conceptual differentiation of freedom, it also thinks of itself as completely free to disregard the given social reality that tracks the conceptual differentiation of freedom. In short, pathological moral freedom is pathological because it is anti-*sittlich*. This anti-*sittlich* attitude shapes pathological moral freedom's active-creative ambitions that are not regarded as in any form constrained by social life as it currently is. Pathological exercises of moral freedom thus completely abstract from given 'social' roles and 'rules that determine the nature of the relation between the subjects in specific spheres of society' (Honneth 2014: 111). As a result, we are left with nothing but the form of universality itself and the 'abstract perspective of universal humanity' (Honneth 2014: 115).

According to Hegelians, pathological moral freedom creates two impasses: firstly, one is deprived of the substance from which alternative social roles and norms could be construed; secondly, it is hard to see how one can reconnect the outcomes of such pathological exercises of moral freedom with the fabric of our given social world.¹⁸ Honneth illustrates this with ‘the example of a university professor who notices a relatively harmless act of plagiarism on the part of a close colleague and considers the appropriate action to take’ (Honneth 2014: 110). In such a situation, one cannot identify the right course of action if one completely abstracts from the ‘role in which the subject is faced with a moral conflict’ and the point of the social practice at hand (Honneth 2014: 111). In sum, in its pathological form, moral freedom retains a sufficiently unrestricted transformative potential, since it refuses to be limited by the status quo. But pathological moral freedom is unable to realize this potential because it ‘remains’ either ‘entirely empty’ or, without openly acknowledging it, parasitic on extant social roles, norms and practices (Honneth 2014: 338).

What about the benign version of (Kantian) moral freedom that Hegelians do integrate into the standard account of *Sittlichkeit*? Does it address the problem of scope unfreedom? With regard to moral freedom, things look more promising than with respect to legal freedom since being recognized as a moral subject implies that one is ‘always free . . . regardless of social position . . . to question’ any demands associated with the social roles and norms that condition existing relations of social freedom (Honneth 2014: 98). In the case of moral freedom, the point of the ‘interruption’ of one’s ordinary participation in relations of freedom is to ‘gain reflexive distance’ (Honneth 2014: 112). This is important since as modern subjects, we regard ourselves as ‘free’ only ‘to the extent that we obey universalizable norms’ (Honneth 2014: 104). By implication, we regard our participation in relations of social freedom only as free if our social status as moral subject licences us to engage in the ‘reflexive’ activity of ‘test[ing]’ the ‘social universalizability’ of extant social norms and roles, to ‘reject unreasonable social demands’ and to propose ‘new’, more reasonable ‘systems of norms’ when this seems appropriate (Honneth 2014: 65, 98, 104).

Benign moral freedom thus has a passive-receptive and an active-creative dimension that is compatible with the tenets of modern ethical life. The former

¹⁸ Honneth’s criticism of Forst’s constructivism re-enacts the empty formalism objection that Hegel levels against Kant. See Honneth (2014: 111) and Freyenhagen (2012). For Honneth, the abstract criterion of ‘mutual justifiability . . . is of little use’ and ‘remains entirely empty’, since it is impossible to judge whether forms of concrete behaviour are “justified” . . . [w]ithout taking account of . . . normative conditions’ like extant social roles and norms, ‘which represent the object of normative reconstruction’ (Honneth 2014: 338n6, 64–6). See also Forst (2011).

dimension consists in being attentive to those aspects of social roles and norms that cannot be justified to all affected by them based on ‘universalizable reasons’ (Honneth 2014: 116). The latter dimension refers to the activity of generating and demanding the adoption of less biased interpretations of extant social roles and norms. Moral freedom is thus imbued ‘with a transformative power that legal freedom does not have’ and constitutes part of the answer to the problem of scope unfreedom (Honneth 2014: 112).

However, does this transformative power of benign moral freedom suffice to generate a convincing response to the problem of scope unfreedom? As I see it, benign moral freedom’s transformative potential cannot (on its own or in conjunction with benign legal freedom) provide a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom. Moral freedom can only be part of the solution to the problem of scope unfreedom. The reason for this is that the benign version of moral freedom, unlike its pathological counterpart, remains ‘tied to the role in which the subject is faced with the moral conflict’ in a problematic fashion (Honneth 2014: 111). Benign moral freedom treats ‘the constitutive norms’ and roles ‘of our form of society’ which underpin extant spheres of freedom as ‘institutional facts’ that we are ‘constantly compelled to antecedently recognize’ (Honneth 2014: 111). This means that before we even begin to exercise our benign moral freedom, we consider ourselves to be already committed to these extant roles and norms. Benign moral freedom’s receptivity is, by implication, too restricted, since whenever we exercise our benign moral freedom, we only pay attention to how given social norms and roles differentially affect individuals. As a result, the creative contributions of benign moral freedom are also limited because all it aims to do is to generate less biased interpretations of given roles and norms.¹⁹

The restrictions that apply to benign moral freedom’s receptivity and creative activity affect its ability to generate a satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom. Benign moral freedom’s transformative ambition is too limited because it ‘accepts’ existing roles and norms from the outset ‘as institutional facts’ and thus as ‘restrictions on moral self-legislation’ (Honneth 2014: 112). It merely aims to ‘exercise influence on the . . . interpretation’ of extant social roles and norms (Honneth 2014: 113). At no point does benign moral freedom consider transforming these roles and norms in ways that go beyond rendering them less biased. A paradigmatic example of an exercise of moral freedom is

¹⁹ See Honneth (2014: 112–7).

thus generating a post-traditional notion of marriage that does not unfairly privilege heterosexual couples.

A satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom requires a variant of individual freedom that can turn existing social roles and norms themselves into the subject-matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom. To be a life of freedom, democratic ethical life must encompass, in other words, a variant of freedom that has the potential to liquefy or de-reify the social roles, norms and institutions that are framed by the standard account as ‘institutional facts’ (Honneth 2014: 111). Neither benign legal freedom nor benign moral freedom is capable of initiating processes of such a potentially radical self-transformation that open up our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit*.

This result is not substantially altered by the fact that the transformative potential of benign moral freedom reaches a bit further than Honneth himself points out: one can imagine that benign moral freedom is in charge of generating less biased interpretations of extant social roles and norms not just on an atomistic basis but by looking at society as a whole. In other words, moral freedom can adjudicate conflicts between different roles and norms. In such cases, moral freedom’s task consists in ensuring that all extant social relations are given due consideration (by protecting their core purpose). This can involve, for instance, reinterpreting existing social roles and norms in such a way that their negative impact on each other is minimized as well as justly distributed among them.

Even if we acknowledge this additional transformative dimension, exercises of moral freedom still do not amount to a fully convincing answer to the problem of scope unfreedom, for it remains the case that benign moral freedom is all about reinterpreting given social roles and norms (by adopting either an atomistic or a holistic perspective) against a backdrop of an antecedent commitment to those roles and norms. However, we can imagine a society in which there is nothing left to do for benign moral freedom (because all roles and norms are impartially interpreted and all conflicts between them are dealt with in an impartial fashion) but which is nonetheless marred by scope unfreedom – since those inhabiting this social world cannot regard their participation in given relations of social freedom as fully free because there is no way for them to bring the roles and norms that are constitutive of these relations of social freedom within the scope of a sufficiently unrestrictive practice of freedom.

As far as I can see, there are only two ways in which proponents of the standard account can respond to my claim that their account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is

unsatisfactory in terms of denoting a life of freedom. They can point to another conceptually distinct and socially effective variant of individual freedom that has hitherto been overlooked, or they can deny that scope unfreedom and ethical life's lack of openness really amount to a problem. In my view, we should take the former route and integrate aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life, since the latter option is fraught with problems. For denying that scope unfreedom is a problem would force Hegelians to endorse a philosophy of history that encompasses an 'end of history' thesis.

To make the case that scope unfreedom does not really pose a problem requires more than claiming that equal freedom provides the ultimate normative horizon of ethical life and that freedom is realized in relations of social freedom.²⁰ Proponents of this view would have to rule out, as a matter of principle, the possibility that an alternative framing of relations of social freedom (i.e. one that goes beyond rendering them less biased) could result in a more comprehensive realization of equal freedom than is achievable within the currently existing framework (with its distinct conceptualization and separation of personal, economic and political relations). In short, Honneth would have to take recourse to an 'end of history' thesis that is strong enough 'to rule out the possibility' that any gains in terms of the realization of equal freedom can be achieved by transforming 'the normative structure' of 'modern society' (Honneth 2015: 209). Given human finitude and inventiveness, the finitude of our historical experience and the ever-changing contexts in which democratic societies exist (think, for instance, of the global climate crisis), I simply cannot see how Hegelians can go about backing up an 'end of history' thesis.²¹

If this diagnosis of the Hegelian predicament is correct, then the account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* outlined by Honneth is shown to be inadequate as an account of a free form of life, for it does not adequately deal with the problem of scope unfreedom. I now want to argue that by integrating another variant of individual freedom, namely aesthetic freedom, into the architecture of relations of freedom, we can overcome this impasse, because aesthetic freedom can bring extant social roles and norms themselves into the remit of a practice of freedom.

²⁰ For the purposes of this study, I am willing to grant Honneth both assumptions despite the fact that fallibilism and contextualism suggest leaving open to revision even the claim that equal freedom provides the ultimate normative horizon and that the best way of realizing freedom is through relations of social freedom (especially since actually existing liberal societies manifest a range of problems that are, arguably, rooted in the notion of equal individual freedom). See Honneth (2015: 209).

²¹ On human finitude, see Rebentisch (2016: 94–9).

3.3.4. Scope unfreedom and the free play of the imagination

The imagination as a dimension of modern aesthetics relating has the potential to deal with (those aspects of) the problem of scope unfreedom (that legal and moral freedom leave unaddressed).²² According to my capacity-based approach to modern aesthetics, someone engages aesthetically with an aspect of the world if they explore it with their senses, explore how they emotionally experience it and then let their imagination play freely with this aspect of the world (in a way that is guided by how their senses and emotions have disclosed this aspect of the world to them). Any aspect of the world can, in principle, be turned into the subject-matter of such an aesthetic engagement, including the social norms and roles that underpin extant relationships of social freedom. If that happens, social norms and roles become the subject-matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of aesthetic freedom, since the free play of the imagination is emancipated from the practical constraints that are associated with participating in given social practices. Further, the degree to which such a free play of the imagination transforms social roles and norms is not subject to any predetermined limitations. It might, in other words, become almost impossible to still recognize the original object of aesthetic relating in what emerges from this free play of the imagination. This feature can be illustrated with morphing sequences which I encountered first in Michael Jackson's *Black or White* music video from 1991. These sequences allow you to turn anything into anything via a sequence of changes. Menke gets at the same phenomenon when he states that the free play of the imagination, on the one hand, entails the suspension of any commitment to 'law and normativity' that is linked with extant social practices and, on the other hand, instigates a 'metamorphic game of unceasing transformations and developments' (Menke 2013b: 155; my translation).

Exercises of aesthetic freedom are therefore very different from exercises of benign moral freedom. The latter start out from a commitment to preserving extant social roles and norms and are thus limited in terms of their transformative potential. Their ambition is (merely) to render our interpretations of existing social roles and norms fairer. Comparing aesthetic freedom and benign moral freedom in terms of their passive-receptive and active-creative moments also helps to shed light on the differences between them. The receptivity or attention of benign moral freedom is from the very beginning confined to phenomena

²² For my account of modern aesthetics, see Chapter 1.

that are linked to the differential impact of extant social norms and roles. Exercises of aesthetic freedom are, by contrast, unrestricted in terms of their receptivity. As part of aesthetic relating, anything can become the subject-matter of our perceptive and emotional explorations. What is more, the active-creative moment of exercises of aesthetic freedom is as unconstrained as the receptivity informing it.

There is also a clear contrast between (benign) aesthetic freedom and pathological moral freedom. Exercises of pathological moral freedom abstract completely from social reality. They are therefore not receptive at all but purely creative. The ambition of exercises of pathological moral freedom is to construct the social world (anew) without being in any form influenced by the existing fabric of social life. For the only thing that guides and limits this work of moral construction is the principle of universal justifiability itself. Both pathological moral freedom and aesthetic freedom can be said to be unrestrictedly creative; however, only the creative exercises of (benign) aesthetic freedom are grounded in an engagement with the extant social world. In acts of aesthetic relating, the free play of the imagination is informed by how our senses and emotions disclose the world to us. It is this engagement with the fabric of social life that renders exercises of aesthetic freedom non-formal, non-abstract and non-pathological, to use the Hegelian terminology.²³

It should now be clear how the aesthetics of the free play of the imagination bears on the problem of scope unfreedom. By complementing legal and moral freedom with aesthetic freedom, we can address the residual scope unfreedom that mars the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. Of course, any alternative to the status quo that emerges from exercises of aesthetic freedom must be scrutinized in the democratic public sphere. It should only re-shape the way we live together if it is found to be compatible with democratic *Sittlichkeit's* overarching normative commitment to equal freedom for all, on the one hand, and if it is adopted through democratic procedures, on the other hand.

To conclude this section, I can now link up this discussion of scope unfreedom with the remarks in the previous chapters on how the modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination interacts with the notion of freedom that underpins modern ethical life. The aesthetics of the free play of the imagination counteracts

²³ Martin Seel calls this interplay between the passive-receptive and the active-creative moment of aesthetic relating 'interpreting attentiveness' (Seel 2014: 275, also 273). Menke points to a similar phenomenon when he highlights that 'the aesthetic . . . sphere is never purely aesthetic but the precarious, insecure and transient unity of play and praxis' (Menke 2013b: 156; my translation).

the unfreedom that is involved in becoming and being a practical subject or a subject of capacities.

We develop our capacities by being socialized into extant practices; and socialization is inevitably (albeit to different degrees) shot through with power (e.g. discipline). What is more, the normatively constituted social practices into which we are socialized (typically) predate us. We don't really have a choice when it comes to being socialized into them and developing those capacities that enable us to become self-guiding participants in these practices.²⁴ This is why becoming a 'social participant' always involves unfreedom (Menke 2013a: 96; my translation).

The modern aesthetics of the free play of the imagination thus points to a mode of addressing this unfreedom by bringing the social norms and roles that are constitutive of the practices into which we are socialized themselves within the remit of a practice of freedom. For these social norms and roles are among those aspects of the world that we (can) allow our imagination to freely play with.²⁵ If one does that, one starts 'to distinguish oneself from oneself as a social participant' and thus 'transcends oneself' as the 'practical subject' that one has become through socialization processes (Menke 2013a: 96; my translation). The aesthetics of the free play of the imagination therefore entails the potential for generating (at least) some distance between us and our social roles. For this reason, it opens up again and again a space for self-difference and self-becoming (e.g. by aesthetically engaging with social practices, norms and roles).

3.4. The shortcomings of the standard account II: Individual unfreedom

The problem of individual unfreedom must be distinguished from the problem of scope unfreedom, even though both denote dimensions of unfreedom linked with the displacement of aesthetic freedom from the standard account of democratic ethical life. In the case of individual unfreedom, the problem results from the fact that we are supposed to realize ourselves as *individuals* through playing social roles that are part of norm-guided social practices.

We need to come back to a discussion from the previous chapter to appreciate how this problem of individual unfreedom is linked with modern aesthetics.

²⁴ See Menke (2013b: 151).

²⁵ See Menke (2013b: 116).

What is culturally revolutionary about modern aesthetics is that it regards explorative (non-instrumental) uses of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as intrinsically valuable. Modern aesthetics discourse thereby transforms our understanding of freedom as self-realization because it brings into focus our individuality, which is cultivated and expressed through aesthetic engagements with the world. What modern aesthetics teaches us about freedom is therefore that a satisfactory account of freedom as self-realization must (also) make room for – and do justice to – our individuality. To do that, such an account has to take seriously that for *aesthetic beings* like us, the free realization of our capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination denotes a dimension of our freedom.

The upshot of this is that aesthetics, as I understand it, complements other dimensions of self-realization that involve us as universal (i.e. rational, legal or moral) subjects. The key contribution of modern aesthetics to the modern understanding of freedom is therefore the insight that we cannot consider ourselves to be fully free or self-realizing if we are only realizing ourselves as universal (moral, legal or rational) subjects. For the self-realization as a universal subject does not imply – as Schiller eloquently argues – that one is also realizing oneself as an aesthetic being or individual.²⁶

Against the backdrop of this analysis of modern aesthetics, we can appreciate that the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is confronted with a problem of individual unfreedom because it displaces the aesthetic. As a result of this displacement, the standard account is unable to provide answers to the following questions: under what conditions can we realize ourselves as individuals if we can only realize our freedom through our participation in (personal, economic and political) relations of social freedom, that is, by playing (inevitably generic) social roles? Is there a way of inhabiting social roles that enables us to realize ourselves also as individuals? In sum, the problem of individual unfreedom emerges from the tension between the claim (linked with modern aesthetics) that freedom involves the dimension of individuality, and the claim (associated with the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*) that we realize our freedom through our participation in relationships of social freedom, that is, by playing *social* roles and acting in accordance with social norms that underpin extant social practices.

²⁶ For Schiller's (2005a) discussion of how modern aesthetics transforms our understanding of individual and political freedom, see his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* from 1795. See also Beiser (2005b: 151–3, 229–37;) and Matherne and Riggall (2020; 2021).

Social roles are part of a framework that structures social interactions. What is more, social roles typically pre-date the individuals who inhabit them, that is, these roles existed before the concrete individuals who have been socialized into them. They can thus appear to individuals as ‘institutional facts’ that they are ‘constantly compelled to antecedently recognize’ (Honneth 2014: 111). Social roles also come with an in-built ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth 2014: 384n476), since, according to structural role theory, ‘roles are typically defined as the socially shared expectations and behaviors associated with a position in society’ (Callero 2008: 275).²⁷ From the point of view of individual freedom, the issue at stake is the following: the social roles through which we are supposed to realize ourselves as individuals cannot be understood as an expression of our individuality. But is there a way of making these roles our own?

My claim is that the standard account of democratic ethical life does not address this problem of individual unfreedom. This, in turn, undermines its claim to denote a life of freedom, since the standard account cannot explain how we can consider ourselves to be self-realizing as individuals if our self-realization takes place by playing social roles. In the remainder of this section, I show, firstly, that this problem of individual unfreedom is linked with the issue of conformism. I then present my case that neither moral nor legal freedom enable individuals to appropriate their social roles as individuals. Based on this finding, I argue that the process of appropriating one’s social roles is aesthetic in character (and involves all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics): it involves reflecting on how one perceives and emotionally experiences playing one’s social roles as well as engaging playfully and imaginatively with these roles. The problem of individual unfreedom can, in other words, be overcome by incorporating a notion of aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life.

Unlike in the case of scope unfreedom, proponents of the standard account demonstrate some awareness of the problem of individual unfreedom.²⁸ Already Hegel warns of the ‘death of the individual’ that ensues if individuals merely follow ‘*custom*’ or fulfil the social expectations associated with their social roles, that is, if they fail to habitually ‘assert’ themselves as individuals (Hegel 1991: 195; trans. modified).²⁹ Honneth also mentions a ‘tendency for conformism’ that is in-built in role-mediated relationships (2014: 384n476). He even suggests that due to this tendency, one ‘might be tempted to view “aesthetic freedom” as

²⁷ For a similar definition, see Honneth (2014: 126). See also Parsons (1951).

²⁸ However, they nonetheless fail to systematically address this problem.

²⁹ See also Seel (2014: 278, 276) and Menke (2013b: 153–5).

‘an independent category of freedom’ that can counter this tendency (Honneth 2014: 384n476).³⁰

Unfortunately, Honneth does not answer the questions that this aside raises: what exactly is conformism? How does it undermine our freedom (and thus democratic ethical life’s aspiration to be a life of freedom)? What features of role-mediated relationships give rise to this tendency for conformism? Does aesthetic freedom constitute a distinct variant of freedom (and, if yes, how are we to conceptualize it)? Why exactly should we consider aesthetic freedom a counterforce to conformism? I provide answers to these questions in the remainder of this (and the next) chapter.³¹

3.4.1. Conformism and the problem of individual unfreedom

Let us take a closer look at the above-mentioned tendency towards conformism that is in-built in role-mediated relations which threatens to undermine the ability of individuals to realize themselves as individuals. To do this, we need to first clarify what is meant by ‘social role.’ Honneth embraces Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism and his structural role theory.³² As a consequence, he understands ‘social roles’ as bundles of normative expectations and ‘behavioural demands’ (Honneth 2014: 126). However, as interactionists like Ralph H. Turner have pointed out, these expectations and demands typically only amount to ‘general patterns’ (Callero 2008: 276) that ‘leave a great deal to individual discretion’ (Turner 2001: 235). Creatively addressing this ‘degree of uncertainty and discretion’ is thus constitutive of playing social roles (Callero 2008: 276). For example, although most parents understand that affection and discipline are key elements when it comes to raising a child, they are also aware that they need to generate their own interpretation of these underspecified notions in their day-to-day interactions with their child.

³⁰ Honneth’s engagement with this issue seems to have been prompted by reading Juliane Rebentisch’s *The Art of Freedom* (2016).

³¹ Taken together, Chapters 1, 3 and 4 provide a comprehensive and affirmative answer to Honneth’s question of whether “aesthetic freedom” . . . represents an independent category of freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 384n476). Unlike Honneth, who points in this connection to the ‘significance of art for the revitalization of the public’, I propose an understanding of aesthetics and aesthetic freedom that is neither conceptually dependent on art nor confined to artistic productions (2014: 384n476). I explain why exercises of aesthetic freedom have the potential to counter the tendency for conformism that is in-built in *all* role-mediated relationships, whereas Honneth only mentions that aesthetic freedom might be capable of revitalizing political relations or ‘the sphere of the democratic public’ (2014: 384n476).

³² See Honneth (2014: 3–4) and Parsons (1951).

Having clarified the notion of social role and what is involved in conforming with roles, we can move on to the next question: how can we tell apart conformist conforming (in short, conformism) from nonconformist conforming with expectations that are associated with social roles? Like Honneth, I am committed to the view that conforming with roles need not be conformist, that is, undermining individual self-realization. Consequently, we are not facing the following *aporia* of individual freedom: we can only realize our freedom, including our individual freedom, through role-mediated relationships, but conforming with social roles always undermines our individual self-realization. After all, talk of a 'tendency for conformism' only makes sense if nonconformist conforming is possible (Honneth 2014: 384n476). In short, we cannot infer from the fact that individuals are conforming with role expectations that they do so in a conformist fashion, that is, in a fashion that undermines their individual self-realization.

The difference between conforming and conformism must therefore lie in *how* one is inhabiting one's social roles and meeting behavioural expectations associated with them. As I see it, there are two aspects to conformism: firstly, we are dealing with conformist conforming if individuals never ask themselves whether they should continue playing a role considering how they perceive and emotionally experience playing that role. Secondly, we are confronted with conformism if individuals generate their interpretations of the (always to some degree underspecified) behavioural expectations associated with their social roles without exploring and consulting how they perceive and emotionally experience playing their social roles. By contrast, individuals who are conforming in a nonconformist fashion remain attentive to how they perceive and emotionally experience playing their roles. They reflect on these perceptions and qualitative experiences when they playfully and imaginatively create their interpretations of extant social roles or alternatives to extant social roles. Nonconformist conforming thus points to a way of playing social roles in a manner that keeps the individuality of individuals in play.

This notion of nonconformist conforming addresses the aforementioned worry expressed by Hegel that we are dealing with the 'death of the individual' if individuals are merely guided by social expectations or '*custom*' without also and habitually 'asserting' themselves or their individuality (Hegel 1991: 195; trans. modified). These issues surrounding conformism are also addressed by authors like Mill, Emerson and Cavell who all are part of a perfectionist strand in democratic theory.³³ Like Hegel, these authors link conformism with unfreedom

³³ On perfectionism, see Cavell (1990: 2–27), Conant (2000: 227) and Mill (1991: 64–78).

as it engenders a form of self-loss.³⁴ For if one does not take seriously how one perceives and emotionally experiences playing roles in relation to whether, and how, one interprets and plays one's roles, then one has no claim to be taking oneself seriously. By implication, if one is not taking oneself seriously, one cannot be realizing *oneself* by participating in given role-mediated relationships. Emerson therefore stresses, for instance, the importance of 'self-reliance' (Emerson 1990: 131), Mill the relevance of cultivating 'the person's own character' (Mill 1991: 63) and Cavell the 'idea of being true to oneself' (Cavell 1990: 1). Another elective affinity between these perfectionist authors and my take consists in the fact that they also argue that conformism not only undermines individuals' self-realization (and thus individual freedom) but also threatens the 'democratic aspiration' of denoting (or becoming) a form of free life (Cavell 1990: 1). For this presupposes the full development of a democratic society's capacity for self-critique and self-transformation.

Mill, for instance, characterizes conformist individuals as conforming to and creatively interpreting the behavioural expectations associated with their roles without 'ask[ing] themselves – what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition?' (Mill 1991: 68) Mill stipulates that to some it might simply 'not occur to . . . have any inclination, except for what is customary' (1991: 68). As a result, they 'conform to custom, merely *as custom*' (Mill 1991: 65). Others are aware of their 'feelings and character' and recognize that aspects of their individuality bring them at odds with their roles (or certain interpretations of them) (Mill 1991: 65). However, conformist individuals respond to such a tension by 'rendering' their 'feelings and character inert and torpid', as opposed to taking these negative experiences seriously as a starting point for a critical and imaginative re-evaluation of their roles (Mill 1991: 65). What these and other guises of conformism have in common is that the individuals in question play their roles without 'consulting' themselves as individuals 'on the state of' their 'consent' when creatively interpreting the underspecified expectations associated with their roles (Cavell 1990: 28).³⁵

There are a range of strategies available to individuals generating conformist interpretations of social roles. One option mentioned by Mill is to imitate

³⁴ See Cavell (1990: 26–7) and Mill (1991: 78).

³⁵ I am making the claim that conformist individuals have a disposition not to take themselves seriously, but I say nothing here about why and how they develop such a disposition and whether we can hold them responsible for doing so. Addressing this issue would require, among other things, to investigate the distinct forms of subjectivization to which they have been exposed and the character of the social practices into which they have been socialized (as well as extant sanctions against creative appropriations of social roles that challenge the status quo).

others inhabiting the same role.³⁶ As a university lecturer, I can respond to the increasing pressure to get high satisfaction ratings from students by imitating my highest scoring colleagues. As a result, I might change my teaching style (e.g. how I interact with students and how I link what I teach with current events), the modes of assessment (e.g. I could replace essays or exams with group work and presentations) or the way in which I deliver feedback (e.g. I could replace written comments with video files). As a conformist, I would implement these changes without consulting myself or taking seriously how I perceive and emotionally experience teaching like this. It is true, even imitating others requires a degree of creativity, for transposing what others do to one's own situation involves making all kinds of determinations. My class sizes might be different from those of colleagues who come out on top in student evaluations. Furthermore, they might be teaching a different subject (or a different specialization of my subject) or students in different years, etc.

Let's consider another conformist strategy. I could reinvent myself as a teacher by inventing novel teaching styles, assessments and feedback procedures (instead of imitating successful colleagues). If I do all this in order to do well in student assessments and without taking seriously and being guided by how I perceive and emotionally experience teaching like this, I still play my role in a conformist fashion. What this example brings out is the *difference between being creative and being aesthetically self-realizing* (for the latter requires the free interplay of all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics, namely sense perception, emotions and the free play of the imagination). Creativity on its own does not provide an answer to the problem of individual unfreedom. For a creative interpretation of a role to bear on individual self-realization it must be guided by 'one's own experience' and 'voice' (Cavell 1990: 2, 27).³⁷

It has been established that conforming need not be conformist. Conforming with a social role (or a distinct creative interpretation of a social role) can be expressive of individuals' 'consent' (Cavell 1990: 28). However, this requires an aesthetic engagement with these roles. Only when one is 'consulting' (Cavell 1990: 28) oneself as an individual can one achieve a '*personal* stage in which one develops an idiosyncratic version of the role that suits the individual's unique disposition' (Turner 2001: 248). If this happens, individuals might not experience playing their roles as confining, or to the extent they do find it confining, they might be unable to imagine alternative roles or interpretations of them which

³⁶ See Mill (1991: 64, 68).

³⁷ For an elaboration of the claim that 'mere creativity' accounts of aesthetic freedom are pathological, see Chapter 6.

they, all things considered, regard as less confining. In short, nonconformist conforming is possible, since our re-affirmation of given social roles or certain interpretations of them can be the outcome of our aesthetic engagement with our social roles. Exercises of aesthetic freedom are thus neither biased in favour nor against the status quo. They engender a potential for radical change but can equally well underpin resistance to change (that might be imposed from outside). However, the decisive difference between conformism and reaffirmation can only emerge in the wake of an aesthetic engagement with one's own social roles.³⁸

3.4.2. What drives the tendency for conformism?

Having clarified the distinction between conforming and conformism, we can now turn our attention to what drives the 'tendency for conformism' (Honneth 2014: 384n476) that is associated with role-mediated relationships. There are many 'factors contributing' to this tendency: a 'broad range' of mechanisms, 'forces, beliefs, and desires', some 'blatant', some 'subtle' and some 'mutually reinforcing with great cumulative effect' (Hogan 2001: 1). Given this complexity, I confine myself here to providing some backing for the claim that such a tendency exists and illustrating some factors that underpin it. In short, I point out some social forces that render individuals less disposed to take seriously how they perceive and emotionally experience playing a role and to imaginatively explore on this basis alternatives to given social roles or alternative interpretations of them.

In this regard, it makes sense to turn again to findings by role theorists that account for the alleged in-built tendency for conformism or 'accommodation' (Turner 1990: 90). One such finding consists in the fact that once a role is established, there is a 'tendency for the broad outline of roles and sometimes quite specific role elements' to stay the same 'in spite of changes in the actors who play the role' (Turner 2001: 235, 241). Several factors explain this tendency: firstly, role theorists postulate an interest in maintaining stability that discourages engaging with established roles in ways that could potentially open them up to radical changes. For 'changes in a focal role threatens the stability of relationships and force some changes in relevant alter roles' (Turner 2001: 235). Secondly, role theorists identify an interest in 'predictability' because predictability is regarded as 'essential for social relationships' (Turner 2001: 235). This interest thus serves as an obstacle to opening up roles to practices of aesthetic freedom that could

³⁸ See Rebentisch (2010: 183; 2016: 84–5).

bring about ‘radical changes’ and thereby ‘provoke anxiety’ (Turner 2001: 235). Typically, not even the individuals in favour of role change are initially aware of where the process of drafting an ‘unattained but attainable self’ based on diffuse negative experiences will lead them (Emerson 1990: 115). Thirdly, role theorists tell us that it is normal for individuals to form an ‘attachment’ to the ‘particular roles’ they play (Turner 2001: 242); in fact, the ‘individual tends to merge self with given roles’ (Turner 2001: 248). Again, this tendency fuels a disposition to disregard negative emotional experiences with a role (or a given interpretation of it).

Role theorists have identified further forces that account for our propensity to form attachments to roles or merge with them. For a start, there is ‘a tendency . . . to view ourselves as others’ see us (Turner 2001: 248). Instead of paying attention to how we perceive and emotionally experience playing a role, we tend to focus on, and identify ourselves with, how others view us as role incumbents. In addition, we tend to ‘identify ourselves most strongly with roles in which we experience . . . favourable evaluations’ from others (Turner 2001: 248). The stronger one identifies with a role, the more one will be inclined to disregard one’s negative emotional experience with a role.

This observation relates to a worry expressed by recognition theorists in the tradition of Rousseau. They highlight that our desire for recognition, or being (highly) esteemed, drives a tendency for alienation and unfreedom.³⁹ On the one hand, we tend to prefer roles that confer a higher social status over those with a lower associated status. On the other hand, the craving for favourable evaluations fuels an inclination to perform roles (e.g. as a teacher) in a way that solicits the most positive responses from others. Our sense of alienation can therefore be rooted in the fact that we do not let ourselves be guided by how we perceive and emotionally experience playing these roles. Finally, we tend to identify most strongly ‘with those roles in which we have made the greatest investment’ (Turner 2001: 248). Again, the stronger our degree of identification with a role, the more inclined we become to disregard negative experiences with our roles. It is important to appreciate that the above factors that account for a tendency for conformism pertain to role-mediated relationships in general. By implication, they also apply to relationships of social freedom. Moreover, these factors also affect individuals who experience playing their roles, or given interpretations of them, as limiting.

³⁹ This point is made by Rousseau (1997: 111–231) in his pathbreaking ‘Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men’ from 1755. See also Neuhauser (2008: 57–89).

These general factors that we have considered so far can be amplified by historically and contextually specific social mechanisms. For instance, specific formal and informal negative or positive sanctions can have an impact on whether individuals feel encouraged to contemplate and convey to others how they perceive and emotionally experience inhabiting their roles and to playfully and imaginatively explore alternatives to given roles (or their interpretations). For example, in a context in which engaging in non-heterosexual intimate relationships entails the possibility of criminal charges and/or social ostracizing, individuals with non-heterosexual inclinations have a motive to render themselves unresponsive to them. However, there are many other and more subtle ways of interfering with the process of relying on one's 'own experience' (Cavell 1990: 2).⁴⁰

In sum, a whole range of general features of role-mediated relationships as well as historically and contextually specific mechanisms fuel the tendency for roles to 'become ossified' (Turner 2001: 252). We therefore have no reason to think, *pace* Honneth, that relationships of social freedom 'are safe from the danger of' conformism or of 'becoming passively petrified' (Honneth 2014: 66).

3.4.3. Legal freedom, moral freedom and the problem of individual unfreedom

With this background in the problem of individual unfreedom behind us, we can now explain why moral and legal freedom, that is, the freedoms that are supposed to ensure that our participation in extant role-mediated relationships of social freedom remains free, do not provide individuals with the resources to appropriate their social roles as individuals and thereby to address the problem of individual unfreedom. Such an appropriation is, however, a precondition for being self-realizing as individuals through playing these roles.

What is involved in the process of appropriating one's social role? It involves those aspects that we have already singled out in relation to the emergence of modern aesthetics as individuality disclosing: how individuals perceive and emotionally experience inhabiting their social roles and whether they feel free to re-imagine roles and their socially valid interpretations in light of their

⁴⁰ Axel Honneth gives an example of what it can look like to socially interfere with and undermine individuals' ability to relate aesthetically to their social roles in his article 'Organized Self-Realization' (2004). He argues that since the 1970s, it has become more and more common in the world of work to expect individuals to have, or at least display, certain emotional attitudes (e.g. enthusiasm, joy, excitement) as part of their professional life. For my discussion of this example, see Chapter 6.

perceptions and qualitative experiences. Can exercises of (benign) legal and moral freedom underpin the appropriation of social roles?

The status of a legal person or subject of rights tracks, in the Hegelian tradition, subjects' decision-making capacity. Being recognized as a subject of rights opens up a space for arbitrary decision-making. Subjects of rights can always 'step out of all interpersonal relations and insist on their "right" to do whatever they want to do, 'whatever reasons might be raised against that by others' (Iser 2013).⁴¹ Legal freedom realizes a dimension of freedom that Honneth understands along the lines of a 'negative conception of freedom' (Honneth 2014: 65). Rights enable individuals to withdraw from relationships of social freedom and to 'act on their own unreflected preferences' as long as they do not violate the rights of others (Honneth 2014: 65). Legal personhood is, however, not the solution to the problem of individual unfreedom, since the standpoint of a legal subject denotes an impersonal standpoint.

As subjects of rights, we are all like each other because we all possess decision-making capacity and an equal system of rights and liberties (at least in the kind of liberal-democratic systems I am considering in this study).⁴² Further, when considering the options available for someone as a subject of rights, each course of action that falls within the remit of the space of arbitrary decision-making that is opened up by these rights is equally valid. Whether the option adopted is the morally right course of action or if it is in line with the individuality of the respective person are not questions that arise from the point of view of legal freedom. Conceiving of ourselves and each other as subjects of rights thus involves, as Honneth puts it, stripping off our 'individuality' and the 'colour' of our inner life (e.g. our convictions, desires, aims and sensibilities) (Honneth 2014: 84).

Engaging with our individuality requires to go beyond or behind 'our role as legal persons' (Honneth 2014: 84). Rights might indeed play a role in granting individuals 'a private sphere in which they' can 'examine their life aims' in an aesthetic fashion (Honneth 2014: 81). Yet, this does not change the fact that rights themselves are not directly involved when individuals engage in an aesthetic 'self-reflection' and, on this basis, 'rethink and define their individual preferences and value orientations' and explore how their individuality interacts

⁴¹ See also Menke (2009).

⁴² There are, of course, many exceptions to this rule (think, for example, of the status of non-citizen residents). This is, however, not the place for a discussion and evaluation of these important exceptions.

with the social roles they inhabit (Honneth 2014: 81). Whether or not we can appropriate our social roles as individuals is therefore a question that can only be addressed once we leave behind the perspective of the legal person and adopt another perspective, namely one that brings our individuality to bear on our social roles.

A similar picture emerges with respect to moral freedom. The status of a moral subject is grounded in subjects' capacity to deliberate about what is right. Being recognized as a moral subject implies that one is 'always free . . . regardless of social position . . . to question' demands associated with social roles and norms (Honneth 2014: 98). Exercises of moral freedom thus amount to an 'interruption' of one's ordinary participation in relations of freedom in order to 'gain reflexive distance' (Honneth 2014: 112). As moral subjects, we 'test' the 'social universalizability' of currently valid interpretations of social roles and norms, 'reject unreasonable social demands' and suggest revisions that render these interpretations fairer (Honneth 2014: 98, 89). This standpoint of morality is, however, also an impersonal standpoint. To morally evaluate social roles, we need not inhabit them ourselves, and the point of scrutinizing them is not to ascertain what we as individuals make of these roles, but whether they are generally and reciprocally justifiable to *all*.⁴³ Again, the individuality disclosing dimensions of aesthetic relating are not part of exercises of (benign) moral freedom, even though one should be receptive when engaging in such exercises to how extant interpretations of social roles and norms affect different individuals differently.⁴⁴

We have thus reached the conclusion that moral and legal freedom cannot deal with the problem of individual unfreedom, since neither from the moral nor legal standpoint can we consider whether our social roles are compatible with our individuality. Hegel and Honneth's accounts of *Sittlichkeit* are therefore unsatisfactory in terms of delineating a form of free life, since their accounts only comprise two individual freedoms (i.e. legal and moral freedom) which provide us with two modes of universal self-realization but *no* mode of individual self-realization. In short, the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* cannot overcome the problem of individual unfreedom.

⁴³ See, for instance, Forst (2011).

⁴⁴ For instance, giving certain students with specific learning difficulties additional resources or time in relation to an exam can be morally justified for reasons of fairness.

3.4.4. Aesthetic freedom and the problem of individual unfreedom

According to my analysis, this impasse results from the fact that theorists of modern *Sittlichkeit* from Hegel to Honneth neither recognize the importance of modern aesthetics for modern ethical life nor how modern aesthetics expands the notion of freedom underpinning it. As a result, they displace aesthetic freedom from the standard account of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*. This study aims to overcome this shortcoming. In the next chapter, I develop my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics (from Chapter 1) into a recognition-theoretical account of aesthetic freedom that complements other relations of individual freedom (namely, legal and moral freedom).

I already indicated how the substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics help us address the problem of individual unfreedom that arises from the fact that we realize our freedom through role-mediated relationships. By engaging with their social roles aesthetically, individuals can appropriate their social roles as individuals. Furthermore, it has also become clear that it matters for our freedom if we are socially empowered to freely and imaginatively play with or re-imagine the 'outline[s] of roles' in light of our perceptions of and emotional experiences with them (Turner 2001: 235). Without engaging the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics, we are not present as individuals when we inhabit these roles and thus cannot regard ourselves as being self-realizing as individuals through playing our social roles. What is more, only through engaging aesthetically with our social roles, can we access an aesthetic mode of critique of 'our existing conception of the good' that could open up 'new' ways of living our life (Honneth 2014: 84). The aesthetic appropriating and re-imagining of social roles, norms and practices is thus a counterforce to the 'tendency for conformism' that is in-built in role-mediated relationships (Honneth 2014: 384n476).

Allow me to conclude my remarks on this topic by considering a possible objection. It could be argued that to lend plausibility to my claim that legal and moral freedom are unable to adequately deal with the problem of individual unfreedom, I invoke stunted accounts of moral and legal freedom. For instance, it is not uncommon in the legal and moral sphere to take into consideration the perceptions and emotions of relevant individuals. What is more, exercises of legal and moral freedom can be imaginative in terms of how they deal with cases. For example, in custody disputes relating to a divorce a judge can pay attention to the particularities of the case, consider how the child and the parents perceive and feel about the situation, listen to how they imagine one could best deal with it

and then propose custody arrangements that reflect these perceptual, emotional and imaginative dimensions. In short, exercises of legal and moral freedom can and do incorporate aesthetic considerations. I welcome that. However, to identify that aesthetic considerations have been incorporated into exercises of moral and legal freedom, we need an account of aesthetic freedom. Furthermore, the significance of aesthetic freedom as a dimension of democratic ethical life cannot be reduced to the contributions it makes to exercises of moral and legal freedom. For the sake of democratic *Sittlichkeit* living up to its aspiration to be a life of equal freedom for all, aesthetic freedom also must have a life that is emancipated from the constraints under which it operates if it is invoked within the domains of law and morality.

3.5. The incompleteness of the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*: The social validity of aesthetic freedom

It has been demonstrated that the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is *unsatisfactory* as an account of a life of freedom because it lacks the resources to address the problem of scope unfreedom and the problem of individual unfreedom. I now want to show that the standard account is also *incomplete*. Accounts of democratic ethical life aim for completeness, that is, they aspire to reconstruct *all* dimensions of the value of freedom that have ‘taken on an institutional shape’ or are effectively shaping social relationships (Honneth 2014: 66).⁴⁵ Any account of ethical life is therefore incomplete that omits a conceptually distinct and socially valid dimension of freedom. In the next chapter, I provide an account of aesthetic recognition (understood as a variant of individual freedom that complements legal and moral freedom), drawing on my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics. All we need for the purposes of this section is a rough understanding of aesthetic freedom and its substantive dimensions to argue that the standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* are *incomplete*.⁴⁶ To this end, I invoke a range of case studies that establish that

⁴⁵ Some readers might wonder why I am not considering ethical freedom, the freedom to pursue one’s own conception of a good life, as another variant of individual freedom. According to my Hegelian outlook, the ethical denotes not a distinct variant of freedom. Ethical freedom is the overarching value of democratic ethical life, and the good life is equated with the free life. Ethical freedom is realized through participation in a web of complementary relationships of recognition. Of course, this Hegelian view is controversial but defending it is not the task I have set myself in this study.

⁴⁶ This step in my argument pre-empts a possible objection to my claim that aesthetic freedom is an integral part of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*: readers might agree that we need something other than legal and moral freedom to deal with the problems of scope unfreedom and individual

aesthetic freedom is part of the repertoire of modern subjects' modes of engaging with the world and each other. These case studies also highlight that modern individuals make demands as aesthetic subjects (i.e. demands that are grounded in their perceptive, emotional and imaginative engagement with the world). In other words, these case studies give us a taste of aesthetic freedom in action.

The idea of aesthetic freedom emerges, like other notions that shape modern ethical life (such as moral, legal, personal, economic and political freedom), in the run-up to the modern democratic revolution of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ Aesthetic freedom thus belongs to the intellectual and praxeological context in which the modern democratic revolution takes place. The modern 'aesthetic revolution' is therefore not just an event in intellectual history (Rancière 2002). It is, from the very beginning, linked with 'certain "aesthetic" behaviors' that are different, for instance, 'from moral and utilitarian . . . behavior' (Shiner 2001: 132–3). Members of modern societies (aspire to) familiarize themselves with and engage in this aesthetic mode of relating to the world. Already in the late eighteenth century, there is, for example, a growing market for popular guidebooks on the topic of aesthetic behaviours that target the emerging bourgeois class.⁴⁸ Modern aesthetics thus manifests itself in practical and behavioural ways and is linked with a whole range of expectations (pertaining to explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination). This makes it possible to turn the aesthetic into the subject-matter of sociological studies that reconstructs the aesthetic as a force that shapes modern social life.

A sociology of aesthetics can, for instance, study the aesthetic behaviours and expectations of members of modern societies, including the diverse struggles for aesthetic recognition, that is, the struggle of those who feel they are not given the consideration that is due to them as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings or equal aesthetic subjects.⁴⁹

unfreedom. Furthermore, readers might also concede that my notion of aesthetic freedom has what it takes to address these two unfreedoms. Yet, the same readers might still insist that for this line of argument to be more than empty, ideal theorizing, aesthetic freedom must be socially valid, but it is not. To deal with this objection, I need to demonstrate that aesthetic freedom is socially effective or institutionalized in modern *Sittlichkeit*. For this to be the case, members of modern societies must feel licensed to relate aesthetically to the world and have a sense that others owe them consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. In short, I need to show that the notion of aesthetic freedom is part of the 'culture' of modern and democratic ethical life (Honneth 2014: 96).

⁴⁷ For a genealogy of moral autonomy, see Schneewind (1998), and for an account of the emergence of the modern notion of the aesthetic, see Shiner (2001).

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Link (1992).

⁴⁹ In Chapter 6, I outline the research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics that aims to identify and criticize all the ways in which aesthetic freedom's potential to contribute to democratic ethical life becoming a life of equal freedom for all is (unnecessarily) undermined.

The following case studies range from the period right after the French Revolution to the present day and cover quite different phenomena: the early socialist critique of capitalism, feminist consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s, the new spirit of capitalism and the de-rigidification of social roles. These case studies serve as illustrations of the kind of phenomena that deserve to be studied in more depth by sociologists of aesthetics. These case studies are merely invoked to underpin my claim that aesthetic freedom has been an integral part of and socially effective in modern ethical life from its inception.

3.5.1. Case Study 1: The early socialist critique of capitalist society

My first case study is one that Honneth himself explores in *The Idea of Socialism* (2016). My claim is that even according to Honneth's own depiction of the early socialists' critique of the capitalist market, we cannot make sense of the socialists' critique of modern bourgeois society if we only draw on the notions of legal and moral freedom (i.e. the only notions of freedom available to proponents of the standard account of democratic ethical life). I argue that we must invoke all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics to account for all aspects of the early socialists' radical critique of modern capitalism. In short, the early socialist critique of modern capitalism is also an aesthetic critique put forward by aesthetic subjects, that is, individuals who relate aesthetically to their social world and make aesthetically grounded demands.

What makes the early socialists' critique aesthetic? It is saturated with attentive observations of and emotional experiences with the capitalist mode of production.⁵⁰ This saturation accounts, at least to some extent, for the lasting impression this critique makes on us. We can learn a lot from their writings about how workers perceived and emotionally experienced their relationship to their productive activities, fellow workers, working conditions, living conditions, employers, the products of their labour and so on and so forth. In short, the early socialists left behind an impressive record of their aesthetic engagement with their social reality, an engagement that went well beyond what was required from them in terms of fulfilling their obligations as labourers.

One source of socialists' negative evaluation of capitalism is, in other words, their perceptive and emotional exploration of it, and this exploration is not

⁵⁰ Simone Weil's critique of factory work, which I explore in Chapter 6, belongs to and continues this tradition of criticizing capitalism in aesthetic terms.

directly linked with their legal and moral freedom. What makes their radical critique of negative legal freedom possible is that exercises of aesthetic freedom (unlike benign exercises of moral freedom) do not start out from an *ex ante* commitment to keep the broad outlines of extant social norms and roles in place. To put it differently, only because the early socialists related to their social world aesthetically, could the ‘legal notion of individual freedom’, which underpins the capitalist market, itself show up as problematic (Honneth 2016: 11).

The early socialists’ critique of the capitalist market also involved the third substantive dimension of modern aesthetics: the free play of the imagination. The early socialists found imaginative expressions for their negative experiences. Poetic-diagnostic conceptual inventions such as alienated labour, reification, exploitation or commodity fetishism originate from early socialists’ perceptive-creative aesthetic engagement with the world of capitalism.⁵¹ What is more, they re-imagined productive social cooperation, producing ideas such as socialism, social freedom, phalanstères, proletariat and the notion of an ‘association of free producers’ (Honneth 2016: 20).

The example of the early socialists illustrates aesthetic freedom’s potential to set in motion processes of radical critique and change. Aesthetic freedom is, for this reason, key to retaining the openness that is characteristic of the democratic form of life (but missing from the standard accounts of *democratic* ethical life). Democratic *Sittlichkeit*, as I understand it, remains open to democratic changes to ‘the normative structure’ of ‘society’, assuming they are associated with benefits in terms of equal freedom (Honneth 2015: 209). One way of reading Honneth’s *The Idea of Socialism* is therefore as an account of a social movement demanding radical changes that are linked with concrete, negative experiences with the extant capitalist economic sphere. Furthermore, Honneth presents this socialist project as a progressive contribution to democratic ethical life, even though it cannot be understood as emerging from an exercise of legal or moral (or economic) freedom.

According to Honneth, the French Revolution overcame the estate-based order and put in place a novel normative horizon. This horizon encompassed the ideals of ‘freedom, equality, and fraternity’ or solidarity, which informed key post-revolutionary social institutions such as the capitalist market (Honneth 2016: 6). The socialists then ‘discovered an internal contradiction in the principles of the French Revolution’, for the ‘merely legal or individualist understanding

⁵¹ See Honneth (2016: 89, 99, 107). For a more detailed account of the notion of ‘conceptual innovation’, see Geuss (2008: 42–50).

of freedom' underlying the capitalist market was 'far too narrow for it to be reconcilable with the principle of fraternity' (Honneth 2016: 11). Against this backdrop, the socialists came up with the 'original, groundbreaking idea' of social freedom that 'boldly' unified 'the three partially conflicting principles' of equality, liberty and solidarity 'by interpreting individual freedom as a kind of freedom in which each person complements the other', thus 'completely resolving this freedom with the demands of equality and fraternity' (Honneth 2016: 25).⁵²

This innovative and radical socialist project cannot be conceptualized as an exercise of (benign) moral freedom, for the notion of social freedom is not a less biased interpretation of the notion of legal freedom but an 'alternative model' (Honneth 2016: 20) of freedom.⁵³ To account for this radically innovative and transformative socialist project 'to replace individual freedom with social freedom' in the economic sphere 'in order to fulfil all the necessary prerequisites for relations of solidarity among members of society', we have to invoke aesthetic freedom (Honneth 2016: 54). Once we recognize that aesthetic freedom is, and always has been, an integral part of democratic ethical life, we can appreciate that the socialists' radically critical and freedom expanding project, which aimed at transforming the normative structure of democratic societies, preserves democratic *Sittlichkeit* itself. For this transformation originates from one of the three variants of individual freedom (i.e. moral, legal and aesthetic freedom) and is guided by the normative aim to realize equal freedom for all.

3.5.2. Case Study 2: The aesthetic dimensions of feminist consciousness-raising

Consciousness-raising or 'CR groups' played an important role in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. They also provide another powerful illustration of aesthetic freedom's nonconformist tendency and transformative

⁵² Honneth's evaluation of the socialist legacy is not entirely positive. He judges the exclusive focus on the economic sphere to be a deficit 'in the original socialist program' (Honneth 2016: 25–6). Further, he considers it a drawback that the 'socialist project' was burdened 'with a metaphysical theory of history' (Honneth 2016: 26). This last assessment is curious, since it does not sit well with Honneth's own defence of a variant of an 'end of history' thesis. See Honneth (2015: 209–10).

⁵³ The story Honneth tells about the economic sphere in *The Idea of Socialism* (2016) is incompatible with the account provided in *Freedom's Right* (2014). In the latter work, Honneth argues that the notion of social freedom has been underlying the market sphere from the very beginning (Honneth 2014: 176–252); whereas in *The Idea of Socialism* he claims that the notion of social freedom—understood as a form of cooperation in which 'each person is concerned about the self-realization of the others for non-instrumental reasons'—amounts to a conceptual innovation and creative response to negative experiences with the capitalist market and its underlying norm of negative legal freedom (Honneth 2016: 24). This is, however, not the place to address the question of which of these two views is more plausible.

potential. CR groups, which often were coextensive with or later became ‘writing groups’ (Reed 2005: 99), were arguably the ‘major technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women’s movement’ in this period (MacKinnon 1982: 5).⁵⁴ My claim is that doing justice to CR and writing groups requires us to understand them (also) as a sustained and *collective* exercises of aesthetic freedom that turn on all three substantive dimensions of aesthetic relating.⁵⁵ By implication, we have to understand the feminists involved in these CR and writing groups also as aesthetic subjects who demand to be treated as equal aesthetic subjects. In other words, these individuals engaged with their concrete social reality aesthetically and made demands that were grounded in how they perceived, emotionally experienced and re-imagined the status quo.

Firstly, consciousness-raising groups were all about women exploring together how they perceive and emotionally experience all aspects of their life.⁵⁶ Their point was, as one feminist activist put it, ‘the close examination of the individual lives of group members’ and their ‘personal experiences’ (Ware 1970: 100, 112). Literally every aspect of women’s lives became the object of aesthetic contemplation. One participant in such CR groups remembers: ‘[w]e do not rush to speech. We allow ourselves to be moved’ (MacKinnon 1982: 22).⁵⁷ These perceptive and emotional explorations are linked with an individual and collective ‘opening up’ and ‘sharing,’ which is designed to allow for women’s own experiences to emerge and be expressed (Reed 2005: 89); for the exploration of women’s perceptions and qualitative experiences is typically discouraged in patriarchal societies. Consequently, these female experiences were often obscured and suppressed via the imposition of male-dominated frameworks of expectations, perceptions, interpretations and evaluations. It is against this backdrop that Shulamith Firestone conceived of ‘an innovative mode of feminist protest’ that was supposed to draw attention to these male-dominated frameworks (Palazzi 2023: 38): ‘a *smile boycott*’ which consists of women ‘instantly abandon[ing] their “pleasing” smiles, henceforth smiling only when something pleased *them*’ (Firestone 1971: 90).

⁵⁴ MacKinnon (1991: 14) argues, in other words, that feminism is a movement that is grounded in women’s concrete experiences. This movement therefore needs a form of organization that allows for the surfacing and collective reflection on these experiences. See also Palazzi (2023: 95).

⁵⁵ See Reed (2005: 89).

⁵⁶ See Ware (1970: 108–119).

⁵⁷ See also Ware (1970: 44) and David Batho’s (2018) illuminating Heideggerian account of reticence and proleptic interpretations. There are also parallels between feminist consciousness-raising understood as an aesthetic practice, on the one hand, and psychoanalytic practice, on the other.

It is absolutely fascinating to see the explosion 'of feminist issues that emerged from formal CR groups' (Reed 2005: 92).⁵⁸ Many of them later became 'issues for the agenda of women's liberation', such as 'domestic violence', the longing for 'equal sexual pleasure for women' or the 'sense of social "double jeopardy" of being a woman and of color' (Reed 2005: 89). A wonderful way of tracing this explosion is via the anthologies of feminist poetry that emerged alongside these CR and writing groups.⁵⁹

The 'method' of CR meetings, that is, a communal form of aesthetic engagement with one's own life, enabled women to encounter their lives and social world 'in a different way', that is, 'within yet outside the male paradigm' (MacKinnon 1982: 22). With the help of this aesthetic method, CR meetings enabled the 'collective speaking of women's experience, from the perspective of that experience' (MacKinnon 1982: 6). As in the case of the early socialists, achieving this aim required women to be perceptively and emotionally attentive as well as imaginative because they had to find their own words to describe, share, diagnose and evaluate their experiences. It is therefore not surprising that what emerged from these CR groups, in which women perceptively and emotionally explored and re-imagined all aspects of their lives, are again conceptual-diagnostic inventions such as 'sexual harassment' (Fricker 2007: 150).⁶⁰ Aesthetic relating was, in other words, an integral part of 'consciousness-raising' as a 'feminist practice' (Reed 2005: 92) and made it 'transformative as well as perceptive' (MacKinnon 1982: 29).

As in the case of the early socialists, the transformative potential of the feminist critique of the 1960s and 1970s is linked with a form of collective aesthetic relating. Together they explored not just their concrete experiences but also their roots. What is more, together they re-imagined the elements that made up their lives. They imaginatively and playfully explored what it could mean and what it would take for them to be more at home in their social world or less oppressed, limited, scared, objectified and so on. In this way, CR groups were performing 'a poetic leap of the imagination forcing new insights into the roles women and men play' or could play in society (Ware 1970: 113).

My claim is, in short, that the 'feminist method' of 'consciousness raising' (MacKinnon 1982: 29) is best understood as a collective exercise of aesthetic freedom. The notion of aesthetic relating thus helps us think about or elucidate this 'collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social

⁵⁸ See also MacKinnon (1982: 15) and Ware (1970: 31).

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Cade (1970), Howe and Bass (1973) and Morgan (1970).

⁶⁰ See also Brownmiller (2000: 280–1).

experience' that takes place in CR groups in a different way (MacKinnon 1982: 29).⁶¹ Participants of CR groups link 'the close examination of the individual lives of group members' with the ambition to imaginatively 'determine how society must be changed to eliminate the oppression to which all women can testify' (Ware 1970: 100). Further, the very fact that women, like the early socialists, took recourse to a collective aesthetic practice of freedom tells us something important about this variant of freedom, namely that asserting themselves as equal aesthetic subjects was culturally available to women in their societies (even if women were still systematically suppressed as aesthetic subjects). The participants in CR groups regarded aesthetic freedom, at least implicitly, as an integral part of their emancipatory struggle and the fabric of democratic ethical life. Participants in the feminist movement made demands not just as equal moral, legal, economic and political subjects but also as equal aesthetic subjects. They were engaged in a multifaceted struggle against patriarchy and male domination. This struggle had an aesthetic dimension because women were confronted with the systematic marginalization and devaluation of their perceptions, emotional experiences and imaginative ideas for change.

3.5.3. Case Study 3: The increasing openness of social roles

Another social development pointing to aesthetic freedom's social validity and historical effectiveness is the fact that social roles have been progressively opened 'to interpretation' and thus are expected to 'leave' more and more 'room for social negotiation' (Honneth 2014: 126). Moral and legal freedom cannot account for why the opening up of social roles is, in general, associated with an increase in terms of freedom.

I understand the fact that social roles 'offer' increasing 'opportunities for intersubjective interpretation' as the result of successful struggles for aesthetic freedom, that is, a form of freedom that can turn social roles and norms into the subject-matter of an aesthetic practice of freedom (Honneth 2014: 126–7). This development brings in its wake 'increasing individualization, . . . social deviation, and rearrangement' while decreasing 'the rigidity of these roles' (Honneth 2014: 126–127). What this means is that individuals are treated as aesthetic subjects and granted more licence to re-imagine and interpret their social roles in order to give them more room to express their individuality through playing those roles. However, Honneth fails to link this social development that brings in its

⁶¹ I am grateful to Jeff Flynn for his insightful comments on this case study.

wake increasing opportunities to generate ‘individual interpretations’ of social roles, many of which would have been ‘unthinkable’ a couple of decades earlier, with the aesthetic (or any other dimension of freedom) (Honneth 2014: 127).

This case study reinforces my claim that aesthetic freedom is a force that counters the tendency for social roles to ‘become ossified’ and unresponsive to our individuality (Turner 2001: 252). Further, it showcases that aesthetic freedom is socially valid and historically effective in democratic ethical life. Integrating aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life therefore renders them (more) complete and comes with *explanatory benefits*. The notion of aesthetic freedom and the associated notion of struggles for aesthetic recognition can be invoked to explain what drives certain social developments, on the one hand, and why these developments promise to promote our freedom, on the other hand.

3.5.4. Case Study 4: The artist critique and its co-optation

Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, two eminent contemporary sociologists, have contributed more than anyone else to raise awareness of the social effectiveness of the aesthetic in modern social life and in today’s liberal capitalist societies.

Boltanski and Chiapello show that the aesthetic has been an integral part of Western societies for over 200 years.⁶² They also highlight that the aesthetic gives rise to a distinct variant of social critique, which they call ‘[a]rtist critique’, even though artists ‘were not the only ones’ engaging in it (Chiapello 2004: 585).⁶³ ‘Artist critique’ is used by Boltanski and Chiapello as ‘an umbrella term, synthesizing . . . many forms of critique first levelled against the new industrial, capitalist, and bourgeois society of the nineteenth century’ (Chiapello 2004: 585). ‘Artist critique’ is a variant of critique that is made ‘in the name of freedom’ (Chiapello 2004: 585) but is neither reducible to (what I call) moral nor legal freedom.

Unlike (benign) moral and legal freedom, artist critique frames being ‘free’ in terms of being ‘emancipated from all forms of’ social ‘constraint . . . and convention’ (Chiapello 2004: 588). This aspect of the artist critique connects it with the free play of the imagination dimension of my account of modern aesthetics. The artist critique is, however, also a ‘critique of inauthenticity’

⁶² See also Chiapello (1998).

⁶³ In my opinion, it would have been more appropriate to use the term ‘aesthetic critique’, since the phenomena discussed by Boltanski and Chiapello go far beyond the narrow confines of the art world.

(Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 438). It is thus also linked with (what I call) individual freedom, which is grounded in exploring, taking seriously and expressing how one perceives and emotionally experiences all kinds of aspects of one's life. What is more, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, at least implicitly, that the aesthetic amounts to a distinct relationship of aesthetic freedom. For the 'formulation of' the artist 'critique presupposes the existence of a speaker whose *status is such that other people feel they have to listen to what she/he has to say*' even if – or precisely because – what she or he expresses is underpinned by her or his perceptive, emotional and imaginative engagement with the world (Chiapello 2004: 587–8). The social status of aesthetic subject is thus, in Boltanski and Chiapello's view, an integral part of modern ethical life.

Boltanski and Chiapello's sociology of aesthetics encourages us to revisit the history of modern democratic life in order to identify the struggles for aesthetic recognition that are part of this history and to establish how these struggles have shaped modern democratic life. For instance, we need to shed more light on the struggles for aesthetic inclusion on the part of individuals who were not (or are still not) seen as equal aesthetic subjects.⁶⁴ Such aesthetic struggles complement the much better researched struggles for equal political citizenship from which many were originally excluded on the basis of property, class and gender. In Great Britain, for example, the Chartist movement, which demanded universal suffrage for men in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the suffragette movement, which demanded voting rights for women at the beginning of the twentieth century, are very well known. However, the fact that the status of (equal) aesthetic subject, like all other social statuses, is also a site of exclusion and struggles for inclusion has received little attention to date.

Ève Chiapello suggests that the status of the aesthetic subject was, up to the late nineteenth century, regarded as the privilege of 'artists and writers', that is, individuals who occupied a distinct 'position in the field of cultural production' (Chiapello 2004: 589). Their aesthetic behaviours and practices were then 'copied by other types of actors' such as 'intellectuals, journalists, and many other media professionals', before 'anyone . . . demanded for him- or herself' the licence to relate aesthetically to the world and to engage in an aesthetic critique of the status quo in the wake of the '1968 . . . student' protests (Chiapello 2004: 589). However, despite the pioneering work by Chiapello, the study of struggles for the 'democratization' of the status of equal aesthetic subject is still in its infancy (Chiapello 2004: 585).

⁶⁴ I come back to this issue in Chapter 6 as part of my outline of a critical theory of aesthetics.

Another feature that renders Boltanski and Chiapello's sociology of aesthetics so valuable is that it offers a detailed sociological description of the social mechanisms through which the artist critique of capitalism has been co-opted and robbed of its emancipatory potential. In fact, in their view, the artist critique has been turned against itself and transformed into a force that props up contemporary capitalism. In other words, the artist critique of capitalism has become a victim of its own 'success' (Chiapello 2004: 585). For in response to the artist critique undermining the legitimacy of the capitalist mode of production and consumption in the 1960s, the capitalist system co-opted and manipulated the aesthetic by way of a 'contradictory double incorporation' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 452). One of Boltanski and Chiapello's major contributions consists in describing in detail how the aesthetic has 'been mimicked' and skewed by 'neo-management' theories and practices since the 1970s, with the effect that the artist 'critique of capitalism' has now lost 'much of its poignancy' (2005: 452).

Allow me to unpack what Boltanski and Chiapello mean by the 'contradictory double incorporation' of the artist critique (2005: 452). They argue that the new spirit of capitalism, on the one hand, presents itself as a development that acknowledges 'the demand for authenticity' and, on the other, rejects the oppressive nature of social 'conventions' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 452, 438). In short, capitalism takes on the guise of informality and flexibility. Furthermore, capitalism seems to be adopting the 'critique of authenticity', which was originally directed against the '*standardization and massification*' that becomes a characteristic feature of the capitalist mode of production in the first half of the twentieth century (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 438). Proponents of the 'critique of authenticity' lamented this 'standardization' and '*mass production*' because it is, in their view, linked with 'a loss of *difference* between entities, whether these are objects or human beings' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 438–9).

For instance, in the realm of production, 'especially in *forms of organizing work of a Taylorist type*, the difference between human beings vanishes' since 'assembly-line workers lose all particularity' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 439). In other words, in terms of what is produced, it does not matter which individuals are part of an assembly line shift. The individuals are completely replaceable (and thus no longer involved in productive cooperation as individuals).⁶⁵ And in relation to 'consumption', this loss of particularity even 'extend[s]' to 'what seems to be among the most particular, the most intimate, of

⁶⁵ See also my discussion of Simone Weil's critique of factory work in Chapter 6.

the dimensions of persons, rooted in their interior being: desire itself' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 439). To put it another way: in the age of marketing and advertising, we become suspicious of our own desires and wishes because we can no longer distinguish whether they are connected to our individuality or are being manipulated in ways we are unconscious of.

In response to this artist critique of inauthenticity, capitalism embraces 'the intense demand for differentiation and demassification' by commodifying differences (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 441). In other words, a new mode of capitalism emerges that offers '*more varied goods* destined for a shorter life-span and more rapid change', provides more custom-made products that require consumers to add their personal style to the products they consume, and commodifies '*goods that had hitherto remained outside the commodity sphere*' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 442).⁶⁶ All of these innovations are designed to infuse consumer products with an aura of authenticity.

This new phase of capitalism also brings in its wake an '*increased commodification of certain qualities of human beings*' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 442). Companies no longer see themselves as mere sellers of goods (such as clothing). They now also sell positive experiences and feelings; and the task of generating these positive and exciting experiences and feelings also lies with employees who interact with customers. As a result, the sales staff, for instance, in a clothes shop start to behave like a friend, providing you with candid and casual advice while offering you an espresso. And the staff at Open Days at my university are told to stay on brand and project a spirit that is in line with the university's overall marketing strategy while talking to prospective students about courses and modules. In sum, employees are now also paid and expected to convey and evoke certain experiences and emotional states. This is all part of capitalism's response to the artist critique that targeted capitalism's inauthenticity.

However, this strategy gives rise to a new problem: the commodification of 'differences ushers in a new era of suspicion' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 446). The spectre of inauthenticity raises its head again. Inauthenticity is now no longer associated with 'mass production and standardization' that eradicates all differences but understood as '*reproduction of a difference for commercial ends* – as copy – to which the authenticity of an original can be counter proposed' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 449). This redefinition makes reference not so much to the object itself, as to the *intentions* of those it is procured from. Now

⁶⁶ Think, for example, of offers like cooking lessons with 'real' Italian grandmothers in their own homes in Sicily.

what is authentic is that which has been made without a secondary strategic intention – that is to say, without any other intention than making it (in contrast with the intention of getting it sold, as with eco-products), of making it (or oneself) loved, making it (or oneself) admired (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 449).

For instance, a prospective student attending a university Open Day might wonder whether the members of faculty staffing the tables really are that approachable, friendly, curious, bold and thought-provoking, or whether they just put on a show because they are pushed by their university to play their part in a marketing campaign designed to generate more income (through tuition fees, rent payments and on campus spending).

Given that the commodification of differences ultimately transforms rather than eliminates concerns about authenticity, it is not surprising that the new spirit of capitalism adopts a ‘contradictory double incorporation’ strategy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 452). Capitalism embraces the critique of authenticity and rejects it at the same time. This rejection of demands for authenticity is inspired, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, by the deconstruction of the ideal of authenticity, which they associate with theorists like Deleuze, Bourdieu and Derrida, who gained wide popularity, at least in France and some other Western countries, in the 1960s. From the point of view of capitalism, the

deconstruction of the old notion of authenticity – as loyalty to self, as the subject’s resistance to pressures from others, as a demand for truth in the sense of conformity to an ideal – goes hand in glove with the concept of a network world. In a connexionist world, loyalty to the self looks like inflexibility; resistance to others seems like a refusal to make connections; truth defined by the identity between a representation and an original is regarded as a failure to understand the infinite variability of the beings who circulate in the network, and change every time they enter into relations with different beings, so that none of their manifestations can be taken as a point of origin with which other expressions can be compared. In a network world, the question of authenticity can no longer be formally posed. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 451)

The connexionist world of team and project work that the new spirit of capitalism brings in its wake thus promotes a whole range of dispositions that employees are expected to embody: flexibility, a willingness to enthusiastically play new roles in ever-changing teams, adaptability to new situations and tasks, an openness to the ideology of resilience, etc. Individuals who explore and take seriously how they perceive and emotionally respond to a situation or challenge, or resist

certain expectations on aesthetic grounds, appear in such a context simply as inflexible, stubborn, unwilling to discover new things about themselves and as lacking an open mind.

In sum, the new spirit of capitalism both embraces and undermines authenticity, creating a world in which authenticity is advertised all the time, but also treated as a 'question' that can 'no longer to be posed' because it is presented as 'meaningless' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 452). This 'contradictory' stance of contemporary capitalism produces 'psychological and ethical' 'tensions', since the members of contemporary capitalist societies are expected, on the one hand, to always be themselves and, on the other hand, to be completely flexible (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 452).

Using sociological methods, Boltanski and Chiapello paint a revealing picture of the role aesthetics plays in today's capitalist societies. However, what they don't do is lay the foundation for another wave of an aesthetic critique of the status quo. To this end, it is not enough to describe the changes pertaining to how the aesthetic manifests itself in liberal capitalist societies. What we need is a theoretical standpoint from which such manifestations of the aesthetic can be critically evaluated.⁶⁷ This, in turn, requires us to develop a non-pathological account of aesthetics, that is, an account that explains what aesthetics can (still) contribute to our life becoming a life of freedom and that can be invoked to criticize the way in which the aesthetic currently manifests itself in social life.

3.6. Conclusion: A sufficiently open account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*

In this chapter, I first provided an outline of the standard accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* (Section 3.2). I then argued that these standard accounts are *unsatisfactory* according to their own terms, since they fail to address two dimensions of unfreedom: scope unfreedom (Section 3.3) and individual unfreedom (Section 3.4). Scope unfreedom results from the fact that legal and moral freedom are unable to turn the social roles and norms that underpin extant relations of freedom into the subject-matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom. According to the standard account of democratic ethical life, it is therefore impossible to understand these social roles and norms as being expressive of our freedom. The problem of individual unfreedom arises from

⁶⁷ See Chapter 6.

role-mediated relationships' in-built 'tendency for conformism' that threatens to undermine our self-realization as individuals (Honneth 2014: 384n476). Based on this analysis, I then argued that integrating the recognition relationship of aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* makes it possible to address both scope unfreedom and individual unfreedom. Finally, I maintained, drawing on several case studies, that accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that displace aesthetic freedom are not just unsatisfactory but also *incomplete* because aesthetic freedom denotes a conceptually distinct and *socially valid* variant of freedom (Section 3.5).

What emerges from this line of argument is therefore a revision of the Hegelian account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. I understand aesthetics as underpinning a distinct relationship of recognition and conceptualize this recognition relationship as a variant of individual freedom (complementing legal and moral freedom). In other words, my claim is that we have to expand the architecture of relationships of freedom that is familiar from Hegel and Honneth, who 'follow[s]' in this regard 'the model of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*' (Honneth 2014: vii).⁶⁸ According to Hegel and Honneth, the core of ethical life is formed by personal, economic and political recognition relationships of social freedom, which are complemented by legal and moral recognition relationships of individual freedom.

However, I am not just arguing for expanding this view of ethical life by adding another recognition relationship of individual freedom to it, namely aesthetic freedom. For this expansion also changes the balance between recognition relationships of (personal, economic and political) social freedom and recognition relationships of individual (legal, moral and aesthetic) freedom. In my view, the latter no longer merely complement the former, since relations of individual freedom are now, due to integrating aesthetic freedom, endowed with the potential to transform relations of social freedom (beyond generating less biased interpretations of them).⁶⁹ Relations of individual freedom are, according to Hegel and Honneth, permanent features of modern ethical life, since they protect the right of subjectivity. I agree with this assessment but argue that we can only adequately protect the right of subjectivity if we complement legal and moral freedom with aesthetic freedom. For it is aesthetic freedom that prevents

⁶⁸ I systematically develop my recognition-theoretical account of aesthetic freedom in Chapter 4.

⁶⁹ Hegel does not regard 'Abstract Right' (1991: §§34–104) and 'Morality' (1991: §§105–40) as proper relations of *Sittlichkeit*. He reserves this term for the 'family', 'civil society' and the 'state' (Hegel 1991: §§142–320).

individuals from ‘capitulat[ing]’ to existing relations of social freedom (Seel 2014: 279).

Including aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life also restores the open character of the democratic form of life, since aesthetic freedom can underpin far-reaching forms of self-critique and self-transformations. Such transformations preserve the integrity of democratic ethical life if they meet certain conditions: firstly, they have to be guided by the overarching norm of equal freedom for all; secondly, they have to originate in one of the three variants of individual freedom; thirdly, they have to preserve all three variants of individual freedom; fourthly, these changes have to be adopted through acceptable forms of collective democratic decision-making.

This expansion of the standard account of democratic ethical life is driven by the view that variants of individual freedom are as important as variants of social freedom for realizing democratic *Sittlichkeit*'s ambition to become a life of equal freedom for all. By engaging aesthetically with their world, aesthetic subjects are licensed to re-imagine and transform the social roles and norms that shape extant relationships of social freedom. For example, given the ecological challenges that we are facing today, we might imagine new ways of re-integrating the political and the economic sphere (also on the transnational level), which would imply a de-differentiation of the recognitional statuses of the political subject and the economic subject. However, like the other (benign) variants of individual freedom, aesthetic freedom always presupposes relationships of social freedom.⁷⁰ In sum, we need aesthetic freedom to give extant relations of freedom the ‘dynamic, open and transgressive character’ that Honneth, in my view wrongly, already claims for the standard account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* (2014: 61).

I am aware that integrating aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* might not be the only revision that we need to consider. For instance, other challenges might arise from a de-colonial perspective. For example, the way in which we currently conceptualize human capacities, package them

⁷⁰ See Honneth (2014: 123). Integrating aesthetic considerations into our understanding of liberal-democratic life might also help us to make sense of the following, otherwise cryptic remark by John Rawls from *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*: ‘We cannot tell solely from the content of a political conception – its principles and ideals – whether it is reasonable for us. Not only may our feelings and attitudes as we work through its implications in practice disclose considerations that its ideals and principles must be revised to accommodate, but we may find that our *sentiments* prevent us from carrying it out. On reflection we cannot live with it.’ (2001: 136) Rawls uses terms like ‘feelings’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘sentiments’ to indicate that the political dimension (that turns on justice) can be in tension with an aesthetic dimension; and if that happens, it is not obvious, according to Rawls, in which way such a tension is to be resolved.

and link them with distinct recognitional statuses in Western societies is (perhaps) contingent on European Enlightenment culture. Furthermore, this framework was imposed as part of Western colonialism on other cultural communities whose members were simultaneously (and in many respects still are) excluded from full and equal participation in this framework of recognition. Modern democratic *Sittlichkeit* is, for this reason, implicated in our colonial and imperialist history. It therefore makes sense to subject this tradition to a de-colonial critique. Given the problematic historical and ongoing encounters and entanglements of Western societies with communities that had to endure attempts to colonize them (and still deal with the aftermath of these attempts), we have to be prepared to revisit the framework of recognition that we inherited from the European Enlightenment tradition, that is, how we conceptualize, package and link capacities with recognitional statuses and practices.⁷¹

⁷¹ My intention here is merely to flag up the importance of this de-colonial angle for recognition theory. Hopefully, I will be able to come back to and address these issues in more detail from a recognition-theoretical perspective in my future work.

Aesthetic recognition

4.1. Introduction

The ideas that sense perception, emotions and the imagination denote valuable dimensions of human personhood and that explorative uses of these capacities are intrinsically valuable are central to the legacy of modern aesthetics that shapes modern life. However, the implications of these modern aesthetic insights have not yet been fully appreciated in philosophy: firstly, if the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are valuable dimensions of our personhood, then they have to be integrated into our understanding of freedom as self-realization; secondly, if it matters that human beings can freely explore the world perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively and how human beings perceive, emotionally experience and (re-)imagine the world, then we must ask ourselves what kind of consideration we owe each other as aesthetic beings, that is, as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. In short, modern aesthetics presents us a twofold systematic challenge: on the one hand, we need to conceptualize the aesthetic dimension of our freedom; on the other hand, we must conceptualize the normative or socio-political life of aesthetics. My thesis in this chapter is that we can meet both challenges by developing an account of aesthetic recognition.

To develop this account of aesthetic recognition, I combine my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics with Hegelian recognition theory. My capacity-based account of modern aesthetics explains what it means to engage aesthetically with the world; my account of aesthetic recognition sheds light on the social and normative life of the aesthetic.¹ This social and normative life of

¹ For my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics, see Chapter 1. For an alternative framing of how recognition and aesthetics interact, see Jason Miller's *The Politics of Perception and the Aesthetics of Social Change* (2021). Unlike me, Miller does not develop a distinctly aesthetic relationship of recognition; he maintains instead that the aesthetic conditions the recognition of cultural identities (Schaub 2026). In short, he maintains that 'recognition is necessarily bound up with the politics of

aesthetics encompasses, for example, the social status of equal aesthetic subjects, the opportunities that a society offers its members to relate aesthetically to their world, and the way in which a society deals with demands arising from individuals' perceptual, emotional and imaginative engagement with the world.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted that the aesthetic plays no positive role in Hegel and Honneth's accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit*. Further, I explained why this displacement of aesthetics is problematic. However, both philosophers mention aesthetics in passing and gesture towards a link between aesthetics and freedom. This suggests that both philosophers have contemplated the possibility that the aesthetic might underpin a distinct subspecies of recognition that needs to be integrated into their accounts of ethical life. In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth states in the context of his discussion of the democratic public sphere that 'aesthetic freedom' and 'art' might be able to counter this sphere's problematic 'tendency for conformism' and to initiate a 'revitalization of the public' (2014: 384n476). He even suggests that 'we might be tempted to view "aesthetic freedom" . . . as a crucial part' of democratic *Sittlichkeit* and raises the question of whether aesthetic freedom 'represents an independent category of freedom' (Honneth 2014: 384n476). Unfortunately, Honneth does not further pursue the question of whether aesthetic recognition denotes a distinct subspecies of recognition in *Freedom's Right* or anywhere else.

The displacement of aesthetics from Hegel's (1991) *Philosophy of Right* from 1823 is all the more surprising given that he was one of the foremost aestheticians of the nineteenth century. In this work, he mentions aesthetics only in connection with his critique of romantic irony. According to Hegel, romantic irony aspires to be an aesthetic notion of freedom. However, in his view, this is a misguided assertion of the right of 'subjectivity', for romantic irony wrongly assumes that a notion of freedom can be underpinned by 'arbitrariness' or arbitrary willing (Hegel 1991: 181, 184). Hegel therefore regards romantic irony as a pathological, self-undermining and anti-*sittlich* conceptualization of aesthetic freedom.²

Hegel picks up the topic of aesthetic freedom in the guise of romantic irony in the last paragraph before the 'Transition from Morality to Ethical Life' (1991: §141), that is, at the end of his discussion of the two individual freedoms, abstract right (§§34–104) and morality (§§105–40), and right before moving on to the relations of social freedom (§§142–320): family, civil society and the state. What we can learn from this location is that Hegel regards aesthetic freedom as a

perception', since 'the *misperception* of cultural identity' results in a failure of recognition (Miller 2021: 145, 154).

² For a more in-depth discussion of Hegel's views on romantic irony, see Chapter 6.

(candidate for a) variant of individual freedom (complementing legal and moral freedom), not as a variant of social freedom.

Hegel confines himself in his *Philosophy of Right* to presenting the negative case for the displacement of romantic irony from modern *Sittlichkeit*. There is no sustained attempt to make a positive case for the development and inclusion of a non-pathological or benign version of an aesthetic recognition relationship of individual freedom.³ In short, with respect to aesthetic freedom, Hegel does not distinguish between pathological and benign versions, despite drawing such a distinction with regard to legal and moral freedom.⁴ This omission is baffling, especially since he hints at a novel, post-ideal version of aesthetic freedom in his *Aesthetics* as part of his exploration of what happens to art after the end of romantic (ideal) art.⁵

In what follows, I develop my (benign) account of aesthetic recognition. In a first step, I outline key features of my account of aesthetic recognition, explain why it makes sense to frame the aesthetic as a recognition relationship of (individual) freedom, and clarify how aesthetic recognition can be integrated into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* (Section 4.2).⁶ Against this backdrop, I then analyse what is involved in engaging aesthetically with the world in terms of our agency and show that my account of aesthetic recognition manages to integrate all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) (Section 4.3). Finally, I provide an overview of the various ways in which my account of aesthetic recognition interacts with freedom (Section 4.4).

4.2. Aesthetic recognition: The key features

I argue that aesthetics, as I understand it, underpins a distinct relationship of recognition. I therefore outline in this section my account of aesthetic

³ Hegel's distinction between Socratic and romantic irony might serve as a starting point for developing a positive conception of aesthetic freedom (1991: §140). In this regard, one would also have to take a closer look at Hegel's remarks on Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger's (1780–1819) treatment of irony in his *Philosophy of Right* (1991: §140) and his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1975: 68–9). I am grateful to a reviewer for pushing me on this point.

⁴ See Honneth (2014: 86–94; 113–20).

⁵ I provide an outline of Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics in Chapter 2. See also Hegel (1975: 602–611). In my view, Hegel should have argued that his post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics lays the groundwork for a benign version of aesthetic freedom that, like legal and moral freedom, is an integral part of modern *Sittlichkeit*.

⁶ The distinction between recognition relationships of individual freedom and recognition relationships of social freedom is explained in Chapter 3.

recognition and explain why it makes sense to frame aesthetic recognition (like legal and moral recognition) as a relationship of individual freedom.

The concept of recognition is at the heart of Axel Honneth's social and political philosophy. In Honneth's theory, recognition accounts for processes of social integration and differentiation. The notion of recognition also underlies Honneth's understanding of freedom, his normative evaluation of social orders and his account of moral progress. For the purposes of outlining my account of aesthetic recognition, I focus on three structural features of Honneth's conceptualization of recognition.⁷ Firstly, recognition is grounded in 'positive qualities of human individuals' (Honneth 2002: 505); and these valuable dimensions of personhood are capacities of persons. Different recognition relationships thus track different valuable capacities. For instance, legal recognition tracks the capacity to make decisions for oneself, and moral recognition is grounded in the capacity to deliberate about what is right.

Secondly, each subspecies of recognition is linked with a distinct social 'status', for instance, the statuses of legal or moral subject (Honneth 2014: 124). Each social status licences individuals to engage in 'the performance of' distinct kinds of 'acts' that can be 'performed by every . . . subject' (Honneth 2014: 65). For example, as a legal subject, I can enter into contracts and as a moral subject, I can interrupt my participation in a social practice at any time to consider whether social norms or roles unfairly discriminate against certain groups of individuals; and if I come to this conclusion, I can call for a reform of these norms and roles.

Thirdly, all recognition relationships are norm mediated. These norms of recognition tell us what kinds of 'consideration' subjects owe each other due to their various social recognitional statuses (Honneth 2014: 124). For instance, as a legal subject, I can insist that others do not prevent me from using the space that my rights and liberties open up to me in the way I want. For example, I can demand that they don't stop me from quitting my job. Socially valid norms of recognition emerge from collective negotiations and efforts at interpretation aimed at determining what follows from the fact that individuals possess certain valuable capacities.

In sum, Honneth conceives of recognition as 'a conceptual species' comprising different 'subspecies' (Honneth 2002: 506). He frames democratic *Sittlichkeit* as

⁷ The following overview of how Honneth conceptualizes these subspecies of recognition is based on *Freedom's Right* (2014). In his earlier work, Honneth distinguishes three subspecies of recognition, which he calls 'love', 'rights' and 'solidarity' in *Struggle for Recognition* (1995: 92–130), and 'love', 'law' and 'achievement' in *Redistribution or Recognition* (2003: 138–50). See also Schaub and Odigbo (2019: 104–6).

a recognition order that is composed of complementary relationships of (moral, legal, personal, economic and political) recognition which track different valuable capacities or dimensions of personhood. The changes and revolutions that recognition orders undergo can be tracked once this basic structure of recognition is in place. For instance, human capacities can be conceptualized and packaged in different ways, which means that the kind of recognition relationships that are conceptually distinguished within and realized by social orders can vary greatly and undergo far-reaching transformations.⁸ We can, in other words, compare recognition orders along the lines of the capacities they recognize as valuable. And if two recognition orders cover the same recognition relationships, we can study the extent to which their interpretations of norms of recognition differ from one another. Further, we can assess how well (all) individuals are socially and materially supported and encouraged in a particular recognition order to develop and realize these valued capacities.⁹

On the basis of these general remarks on recognition, I can now outline the *key features of aesthetic recognition* by explicating how aesthetic recognition maps onto the three structural features all relationships of recognition have in common: firstly, like other relationships of recognition, aesthetic recognition is grounded in valuable dimensions of personhood or capacities, namely, sense perception, emotions and the imagination. These are the three capacities on which modern approaches to aesthetics turn, which is why I refer to this subspecies of recognition as 'aesthetic recognition'. Furthermore, it is crucial to my argument that aesthetic recognition is a subtype of recognition that is underpinned by capacities that are not covered by any of the other subspecies of (moral, legal, personal, economic or political) recognition.

⁸ The capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination, which are at the heart of modern approaches to aesthetics, play an important role in such transformations of recognition orders, since they underpin conceptual innovations and experimental practices.

⁹ Honneth is attentive to the historical transformations of recognition orders and the global contemporaneity of different recognition orders. With regard to a particular society, we

can speak of a normative revolution if existing norms of recognition are replaced by new ones. For instance, the transition from the 'estate-based order of pre-modern society' to the modern 'bourgeois-capitalist society' (Honneth 2003: 138) amounts to a normative revolution since the 'pre-modern concept of honor' was replaced, on the one hand, by a 'democratized' notion of equal legal respect which tracks decision-making capacity, and, on the other, by a 'meritocratized' (Honneth 2003: 141) notion of esteem which tracks individuals' contributions to society (Schaub 2015: 108–9) (Schaub and Odigbo 2019: 105).

By contrast, we are dealing with a normative reform if struggles for recognition bring about changes pertaining to how given recognition norms are interpreted. Such changes are progressive, according to Honneth, if norms of recognition are framed in a more inclusive fashion or if their content is rendered less biased (2003: 186–7). The struggles to expand the notions of work and achievement to socially valuable contributions like 'housework and childcare' are a case in point (Honneth 2003: 153).

Secondly, like other relationships of recognition, aesthetic recognition is also linked with a distinct social status: the status of (equal) aesthetic subject. This social status licences individuals to relate to the world in specific ways. For instance, the social status of moral subject provides individuals with the culturally granted opportunity to scrutinize whether ‘social demands’ that are connected with social norms and roles are ‘unreasonable’, and if that is the case, they can make moral demands for change (Honneth 2014: 98). By the same token, the social status of aesthetic subject entails that individuals are ‘granted by the culture’ of democratic *Sittlichkeit* the opportunity to reflect on how they perceive and emotionally experience their world as well as to freely re-imagine these aspects (Honneth 2014: 96). These are ‘acts’ that can be ‘performed by every . . . subject’ (Honneth 2014: 65).¹⁰ What is more, aesthetic subjects can also make demands for change that emerge from these aesthetic engagements with the world.

This was done, for example, by the consciousness-raising groups of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ These consciousness-raising groups provided a context for women to come together and engage aesthetically with their lives by exploring and sharing with each other how they perceive and emotionally experience all kinds of aspects of their lives.¹² On this basis, they then re-imagined what it might mean to be a woman, thereby performing what one participant called ‘a poetic leap of the imagination forcing new insights into the roles women and men play’ and could play in society (Ware 1970: 113). Or to give another example, neurodiverse employees and students make demands on their employers and universities that are grounded in how they experience their working and learning environment sensually and emotionally. They then draw on their imagination to generate suggestions and demands for adjustments to their workplaces or learning conditions. What we can learn from such practices is that the subjects who are engaging in them have the normative expectation that others owe them consideration as aesthetic subjects, that is, as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. This brings me to the third structural feature of recognition.

As in the case of other subspecies of recognition, aesthetic recognition is also mediated by norms of recognition. These norms of aesthetic recognition tell

¹⁰ Bubner also highlights this inclusive or egalitarian aspect of aesthetic subjecthood, arguing, based on his reading of Kant’s aesthetics, that ‘no subject is excluded from’ it (Bubner 1989: 38; my translation). See also Kant (2000: §49).

¹¹ See also my discussion of this case study in Chapter 3.

¹² See also Ware (1970: 108–19) and Reed (2005: 89).

us what kind of consideration we owe each other as aesthetic beings. Norms of recognition always require interpretation, for even if human capacities are recognized as valuable, this does not settle the question of what it means to give all individuals the ‘consideration’ they deserve as beings who possess these valuable dimensions of personhood (Honneth 2014: 124). Norms of recognition are therefore contested and subject to continuous re-interpretations (in ever-changing contexts). However, norms of aesthetic recognition are even less settled and less well understood than other norms of recognition (e.g. norms of legal recognition), since so far there has been neither a sustained theoretical attempt to clarify them nor a sustained public debate about them. As a result, we are better placed to talk about the rights and liberties we should grant to individuals than to spell out the forms of consideration that we owe each other as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings.¹³

My assumption is that these norms of aesthetic recognition are conditioned or modulated by concrete ethical relationships (in the Hegelian sense). For instance, as a lecturer, it is my responsibility (not that of their GP) to consider how my neurodivergent students perceive and emotionally experience their teaching environment. It is also my responsibility to take seriously their suggestions for how teaching delivery or group work could be adapted.

For aesthetic recognition to be part of a *democratic* understanding of *Sittlichkeit*, it must also adopt an egalitarian framing. This egalitarian framing arises anyway from the fact that sense perception, emotions and the imagination are basic capacities that all human beings possess. Furthermore, the democratic commitment that ‘all subjects must enjoy equal support in their striving for individual freedom’ also applies to the valuable capacities that are tracked by aesthetic recognition (Honneth 2014: 64). Our commitment to democratic *Sittlichkeit* therefore encompasses the aim to ensure that all members of society are socially encouraged and enabled to freely exercise or realize these valuable dimensions of their personhood.

However, the actual history of modern democratic life is marred by various forms of aesthetic misrecognition. To identify and criticize these forms of aesthetic misrecognition is the task of a critical theory of aesthetics.¹⁴ At this point, I merely want to highlight that aesthetic misrecognition also fuels a range

¹³ In clarifying these norms of aesthetic recognition, we can draw on the resurging interest among philosophers, including political philosophers, in perception (Nanay 2019), emotions (Nussbaum 2013; Cherry 2021) and the imagination (Gosetti-Ferencei 2020). However, these works do not directly address the issue of norms of aesthetic recognition, that is, the question of what kinds of consideration we owe each other as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings.

¹⁴ I outline the research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics in Chapter 6.

of conflicts and demands for change in contemporary society. I refer to such dynamics as struggles for (equal) aesthetic recognition. For instance, there are (groups of) individuals who have a sense that, from the outset, how they perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine the status quo is given less significance than how others perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine it.¹⁵

4.2.1. What exactly does an account of aesthetic recognition value?

My account of aesthetic recognition aims to capture the socio-cultural legacy of modern aesthetics. For modern aesthetic discourse, which emerges in the first half of the eighteenth century, re-evaluates and emancipates the human capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination. What is more, it frames the free and explorative use of these capacities as intrinsically valuable. However, modern aestheticians do not always provide answers to all the philosophical questions that are raised by this discursive shift. In this section, I would like to address two of these questions: what does an account of aesthetic recognition value? And how does an account of aesthetic recognition distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic uses of the capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination?¹⁶

My account of aesthetic recognition considers the capacities of sense perception, emotions and imagination to be valuable dimensions of personhood. Valuing capacities entails that one also values certain exercises of these capacities. This, in turn, means that it is also important to ensure that the social world provides adequate support to individuals in their pursuit of developing and exercising these capacities.

However, valuing a capacity does not commit us to assign a value to every instance of that capacity being exercised. In fact, it is a general feature of the (Hegelian) theory of recognition that it only regards certain exercises of valued capacities as valuable. For example, in order to attain the social status of an economic subject, individuals must possess capacities that enable them to make valuable contributions to social cooperation, but esteem recognition depends on whether they actually use their capacities productively. By the same token, legal recognition is grounded in the valuable capacity to make decisions for oneself. However, this does not commit us to see it as valuable if individuals use

¹⁵ I will illustrate this in Chapter 5 with demands for 'safe spaces' on university campuses.

¹⁶ For instance, it is not clear whether Baumgarten wants to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic uses of sense perception, for he frames the new discipline of aesthetics as 'a general science of perception' (Guyer 2014a: 322). See also Baumgarten (1954: 78).

this capacity to deliberately violate the rights of others. The same holds true for aesthetic recognition. Developing an account of aesthetic recognition (along the lines of legal and moral recognition) thus requires determining which exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are aesthetic or possess aesthetic value. In other words, we must distinguish uses of these capacities that are aesthetic and have aesthetic value from those that are non-aesthetic and don't possess aesthetic value.¹⁷

Let's first consider exercises of sense perception and emotions. As part of my reconstruction of the basic structure of modern aesthetics (in Chapter 1), I used the term 'explorative' to indicate that not all exercises of capacities that underpin modern approaches to aesthetics are aesthetic or aesthetically valuable. Without such a qualification, we end up with an account of aesthetics that is, at least in my view, too wide, since we have sense perceptions and emotional responses virtually all the time. Without introducing further qualifications, we would therefore be permanently in an aesthetic state (and it would become impossible to distinguish the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic).

Considering this problem, I argue that aesthetic uses of sense perception and emotions are explorative, non-instrumental and self-reflective or self-referential in a way in which non-aesthetic uses are not. To put it differently, in aesthetic uses of these capacities, our perceptions and emotions themselves become the subject-matter of our attention: when we engage with the world aesthetically, we explore how our senses disclose a phenomenon to us (for the sake of familiarizing ourselves with how we perceive something) or how we emotionally respond to a phenomenon (for the sake of exploring and getting clearer about our emotional responses).

Allow me to invoke a distinct mode of sense perception, namely hearing, to illustrate what I have in mind. Whenever we hear aesthetically, we do not just hear something, for example, a man coughing, the person on the chair next to you tapping her foot on the floor. In the case of aesthetic hearing, we pay attention to what we are hearing, to everything there is to hear, for instance,

¹⁷ To be clear, I am *not* saying that all aesthetically valuable exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are of *equal* aesthetic value. Aesthetic and therefore aesthetically valuable exercises of these capacities can be more or less (aesthetically) valuable. The question of what renders some aesthetic exercises of these capacities more aesthetically valuable than others is an important one that deserves to be addressed in more detail. I briefly engage with this question in Chapter 2 as part of my engagement with Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics. Here, I want to confine myself to pointing out that aesthetic recognition is not different from other recognition relationships in this respect. For instance, whenever individuals use their deliberative capacities to figure out whether an action or institution is fair or unfair, they are using this moral capacity in a morally valuable fashion. But it does not follow from this that each morally valuable exercise of our deliberative capacities is of equal moral value, for some are clearly more thorough, insightful and differentiated than others.

about the man coughing next to us or the woman making arhythmical tapping noises with her shoes. Aesthetic listening, understood in this way, is arguably the subject-matter of John Cage's (1912–1992) famous composition *4'33"*. The score for this composition instructs the instrumentalists to refrain from doing anything for the duration of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. In this way, the audience is encouraged to listen attentively to whatever it is that can be heard in the concert hall during this period.

Cage's piece highlights that the option of hearing aesthetically is always available to us. In other words, Cage shows that by depriving the audience of an instrumental performance, the composer does not deprive the audience of the aesthetic because the aesthetic resides ultimately in *how we listen*. Cage therefore insists that '[t]here's no such thing as silence. What they [i.e. the audience] thought was silence' in *4'33"*, 'because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds' (Kostelanetz 2003: 70). It is the *mode in which we perceptively engage with the world* that turns the hearing of sounds into an aesthetic hearing or an instance of aesthetic relating. Cage's *4'33"* thus conveys a key aesthetic insight: the aesthetic denotes a distinct mode of relating to the world, not a subset of objects (e.g. artworks) or features of objects. In Cage's own estimation, *4'33"* is 'the highest form of work' because it is 'an art work without work' (Kostelanetz 2003: 69). He even referred to *4'33"* as his 'best piece' because it leads 'people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music' (Kostelanetz 2003: 70). *4'33"* is the first composition that is about (time dedicated to) *aesthetic listening* itself.

Let us now consider an example that involves the capacity of emotions. Imagine you notice that how you feel about your partner has changed. You engage aesthetically with this situation if you start exploring your emotional responses. For instance, you might try to recall how you used to feel about your partner when you first noticed these changes in your emotional responses, etc. Typically, exploring and clarifying emotional responses is for human beings linked with modes of expressing them (verbally or otherwise). For instance, you could write a letter to your partner explaining how you currently feel, talk to a friend about your emotional confusions, or listen to songs that express certain moods. By engaging in such expressive behaviours, we do not simply convey our emotions; what we are feeling takes shape and is clarified through them. This is highlighted, for instance, by Collingwood in *The Principles of Art* (1938: 105–24). Do you need a link here?

Attentive, reflective and expressive explorations of our emotional responses are characteristic of an aesthetic engagement with the world that renders our

often raw and at times quite obscure feels into something more transparent, differentiated and communicable. Against this backdrop, I would argue that to the extent that psychoanalysis relies on individuals being attentive to and expressing how they perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine situations and phenomena, it possesses an aesthetic character. Perhaps one could even say that the psychoanalytic method is indebted to, or an offshoot of, modern aesthetics. Due to this closeness, it is also unsurprising that a lot can be learned from psychoanalysis when it comes to approaching a task that plays an important role in a critical theory of aesthetics, namely the issue of what it might mean to critically engage with how we ourselves and others perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine aspects of our lives.

This brings me to the third substantive dimension of modern aesthetics: the imagination. Unlike uses of sense perception and emotions, the imagination is, in my view, always aesthetic or aesthetically valuable, since it always denotes an explorative endeavour. For when our faculty of imagination engages with an aspect of the world (for instance, an empty canvas or a social role), this always involves exploring how something could be transformed or how else we could bring our capacities to bear on an aspect of the world.

However, it would be a mistake to infer from the fact that exercises of the imagination are always aesthetic and therefore aesthetically valuable that the aesthetic value of exercises of the imagination cannot be diminished. I want to distinguish two ways in which the value of exercises of the imagination can be diminished: firstly, such exercises can be more or less free. An individual who imaginatively explores how an aspect of the world could be transformed may be free from practical or instrumental constraints; or they may find themselves in a situation where they are expected to use the imagination to pursue certain pre-given goals. Think, for instance, of a brainstorming session of the sales team of a company that is about identifying ways of generating more attention for one of their new products. In short, constraining the free play of imagination undermines its aesthetic value. However, this is not usually acknowledged by proponents of the discourse on 'creativity' who want to use the imagination to generate 'economic value' and exploit its potential for 'innovation' (Mould 2018: 17).

Secondly, the aesthetic value of exercises of the imagination can be diminished by disrupting the free interaction between the imagination, on the one hand, and sense perception and emotions, on the other. For instance, if you are paid to use your imagination to design well-selling video games, then it does not matter how you yourself perceive and emotionally experience the game you create. The

only thing that matters is what your market research team tells you about how your target audience perceives and feels about test versions of the game.¹⁸

The illustrations provided have hopefully rendered it a bit clearer what it can mean to make an ‘explorative’ and therefore aesthetic and aesthetically valuable use of sense perception, emotions and the imagination. I do not think it is possible or desirable to provide a more fine-grained list of necessary and sufficient conditions. The history of aesthetic relating is, after all, a history of experiments with sense perception, emotions and the imagination, a history of continuously expanding our understanding of what it can mean to use these capacities ‘exploratively’. I want to keep this horizon open and encourage further experiments. What I am committed to is, however, that an aesthetic engagement with the world is always linked with a first-personal perspective, even in the case of collective exercises of aesthetic freedom.¹⁹ It is impossible to delegate one’s own aesthetic relating to someone else, since nobody can tell you how it is for you to perceive and emotionally experience something or what emerges from your imagination playing freely with an aspect of the world.²⁰

So far, I have focussed on how one can go about distinguishing aesthetic (and aesthetically valuable) from non-aesthetic (and aesthetically non-valuable) exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination. Now I want to consider the value of what emerges from aesthetic exercises of these capacities. Again, this is an issue that arises with respect to all recognition relationships, for they all involve productive and valuable exercises of valued capacities. For instance, in relation to economic recognition, we esteem the achievements of someone who makes valuable contributions to productive social cooperation. We can also think of a moral judgement or demand as a ‘product’ that emerges from a valuable exercise of the valuable capacity that underpins moral recognition. Such a moral judgement or demand (e.g. the demand to reform the legal definition of marriage because it is biased against non-heterosexual couples or those living in polyamorous relationships) is itself valuable and cannot simply be dismissed because it emerges from a valuable use of a valuable capacity. To put it differently, such a dismissal is incompatible with recognizing the other as a moral subject with the valuable capacity to deliberate about what is right and

¹⁸ I will come back to the issue of how social mechanisms can undermine the potential of aesthetics to contribute to our freedom in Chapter 6.

¹⁹ For a discussion of feminist consciousness-raising as a *collective* exploration of sense perceptions and emotional and imaginative responses, see Chapter 3.

²⁰ What we can do, however, is to relate aesthetically to what emerges from others’ aesthetic relating (e.g. by reading a novel). Such aesthetic engagements with the products of others’ aesthetic relating can bring in their wake world-disclosing and transformative experiences.

wrong. It is thus a feature of recognition relationships that what emerges from valuable uses of valuable capacities has a certain normative standing (due to this pedigree).

This also applies to relationships of aesthetic recognition. Being recognized as an (equal) aesthetic subject entails that others can't treat what emerges from our aesthetic engagement with the world as irrelevant or not worthy of their attention, especially if these 'outcomes' bear on how we live together with others. Of course, the degree of indifference that is acceptable in such cases depends on, or is modulated by, the kind of ethical relationships (in the Hegelian sense) that we have with the individuals in question and the issue(s) at stake. But this qualification does not fundamentally change the picture: if what emerges from our aesthetic engagement with the world are demands that bear on how we live with others, then we have the (cultural) expectation as aesthetic subjects that others, with whom we stand in a relevant social relationship, do not simply dismiss these 'outcomes' as irrelevant or valueless. For doing this would be incompatible with recognizing us as aesthetic subjects.

Imagine, for instance, that a group of students approaches me after a seminar to tell me that they find my teaching style intimidating, pointing to features that trigger this emotional response (e.g. my opinionated way of responding to student contributions in class) and sharing with me their ideas about how things could be improved. I am sure that my students would feel let down in this kind of situation if I conveyed to them that I couldn't care less about how they perceive and emotionally experience being taught by me as well as about their ideas for change. For in doing so, I would convey to them that I do not owe them any consideration as aesthetic subjects, that is, as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. This kind of behaviour on my part would therefore damage the social or ethical fabric of the lecturer-student relationship, since aesthetic recognition is an important, albeit mainly implicit, part of it.²¹

It is important to distinguish the claim that 'outputs' from valuable exercises of valuable capacities have a certain normative standing from the claim that such 'outputs' are authoritative. I am endorsing the former claim, not the latter. For instance, no moral subject can sensibly claim that they are not taken seriously as moral deliberators because others do not agree with them or do not treat their moral judgements (e.g. about fair working conditions) as authoritative. Moral deliberation is an open-ended process, and I take others seriously as moral

²¹ I consider further examples of aesthetic misrecognition in Chapters 5 and 6.

subjects if I turn their moral judgements and reasons into the subject-matter of my own moral deliberations.

The same is true for aesthetic recognition. I take others seriously as aesthetic subjects if I regard being confronted with what emerges from their aesthetic engagements with the world as a reason to engage myself aesthetically with the 'product' of their aesthetic relating and the same aspect of the world. In short, I give others the consideration they are owed as fellow aesthetic subjects if I respond to the 'products' of their aesthetic engagement with the world with my own perceptive, emotional and imaginative explorations. Such explorations can take on the form of an aesthetic dialogue in which we scrutinize each other's perceptive, emotional and imaginative engagements with a phenomenon, as we do when we talk to a friend about a novel we just read or a series we just watched. For instance, we can draw attention to aspects that are missing from others' accounts or suggest different ways of looking at certain phenomena. Such changes in how a phenomenon is perceptively disclosed can then also affect others' emotional and imaginative responses to it.

In sum: the notion of aesthetic recognition that I develop in this chapter based on my interpretation of modern aesthetics gives rise to a range of questions that have so far been neglected but require systematic answers: what exactly does it mean, for instance, to give someone the aesthetic consideration they deserve as equal aesthetic subject? What might it mean to engage in an aesthetic (as opposed to a moral, legal, economic or political) critique of how others perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively engage with the world and what emerges from their engagements? How are we to adjudicate between incompatible aesthetic demands? Finally, how can we determine whether aesthetic demands unduly interfere with moral, legal, economic or political demands or vice versa?²²

4.2.2. Aesthetic recognition and the intrinsic value of aesthetic relating

According to my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics, modern approaches to aesthetics assign intrinsic value to non-instrumental, explorative uses of sense perception, emotions and the imagination. However, the theorists whom I credit with establishing the field of modern aesthetics (i.e. Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison) do not provide straightforward answers to the question of

²² I pick up some of these questions again in Chapter 6. However, my aim in this study is not to comprehensively answer all of these questions, but rather to argue that they should be taken more seriously.

why we should regard such exercises of these capacities as intrinsically valuable. It might be argued that this omission renders their accounts of the basic structure of modern aesthetics incomplete.²³ By integrating the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics into the Hegelian recognition theory of freedom, I point to a way of closing this gap.

Hegel understands freedom as self-realization and links self-realization with the participation in a range of different relationships of recognition, which are grounded in different valuable capacities or dimensions of personhood. From this perspective, certain exercises of certain capacities are intrinsically valuable because freedom, understood as self-realization, is intrinsically valuable. Aesthetic or aesthetically valuable exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are thus valuable from a recognition-theoretical perspective because through them we realize a valuable dimension of our personhood or a distinct dimension of our freedom. From my Hegelian perspective, there is therefore no tension between the claim that non-instrumental explorations of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are intrinsically valuable and the claim that the aesthetic is in the service of freedom since both claims amount to saying that freedom is intrinsically valuable.

In short, I believe that we attribute intrinsic value to certain exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination in the case of aesthetic recognition for the same reason that we attribute intrinsic value to certain exercises of our capacity to deliberate about what is right in the case of moral recognition, or the capacity to make decisions for oneself in the case of legal recognition. For in all these cases the intrinsic value of freedom is affirmed under the condition of freedom's conceptual and social differentiation that manifests itself in the various subspecies of recognition that jointly make up modern *Sittlichkeit*. However, I go beyond the basic structure of modern aesthetics that emerged from the pathbreaking works of Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison by explicitly defending the claim that (non-instrumental) explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are intrinsically valuable because freedom (understood as multidimensional self-realization) is intrinsically valuable.²⁴

²³ See also Chapter 1.

²⁴ Addison, for instance, highlights a link with freedom. He maintains that what renders the free play of imagination 'intrinsically pleasurable' is the fact that 'freedom itself is a deep source of satisfaction' for human beings (Guyer 2014a: 64). See also Addison (1965: 540–1).

4.2.3. On the novelty of my account of aesthetic recognition

My account of aesthetic recognition is based on my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics. In Chapter 1, I argued that my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is free-standing from two familiar framings of the aesthetic. According to the first framing, the aesthetic is grounded in a conceptual construct (such as beauty or art). According to the second framing, the aesthetic is grounded in a distinct type of experience, judgement or pleasure, namely, aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgement or aesthetic pleasure. My capacity-based approach neither presupposes any of these conceptual constructs nor does it presuppose that aesthetic experiences, judgements and pleasures are different in kind from other experiences, judgements and pleasures. My capacity-based account engages with the aesthetic at a more basic level. According to this account, the aesthetic is in play whenever we use our perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities in an explorative fashion.

My capacity-based account of modern aesthetics and my account of aesthetic recognition serve different functions. The point of the former is to generate an interpretation of what modern aesthetics is about at the most fundamental level and make explicit the basic structure that also underpins higher-level framings of aesthetics that introduce further conditions and distinctions.²⁵ The point of the latter is to make sense of the social and normative life of the aesthetic (and to account for the contribution that the aesthetic makes to modern ethical life living up to its aspiration to denote a life of freedom). Furthermore, by integrating the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics into the Hegelian recognition theory of freedom, it becomes possible to account for what renders explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the free play of imagination intrinsically valuable. To put it differently, if we look at the aesthetic from the point of view of the Hegelian recognition theory of freedom, aesthetically valuable uses of these capacities appear as intrinsically valuable because freedom as self-realization is intrinsically valuable.²⁶

²⁵ See also my discussion of how my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics interacts with other framings of aesthetics in Chapter 2.

²⁶ My Hegelian take on the value of aesthetic relating thus has similarities with Riggle's view according to which 'things are aesthetically good in virtue of the fact that they . . . facilitate the cultivation of individuality, aesthetic freedom, and aesthetic community' (Riggle 2023: 54). Even though I develop a Hegelian account of aesthetic recognition and Riggle an account of 'practice[s] of aesthetic valuing', we both end up endorsing the view that the "end" or highest good of aesthetic valuing' or aesthetic relating 'is the community of free individuals' (Riggle 2023: 54). See also Matherne and Riggle (2020; 2021).

However, since a notion of freedom serves as the ultimate point of reference for the Hegelian theory of recognition, the question arises whether my account of aesthetic recognition (not the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics) is free-standing from a framing that grounds the aesthetic in a conceptual construct (like art, beauty, truth or freedom).²⁷ As I see it, the aesthetic is not unique in this respect, since the Hegelian theory of freedom maintains that all relationships of moral, legal, aesthetic, personal, economic and political recognition that are part of modern ethical life denote dimensions of freedom.

However, this only becomes apparent if we adopt the high-level theoretical standpoint of the recognition theory of freedom and track the conceptual and social differentiation of the concept of freedom. By contrast, from the perspective of those participating in distinct recognition relationships, what they are doing is not in any straightforward way about freedom. For instance, individuals who are relating aesthetically to the world are not concerned with freedom, but with exploring how they perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine the world. And if the same individuals relate morally to the world, they are deliberating about the moral rightness (or wrongness) of a state of affairs; and if they engage productively with the world, they are concerned with a cooperative venture to which they contribute by making productive use of their (developed) capacities. In other words, these individuals experience themselves as participating in different social practices and relationships. They only become aware of the fact that these different ways of being engaged with and involved in their social world denote different versions of freedom as self-realization if they adopt the higher-level theoretical standpoint delineated by the recognition theory of freedom, which distinguishes between different kinds of recognition relationships.

In short, the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics is free-standing from standard framings of aesthetics. Whether my account of aesthetic recognition is regarded as free-standing from a framing of aesthetics that grounds it in a conceptual construct, namely freedom, depends on whether one adopts a participant or a theoretical perspective.²⁸

²⁷ I take it that any attempt to expand the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics (as developed by the likes of Baumgarten, Du Bos and Addison) in order to explain why explorative uses of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are valuable in their own right, has to invoke a conceptualization of a value (like freedom) which can then be interpreted as modern aesthetics' ultimate point of reference.

²⁸ The same holds true for other relationships of recognition. For instance, from the participants' perspective, relating morally to the world is about determining and bringing about what is (morally) right, whereas from the recognition-theoretical perspective, deliberating about what is morally right and demanding moral reforms is ultimately about our moral freedom or our self-realization as moral subjects.

4.2.4. Aesthetic recognition as a relationship of individual freedom

As part of his account of democratic ethical life, Honneth distinguishes two kinds of recognition relationships: relations of individual and relations of social freedom.²⁹ Drawing on this distinction, I argue that aesthetic recognition is best understood as a variant of individual freedom.

Relationships of social freedom denote substantive contexts of action in which freedom is realized qua participating in interactions that are normatively mediated in such a way that the actions of individuals complement each other.³⁰ In other words, social freedom is freedom in the modality of ‘reality’ (Honneth 2014: 124). Modifying Hegel’s account slightly, Honneth argues that democratic *Sittlichkeit* encompasses three variants of social freedom: personal, economic and political freedom.³¹

Relations of ‘individual freedom’ differ from relations of social freedom in that they ‘do not generate any new substantive contexts of action along with obligating attachments, they only represent “possibilities” of freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 124). The point of relationships of individual freedom is to ensure that we ‘freely participat[e]’ in relations of social freedom (Honneth 2014: 71). Relations of individual freedom render our participation in relations of social freedom free by socially granting individuals some degree of freedom from, or in relation to, the social as it currently manifests itself.

For instance, as subjects of rights we can withdraw, at least temporarily, from our involvement in distinct relationships of social freedom, for example, by ending a friendship or quitting a job. Within the space of freedom opened up by our rights, we can ‘act on’ our ‘own unreflected preferences’ without being obligated to justify our choices to others (Honneth 2014: 65). And as moral subjects, we have the ‘opportunity to reject certain demands’ associated with given social roles and norms on the grounds that we regard them as unreasonable or unfair (Honneth 2014: 124). Honneth’s account of ethical life thus comprises, like Hegel’s, two variants of individual freedom. Honneth calls them legal and moral freedom and Hegel refers to them as abstract right and morality.³²

My claim is that aesthetic recognition denotes another variant of individual freedom complementing legal and moral freedom because the point of aesthetic

²⁹ For a reconstruction of this distinction, see Chapter 3.

³⁰ See Honneth (2014: 127–8).

³¹ In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel (1991: §§142–320) uses the term *Sittlichkeit* exclusively for relationships of social freedom, which he calls family, civil society and the state.

³² See Hegel (1991: §§34–104; §§105–40). Even though relationships of individual freedom do not give rise to substantive social spheres, they are, of course, social, since they denote distinct relationships of recognition.

freedom is to protect in yet another way the right of subjectivity.³³ Like exercises of moral freedom, exercises of aesthetic freedom denote a mode of reflecting critically on the social world. In the former case, reflections hinge on our capacity to deliberate about what is fair, in the latter case on explorative uses of sense perception, emotions and the imagination. It is through such exercises of sense perception, emotions and imagination that we cultivate and assert our individuality, that is, we resist being fully determined by the social (e.g. extant social roles and norms) and we imagine how things could be otherwise, or how we could be more or differently at home in our social world.³⁴ Moral and aesthetic freedom can drive, in other words, transformations of how we live together.³⁵

4.3. The agential structure of aesthetic relating

I now want to clarify the agential structure of aesthetic relating that underpins my capacity-based account of modern aesthetics and my account of aesthetic recognition. Aesthetics denotes, in my view, a distinct way of engaging with the world, e.g. ‘persons, institutions, . . . landscapes, cultures’ or ‘the dramas of politics and the arts’ (Seel 2014: 270–1). With regard to aesthetic relating, I distinguish two (mainly) passive-receptive moments from one (mainly) active-creative moment. However, I also highlight that these three moments always interact when we engage aesthetically with the world.³⁶

³³ I pointed out in the beginning of this Chapter that Hegel considers aesthetic freedom in his *Philosophy of Right* in the context of his remarks on romantic irony. This discussion takes place in §141, that is, after Hegel (1991) completed his treatment of abstract right (§§34–104) and morality (§§105–140) and before he moves on to the family, civil society and the state (§§142–320). From this location we can infer that Hegel regards aesthetic recognition as a (potential) variant of individual freedom (complementing legal and moral freedom), not as a variant of social freedom.

³⁴ According to my interpretation, Hegel maintains that it is the substantive purpose of post-ideal aesthetics to explore ‘everything in which men as such is capable of being at home’ (Hegel 1975: 607). See also Chapter 2.

³⁵ Even though I am presenting aesthetic recognition as a variant of individual freedom, I do not want to make the stronger claim that the substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics cannot underpin relations of social freedom or ‘substantive contexts of action’ (Honneth 2014: 124). In fact, emotions denote one of modern aesthetics’ three substantive dimensions and one emotion, namely love, grounds, according to Hegel, a distinct kind of interpersonal relationship. Love relationships and friendships are relationships of social freedom because those participating in them explore, ‘freely articulate’ and satisfy their ‘actual’ emotional ‘needs and interests’ through these relationships (Honneth 2016: 89).

³⁶ These distinctions are, in other words, heuristic, since none of these three moments is purely active or purely passive. For an alternative account of aesthetic freedom that also distinguishes between its passive and active moments, see Seel (2014).

4.3.1. Sense perception: The first passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating

The first passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating pertains to our perceptive faculties. When we engage aesthetically with the world, we explore it with our senses in all its manifold details; nothing is considered *ex ante* to be irrelevant. When we use our capacity for sense perception aesthetically, we pay attention to and find expressions for how something appears to us (for the sake of exploring how it appears to us). Aesthetic uses of sense perception are therefore different from instrumental ones. For instance, if you have a job interview and the interviewer invites you with a pointing gesture to take a seat, you make instrumental use of your visual capacity to identify as swiftly as possible the object that is to serve as your chair. By contrast, the point of looking (aesthetically) at a painting or the face of a person is to explore all there is to see; and this process is, in principle, open-ended.

Baumgarten highlights this aspect of aesthetic relating in his aesthetics of sense perception. For him, the aesthetic use of sense perception is about disclosing an object in all its individuality, in its inexhaustible or 'overflowing fullness' or 'wealth' (Guyer 2014a: 332, 330).³⁷ For there is always more to see in your visual exploration of a landscape, a face or a painting. By the same token, there is always more to hear in your hearing of a symphony, a forest or a city.

In sum, the first (mainly) passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating denotes an open-ended, unconstrained and self-reflectively perceptive engagement with an object. Relating to an object aesthetically is therefore always linked with a sense that the object invites further perceptive exploration and determination. This sets aesthetic perceiving apart from ordinary perceiving, which is conditioned by our involvement in social practices and serves distinct practical purposes. For instance, if I scan the living room and ask myself: where did I put my reading glasses?

4.3.2. Emotions: The second passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating

The second (mainly) passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating complements and emerges from the perceptive, object-directed attentiveness of the first passive-receptive moment. We turn our attention to and find expressions for

³⁷ See also Baumgarten (2007: 92–4).

how we qualitatively or emotionally experience the contemplated object. We can refer to this second moment as the ‘non-empirical surplus’ of aesthetic relating, for this moment always takes us beyond observable features of contemplated objects (Bubner 1989: 43; my translation). If you witness an act of kindness, you can describe in detail what happened, but your emotional response to this event can never be part of your description of what you have observed ‘out there’. The emotional response that you explore and reflect on in acts of aesthetic relating supervenes upon your careful observation of the object in question.³⁸

Adorno’s (1978) *Minima Moralia*, originally published in 1951, encompasses illustrations of how these first two (mainly) passive-receptive moments interact. Adorno pays attention to everyday objects and explores his emotional responses to them. For instance, he engages aesthetically with design features of American houses such as doorknobs and window shutters:

The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things around him, even in his most secret innervations. What does it mean for the subject that there are no window shutters anymore, which can be opened, but only frames to be brusquely shoved, no gentle latches but only handles to be turned, no front lawn, no barrier against the street, no wall around the garden? (Adorno 1978: 40; trans. modified)

Reading passages such as these tempts one to accuse Adorno of (problematically) projecting human characteristics such as gentleness and coarseness onto inanimate, mass-produced objects. However, this would be a misunderstanding. Such passages convey how he perceptively discloses and emotionally experiences typical American architectural design features. *Minima Moralia* is thus, among other things, an account of Adorno’s aesthetic engagement with his new American surroundings. Many of his aphorisms emerge from the interaction of these two passive-receptive moments of aesthetic relating, for he explores how it is for and what it does to him as an aesthetic subject to encounter these objects daily.

³⁸ As indicated in Chapter 1, my capacity-based account of aesthetics makes explicit the basic structure of modern aesthetics, that is, a structure that is presupposed by higher-level accounts of aesthetics. For instance, the claim that the aesthetic involves being attentive to our emotional responses to a perceptually contemplated object is also part of Kant’s (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. However, the experience of beauty is for Kant linked with a distinct kind of emotion, i.e. disinterested pleasure, that arises from the free play of the capacities of the imagination and understanding. What gives Kant’s aesthetics its particular form is therefore that he builds on this basic structure and develops it further by introducing additional conditions and distinctions.

Distinguishing between these two (mainly) passive-receptive moments of aesthetic relating and shedding light on how they interact also enables us to better understand how we talk about objects that we aesthetically contemplate. For the mixing of perceptive and emotional language, which we have already encountered in Adorno, is a common feature of aesthetic conversations. For instance, there is nothing strange about a conversation in which one person says to another: ‘the first recording of Bach’s aria *Ich folge dir gleichfalls*, the one with a period transverse flute that has much warmer and more somber tonal colours, was more moving than the second recording in which they used a more transparent sounding contemporary instrument’.

Like the first passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating, the second is also linked with an unlimited, unconstrained and open-ended process of attentive exploration, since we can always continue to explore our emotional responses to perceptively contemplated objects, situations or relationships; and we can always explore other ways of expressing and representing our emotional responses.

4.3.3. The free play of the imagination: The active-creative moment of aesthetic relating

The two (mainly) passive-receptive moments of aesthetic relating inform its (mainly) active-creative moment, that is, the transformative play of the imagination with the objects that we perceptively and emotionally explore. To put it differently, the free play of the imagination is grounded in or guided by aesthetic relating’s two passive-receptive moments.³⁹ Seel’s notion of ‘interpreting attentiveness’ gives expression to this interplay of active-creative and passive-receptive moments in acts of aesthetic relating (Seel 2014: 275). The attentiveness points to aesthetic relating’s passive-receptive moments and interpretation indicates that we are always creatively generating something that goes beyond what is already there when we engage aesthetically with the world.

Like the two passive-receptive moments, the active-creative moment of aesthetic relating is also unlimited and unconstrained, for there are endless possibilities to play with and transform any aspect of the world; and there is, in principle, no limit in terms of the degree to which we can transform an object of aesthetic relating. Menke therefore characterizes the free play of the imagination as an open-ended ‘metamorphic game’ (Menke 2013b: 155; my translation).

³⁹ The free play of the imagination that I have in mind is therefore different from the abstract, detached, free-floating creativity that is, according to Hegel, underpinning romantic irony. For my discussion of Hegel’s critique of romantic irony, see Chapter 6.

Morphing sequences, a special effect familiar from videos and films, are an apt illustration of this feature of the active-creative moment of aesthetic relating, for they render apparent how one entity (e.g. a human individual) can be virtually transformed into anything (e.g. a chicken) through a seamless sequence of changing images.

We can now appreciate that the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics broadly correspond to the three agential moments of aesthetic relating. The first (mainly) passive-receptive moment is closely related to sense perception, the second (mainly) passive-receptive moment to emotions and the (mainly) active-creative moment to the free play of the imagination. In aesthetic relating, as I understand it, all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics interact.

4.3.4. Remarks on the phenomenology of aesthetic relating

Let us briefly consider the phenomenology of aesthetic relating. A subject engaging aesthetically with an object perceives 'something given not just as given' (Bubner 1989: 36; my translation). For an aesthetic subject, the contemplated object is neither reducible to nor 'identical with the perceivable and determinable object' (Bubner 1989: 36; my translation). The object that one aesthetically engages with appears to us as possessing countless perceivable features between which an infinite number of connections can be established. Individuals who relate aesthetically to an object therefore have the sense that there is no definable end to their perceptive explorations (e.g. of a painting or a tree in your garden). The object of aesthetic relating appears to them as inexhaustible and, by implication, indeterminable. In short, subjects who engage aesthetically with the world 'play along the sensible' features of an object, but they 'never manage to get to' or to exhaust their object (Bubner 1989: 43; my translation).

This sense of interminableness is reinforced by the second passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating. Our qualitative or emotional responses to perceptively contemplated objects (e.g. Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglorious Bastard* or a landscape) are, at first, often atmospheric, hazy, opaque, vague, multifaceted and conflicting. Clarifying and expressing these responses therefore requires an attentive and interpretative effort. One of the key contributions that Collingwood makes in his *Principles of Art* consists in drawing attention to this poetic-creative work through which we further determine our qualitative-emotional experiences by finding expressions or images for them (1938: 105–24). Indeterminateness is, in other words, also a feature of the second

passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating, since our qualitative-emotional responses to perceptively contemplated objects always appear to us as allowing or calling for further interpretive efforts.

There is another feature pertaining to the interaction of the first and the second passive-receptive moment that gives rise to our sense of indeterminateness of objects of aesthetic relating: the connection between the perceivable features of the object and our emotional experiences of them remains, at least to some degree, obscure and impenetrable for the subjects who engage with an object aesthetically. Of course, we can (and do) point to features of perceptively contemplated objects and report how we emotionally experience them. For instance, imagine you are at an exhibition with your friend. Your friend refers to a painting as a 'celebration of colour', whereas you experience the range of intensive colours as intrusive and attention-grabbing. However, neither your friend nor you can explain how exactly your emotional responses supervene on how your senses disclose the painting to you.

The reason I have referred to the first two moments of aesthetic relating as mainly passive-receptive is that both also involve active-creative moments. We actively explore an object with our senses as part of aesthetic relating (we let our eyes wander about the surface of a painting or a landscape). What is more, as part of such perceptive explorations we cannot help but go beyond what is there. We create meanings and make associations; we see something as something. For example, we discover a face in an abstract painting, or the surface of a leaf reminds us of the texture of human skin. In short, already with respect to the first passive-receptive moment of aesthetic relating, we engage in what Seel calls 'interpreting attentiveness' (2014: 275). The same holds true for the second passive-receptive moment, since further determining our (often complex) emotional reactions to contemplated objects requires finding expressions for them, that is, active-creative, interpretative work.

This active-creative work, which is part of engaging aesthetically with a phenomenon, is always guided, but not determined, by how our senses and emotional responses have disclosed an object to us. However, what triggers this active-creative work is the sense of the subjects of aesthetic relating that there is (still) something to be determined by them. As part of their aesthetic engagement with the world, individuals thus 'oscillate[. . .] between the expectation that there is something there to be comprehended and the indeterminacy of what is to be comprehended' (Bubner 1989: 44; my translation). In this way, aesthetic relating 'ignites' a process of creative 'reflection that detects in the formed material' features 'that possess general meaningfulness' (Bubner 1989:

118; my translation). In aesthetic relating, the sense that there is something to be comprehended thus co-exists with a 'structure of interminableness' (Bubner 1989: 41; my translation); and both experiences together generate a productive tension that manifests itself in individuals creating one attentive interpretation after another (e.g. of a Shakespeare play).⁴⁰

Phenomenologically speaking, an aesthetic engagement with the world is also accompanied by a feeling of 'enlivening freedom' (Bubner 1989: 120; my translation). This feeling is linked with the active-creative moment of aesthetic relating. When we engage aesthetically with the world, we encounter the world (including ourselves) as indeterminate and indeterminable, and therefore always still in need of being (further) determined by us. Through aesthetic relating we thus constitute ourselves as subjects of freedom because we become alive to 'the determinability of ourselves and the world' (Seel 2014: 271). In other words, whenever we relate aesthetically to the world, we feel called upon to generate further attentive interpretations. At the same time, the world appears to us as something that cannot be exhaustively determined by any one interpretation. In this way, aesthetic relating engenders an 'inexhaustible search' for attentive interpretations; it sets in motion open-ended 'sequences of interpretations' and imbues contemplated objects with a sense of 'fullness of meaning' (Bubner 1989: 42; my translation).

4.3.5. Aesthetic recognition: An integrated account of modern aesthetics

Against the backdrop of this analysis of the agential structure of aesthetic relating, we can appreciate another contribution that my capacity-based account makes to modern aesthetics: it *integrates all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics* (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination).

I agree with Paul Guyer that a 'great deal of the history of modern aesthetics . . . can be captured by following the intertwining trails of . . . three' substantive dimensions (2014c: 27); and like him, I think, modern aestheticians should strive for 'a threefold synthesis' (Guyer 2014b: 8). However, the synthesis Guyer has in mind is different from the one I am proposing here: Guyer's synthesis is a synthesis of aesthetic experiences of 'truth, feeling, and play', whereas I integrate

⁴⁰ See also Bubner (1989: 37).

the aesthetics of sense perception, emotions and the free play of the imagination (2014b: 8).⁴¹

As part of my outline of the three agential moments of aesthetic relating, I have already indicated how I envision the threefold synthesis of sense perception, emotions and the free play of imagination to work. One can describe the aesthetic engagement with the world as a process that gets going by something catching our attention. If we then explore the object with our senses for the sake of exploring how it appears to us, we begin to relate aesthetically to it (the first passive-receptive moment). Further, we explore how we emotionally respond to the contemplated object for the sake of exploring our emotional responses to it (the second passive-receptive moment). Guided by how our senses and emotions disclose the object to us, we then let our imagination play freely with the object in question. At this stage, we transform the object in reality, in our imagination or via generating a representation of the object (the active-creative moment). The transformed object can then be again perceptively explored, and we can again reflect on our emotional experiences of it, before we let our imagination freely play with it once more. Aesthetic relating thus denotes a process that is, in principle, open-ended and establishes in a straightforward fashion a *synthesis of the three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics*.

Allow me to illustrate this process with two examples. The moment a painter puts her brush on the canvas in her studio to make her first mark is not the beginning of her aesthetic engagement with the canvas, for this moment is already saturated with all the paintings (including her own) and appearances of the world that she has previously perceptively explored. What is more, what she is about to do with her brush will also be informed by how she emotionally experienced these paintings and the aspects of the world that she has previously visually contemplated. It is against this backdrop that she lets her imagination play freely with the paint, brush and canvas, at least for a while. When the

⁴¹ Guyer actively encourages aestheticians to aim for such a threefold synthesis. He states that 'each of these ideas – of the cognitive value of aesthetic experience, of the emotional impact of aesthetic experience, of the free play of our distinctively human capacities – has taken many different forms, and they have sometimes entered into different combinations with each other, sometimes not. Tracing out the different forms and combinations of these ideas – and suggesting that greater value lies in their synthesis than in their separation – is the task of this work' (Guyer 2014a: 9). However, since Guyer and I have diverging views about this synthesis we also disagree about what can be gained from it. Guyer holds that only 'a pluralistic approach will provide us with more insight into the nature and value of our experience of art and nature and with a more satisfying basis for our engagement with the works of art and nature than any reductionist or monistic approach can do' (Guyer 2014a: 7). My capacity-based account of modern aesthetics does not rely on an account of aesthetic experience, but it is nonetheless 'pluralistic' (Guyer 2014a: 7) and aiming for a threefold synthesis. For I argue that a comprehensive account of aesthetic relating must encompass all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics and shed light on how these dimensions interact.

flow of painting is interrupted, she then steps back from her canvas, grabs a ready-to-hand chair, sits down and contemplates her work in progress. Only after exploring with her senses what's happening on the canvas as well as her emotional responses to it (e.g. she is intrigued by the ambivalent play of flatness and depth, she worries about the complexity of the painting appearing forced, that things seem to fall apart in the top left corner, etc.), she continues to let her imagination play freely again with paint, brush and canvas, until she stops once more (to reflect on what she has done and to either continue with this painting, discard it or declare it finished).

My next example of an exercise of aesthetic freedom that integrates all three dimensions of aesthetic relating is gender transitioning. This example takes us beyond the realm of aesthetics as it is traditionally understood and illustrates the significance of aesthetics in our lives.⁴² The process of transitioning involves, from the point of view of transitioning individuals, the interplay of all three moments of aesthetic relating. The individuals in question pay, for instance, attention to gender roles and expectations as well as bodily differences and the different ways in which gender is performed (e.g. dress styles and ways of comporting oneself). While they do all of that, they also scrutinize how they emotionally respond to all these gender-related aspects that are part of their lives. For example, they contemplate how they feel about their given names, track the ways in which they feel limited by gendered expectations and explore whether they feel alienated from aspects of their body. The process of transitioning is, in other words, grounded in and driven by the two (mainly) passive-receptive moments of aesthetic relating, which, in turn, then guide the active-creative, free imaginative play of these individuals with (their own) gender. This can involve all kinds of aspects of their lives, for instance, their names, their ways of dressing and comporting themselves, their intimate life and body modifications. In short, the process that we commonly refer to as transitioning can be understood in terms of an (open-ended) exercise of aesthetic freedom.

One consequence of framing the process of gender transitioning in terms of an exercise of aesthetic freedom consists in rendering apparent that we all could (and many of us do in different ways and to differing degrees) turn (our) gender into the subject-matter of our aesthetic engagement with the world, and by virtue of doing that we become transitioning individuals. From the

⁴² I owe this case study to my student Clara Moreton (2021) who argues in her excellent BA thesis that we can make sense of the process of gender transitioning along the lines of my understanding of aesthetic freedom. For a similar line of argument, see also the excellent MA dissertation by Anna Hartigan (2022).

aesthetic point of view, transitioning is not primarily a medical, moral or legal phenomenon, but driven by an aesthetic engagement with (our own) gender that is perceptively and emotionally explorative and imaginative. This process is never completed, since we can always re-engage with that process as long as there are gender-related aspects of our life that (could) capture our attention, as long as there are gender-related emotional responses that (could) invite further exploration, and as long as we (can) imagine alternative ways of being that bear on (our) gender.

4.4. Aesthetic recognition as a variant of freedom

To conclude the outline of my account of aesthetic recognition, I want to provide an overview of the different ways in which aesthetic recognition interacts with freedom. As a relationship of recognition, aesthetic freedom is linked with freedom in the same way as all other recognition relationships. Relationships of recognition are grounded in valuable dimensions of personhood or capacities; and the (Hegelian) theory of recognition understands freedom as self-realization. According to the theory of recognition, we are therefore free if we are socially encouraged and enabled to realize all valuable dimensions of our personhood.

My notion of *aesthetic recognition* expands the range of relations of recognition, for aesthetic recognition is not part of the Hegelian standard account of modern or democratic *Sittlichkeit*. This expansion also amounts to an expansion of our freedom because it includes more valuable dimensions of our personhood into our account of freedom as self-realization. To put it differently, I argue that a version of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that complements relationships of legal, moral, personal, economic and political recognition with a relationship of aesthetic recognition affords more freedom since it takes into consideration more valuable capacities. This additional 'institutional differentiation of spheres of recognition' that tracks another valuable dimension of our personhood also entails an 'opportunity for greater individuality' since 'with each newly emerging sphere of mutual recognition, another aspect of human subjectivity is revealed' and can be realized (Honneth 2003: 143); and this is especially true for aesthetic recognition because our individuality, that is, what makes us different from all other persons is underpinned by explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination.

All relationships of recognition are linked with a distinct social status (i.e. the status of legal, moral or aesthetic subject) that licenses individuals to engage with the world and others in certain ways. Framing aesthetics in terms of a variant of individual freedom thus also involves freedom in the sense of 'freedom to', for individuals who are recognized as aesthetic subjects are culturally granted the opportunity to develop and make explorative use of those three capacities that are singled out by modern aesthetics as valuable. Further, norms of aesthetic recognition establish forms of consideration that we owe each other as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. For this reason, aesthetic recognition also encompasses the promise of a 'freedom from' certain forms of aesthetic disrespect or oppression. Of course, at this point, the struggles for recognition pertaining to these norms of aesthetic recognition are still ongoing. I now want to move on to discuss how explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination contribute to our freedom.

4.4.1. The emancipation of sense perception, emotions and the imagination

My claim is that it is a modern aesthetic idea to characterize explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as aesthetically valuable and significant for our self-realization. One of the important legacies of modern aesthetics is therefore the *emancipation* of these capacities from the (practical) constraints under which they typically operate. Schiller celebrates this emancipation of our senses when he states that '[o]nce' man 'does begin to enjoy through the eye, and seeing acquires for him a value of its own, he is already aesthetically free' (2005a: 167). Aesthetic recognition thus also involves a liberation of human capacities. For when we engage aesthetically with the world, our capacities of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are, at least temporally and to some degree, *exempt from* the (social) expectations that typically apply to us as subjects who participate in (purposefully arranged and goal-oriented) social practices.

4.4.2. Individual freedom

Aesthetic recognition also underpins our individual freedom, since we cultivate and express our individuality through exercises of aesthetic relating. Our individuality must be cultivated throughout our life, and this cultivation

happens through non-instrumental, explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination.⁴³

In my discussion of Baumgarten, I pointed out that the *emergence of individuality* is linked with the modern *aesthetics of sense perception*. To support this claim, Baumgarten distinguishes between extensive clarity, which he associates with sensible discourse, from intensive clarity, which is a feature of logico-conceptual discourse.⁴⁴ Intensive clarity is achieved by subsuming particulars under general concepts. Think of statements like: ‘that contraption is a landmine!’ Extensive clarity, by contrast, unlocks something in its particularity or individuality.⁴⁵ It is, in other words, only through the perceptive exploration of particulars that we can disclose something ‘as a distinct, unique individual from all other exemplars of the same species or kind’ (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation). For instance, I become aware of what is unique about my daughter’s face by carefully observing it. In short, (awareness of) individuality is a function of perceptive aesthetic relating, for individuality ‘only appears to our senses’ (Mirbach 2007: LII; my translation).

What is at stake in such processes of aesthetic-perceptive relating to the world is not just the individuality of the contemplated object but also the individuality of the contemplating subject. For *our individuality expresses itself in what we feel called to perceptively explore*. Further, *our individuality also manifests itself in the unique way in which we perceive the objects that we explore with our senses*. Different individuals see, hear, smell, taste and experience the touch of objects differently. This is a feature that can be easily teased out, for example, by asking a group of individuals independently from each other to describe how their senses disclose one and the same phenomenon (for instance, a dish, a landscape or a symphony).

The aesthetics of sense perception is linked with a (mainly) passive-receptive stance, since we ‘let something happen’ to us, *we allow something that we encounter* (e.g. a symphony, a landscape or an individual) *to make an impression on us* (Seel 2014: 276). By implication, we are open to being touched and transformed

⁴³ In Chapter 1, I highlighted that already Schiller (2005a) maintained that freedom worthy of the name must involve our self-realization as universal (i.e. rational and moral) beings and as particular (i.e. sensing, feeling and imaginative) beings. For Schiller, aesthetic freedom is thus the name for the free self-realization of the whole human being (Beiser 2005b: 232–5). Schiller also makes it clear that aesthetic freedom, thus conceived, possesses a socio-political dimension. See Schiller (2005a: 176). What Hegel (and Honneth) could have learned from Schiller is therefore that the ‘freedom’ of the human being as a ‘complete being’ (Schiller 2005a: 144) requires more than an ‘ethical state’, namely an ‘aesthetic state’ (Schiller 2005a: 176).

⁴⁴ For my reconstruction of Baumgarten’s aesthetics of perception, see Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ See Baumgarten (2007: 92–4; 558–9).

through these perceptive encounters with the world.⁴⁶ The aesthetics of sense perception is, in this sense, connected to the *freedom of becoming ourselves* (or *the freedom of becoming* someone else than who we took ourselves to be).

A similar picture emerges in relation to the modern aesthetics of emotions. In this case, our attention moves from how an object appears to our senses to how we emotionally experience the contemplated object. *It would be impossible to give an account of our individuality (to ourselves or others) without being attentive to, and finding expressions for, how we emotionally experience the world.* Again, our individuality manifests itself in terms of the objects that we regard as worth exploring emotionally. Furthermore, our individuality manifests itself in what emerges from exploring our emotional responses to contemplated objects. For instance, individuals will experience their love for each other or a situation they find themselves in differently. This becomes apparent if we invite them to give an account of how they emotionally experience their love relationship or how it is for them to give a talk at a conference. Since our individuality also emerges from our attentiveness to and our expressions of our emotional responses to the world, our individual freedom depends on such aesthetic engagements with the world.

Like the aesthetics of sense perception, the aesthetics of emotions involves a willingness to open up; however, this time not to the world but to yourself, that is, to how you qualitatively experience your life. Again, this is a (mainly) passive-receptive stance, since *we allow ourselves* to be impressed by how we are emotionally affected by something (e.g. another individual, a novel, a social expectation or a religious ritual). By allowing ourselves to be impacted by our emotional responses to aspects of our life, we open ourselves up to being transformed or to engage in a re-evaluation of who we take ourselves to be. In this sense, the modern aesthetics of emotions is (also) concerned with the *freedom of becoming ourselves* (and harbours the potential of becoming someone else than who we took ourselves to be).

The aesthetics of sense perception and emotions is also connected with a *freedom from, or in relation to, the social*, for it can generate a distance to (socially valid interpretations of) social roles and norms that give ethical life its current form by suspending, at least temporarily and to some degree, the normative hold they have over us. For example, negative emotional experiences with prevailing gender norms and expectations in our society can put individuals at odds

⁴⁶ See also Seel (2007).

with this aspect of their social world.⁴⁷ Engaging aesthetically with our social world can therefore open up a 'space' for 'self-encounter' and the exploration of self-difference (i.e. the difference between our social identities and ourselves as individuals) (Seel 2014: 276).⁴⁸ Individuals can then respond imaginatively to such experiences of self-difference, for instance, by freely and creatively playing with gender roles and relations. This free and imaginative play, which is the topic of the next section, denotes another way of cultivating and realizing our individuality, assuming it is informed by how we perceive and emotionally experience inhabiting social roles and being expected to comply with certain social norms (e.g. gendered expectations).

In sum, individual freedom is cultivated through the interplay of all three substantive dimensions of aesthetic relating. Integrating aesthetic recognition into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is therefore linked with 'increases in individuality' or individual freedom (Honneth 2002: 511).

4.4.3. The freedom to re-imagine your world

A further way in which aesthetic relating bears on our freedom might be less obvious: it constitutes ourselves as subjects of freedom because in engaging aesthetically with the world, we become alive to 'the determinability of ourselves and the world' (Seel 2014: 271) and therefore experience a sense of 'enlivening freedom' (Bubner 1989: 120; my translation). By integrating aesthetic recognition into the ethical fabric of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, we thus encourage and enable subjects to relate aesthetically to the world, thereby cultivating also their sense for the indeterminateness and 'determinability of ourselves and the world' (Seel 2014: 271).

My claim is that it is a socio-cultural legacy of modern aesthetics that modern subjects have the *normative expectation* that they are encouraged and granted opportunities to engage aesthetically with their world. What is more, they have the *normative expectation* to be recognized as equal aesthetic subjects. To be clear, I am not claiming that all individuals in liberal-democratic societies are given the consideration and support they deserve as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. In fact, I argue that we need to develop a critical theory of aesthetics and pay more attention to struggles for aesthetic recognition because contemporary democratic life is still marred by aesthetic unfreedom, oppression

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Butler (2021: 38).

⁴⁸ See also Seel (2014: 270, 271, 277, 280) and Rebentisch (2010: 180).

and discrimination. My point is that the normative expectation to be treated as an equal aesthetic subject denotes an integral part of modern and contemporary democratic ethical life. That is why struggles for aesthetic recognition and the interpretation of norms of aesthetic recognition have been a feature of modern democratic life since its inception.⁴⁹

Aesthetic recognition is, in other words, socially valid and effective, even if it is contested. Through aesthetic recognition we grant each other, among other things, a certain *freedom from, or in relation to, the social*. As aesthetic subjects we are licensed to (again and again) freely and creatively generate alternatives to what is and to imagine how things could be otherwise. The purpose of this free play of the imagination is, according to Hegel, the exploration of what it might mean for us as socially and historically situated individuals to be more or differently 'at home' in our world (Hegel 1975: 607).⁵⁰

There is an elective affinity between aesthetic freedom and democratic ethical life, for the latter aims to be a life of equal freedom for all. In democratic societies, our ambition is to shape how we live together through collective exercises of political freedom, with moral, legal and (I would add) aesthetic freedom continuously generating impulses for change. Such changes preserve the integrity of democratic ethical life, even if they are far-reaching, if they originate in exercises of moral, legal or aesthetic freedom and are guided by the overarching normative commitment to equal freedom for all. Aesthetic freedom plays a significant role in maintaining democratic *Sittlichkeit's* claim to denote a life of freedom: it is the only recognition relationship that underpins our individual freedom and it can also inspire more radical modes of self-critique and self-transformation.⁵¹ Without aesthetic freedom, members of modern democracies would encounter extant social roles, norms and practices as 'institutional facts' that they are 'constantly compelled to antecedently recognize' (Honneth 2014: 111). In other words, without aesthetic recognition, we are unable to bring the norms that shape the social institutions into which we are all socialized and through which we are supposed to realize our freedom within the remit of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom.

We must also appreciate (the Foucauldian point) that we become subjects of capacities, that is, self-guiding participants in social practices, through

⁴⁹ Of course, I am also claiming that the social theorists of modern ethical life from Hegel onwards have overlooked this. For a case study of aesthetic misrecognition, see Chapter 5. For my outline of the research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key, see Chapter 6.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 2 for my discussion of Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics.

⁵¹ See my remarks on scope unfreedom as a consequence of (displacing) aesthetic freedom from accounts of modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* in Chapter 3.

processes of socialization that are shot through with power and discipline. It is for this reason that Menke juxtaposes the free play of imagination dimension of aesthetics with the practical freedom of subjects of capacities. Practical freedom consists, according to Menke, in 'being able to guide oneself, one's own conduct . . . according to standards of success and failure of a social practice. Practical freedom is the freedom of normative self-guidance.' (Menke 2013b: 150; my translation) However, since power is involved in our becoming subjects of capacities, '*practical freedom gets entangled in the paradox of capacity and power*' (Menke 2013b: 151; my translation): we cannot be free in this practical sense without developing our capacities which, in turn, happens through our participation in disciplinary practices (that predate us and can therefore not be understood as expressions of our freedom).

The (culturally sanctioned) free play of the imagination denotes one way of addressing this unfreedom, since engaging with the world aesthetically counters the effects of 'social discipline through which subjects and their capacity for practical freedom are generated' (Menke 2013b: 153; my translation). By letting our faculties play freely and imaginatively, we emancipate them (at least to some degree and for a certain amount of time) from the constraints and expectations that are connected with exercising these capacities as self-guiding participants in established practices. Social practices are underpinned by norms and serve practical purposes that render some uses of our faculties appropriate and others inappropriate. However, by engaging aesthetically with these social practices we suspend (some of) the norms and role expectations that are constitutive of social institutions. In this way, our imagination can freely and playfully generate variants of and alternatives to these social practices. In short, aesthetic relating provides us with objects of comparison and contrast to the status quo. 'Aesthetic freedom' thus 'interrupts the freedom of self-guidance' that is connected with 'socially defined normative practices' (Menke 2013b: 155; my translation). 'Aesthetic freedom' therefore affords us with a degree of 'freedom *from* social training and discipline' (Menke 2013b: 155; my translation).

In sum, the free play of the imagination is a force that counteracts, on the one hand, the facticity and normative power of established social institutions and practices and, on the other hand, the effects of subjectification and disciplinary power that are part of our becoming subjects of practical capacities. With this outline of my account of aesthetic recognition behind us, we can now begin to explore *how it can be put to critical use*.

Struggles for aesthetic recognition

5.1. Introduction

The flipside of aesthetic recognition is aesthetic misrecognition. My claim is that a wide range of historical and contemporary conflicts in democratic life are (also) about aesthetic misrecognition. We are dealing with an instance of aesthetic misrecognition if individuals are not treated as equal aesthetic subjects, that is, if they are not given the consideration they are owed as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. If (groups of) individuals have the sense that they find themselves in such a predicament, they sometimes engage in struggles for aesthetic recognition. I argue that we have not yet fully appreciated the aesthetic nature of such conflicts and struggles because we lacked a capacity-based account of modern aesthetics and an account for aesthetic recognition. My account of aesthetic recognition is therefore a much-needed diagnostic tool for identifying, making sense of and evaluating conflicts that are (also) about aesthetic misrecognition or aesthetic injustice. Furthermore, it can be invoked to raise awareness for and lend legitimacy to those who struggle for aesthetic recognition. By struggles for aesthetic recognition, I mean all instances in which (groups of) individuals attempt to overcome a situation in which they are not given the consideration they deserve as equal aesthetic subjects.

To render these claims about struggles for aesthetic recognition more concrete, I consider in this chapter conflicts pertaining to 'safe spaces' demands, focussing on a conflict that was sparked by the Halloween costume policy proposed by the Associate Master of Silliman College at Yale University in October 2015. I argue that the concepts of aesthetic recognition and misrecognition help us to better understand this kind of conflict and the demands of the students involved. If I can demonstrate that the notion of aesthetic misrecognition enables us to appreciate what is (also) at stake in this conflict (and similar ones), then I will have laid the foundation for explaining why common representations and evaluations of such controversies are misguided or one-sided. For if aesthetic recognition denotes a

subspecies of recognition, then one cannot simply dismiss the demands (groups of) individuals make based on how they perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine a situation as ridiculous, bizarre or irrelevant.¹ To be clear, my ambition in this chapter is not to settle whether, or to what extent, demands and claims by participants in this conflict about Halloween costumes are justified. Instead, I want to show that this conflict is (also) about a struggle for aesthetic recognition. In other words, my aim is to demonstrate that this conflict (and similar ones) has an aesthetic dimension that is typically overlooked.

My general point is the following: The history of modern democratic life is (also) a history of aesthetic misrecognition or aesthetic injustice. This aesthetic misrecognition has so far received little attention. It is therefore important to revisit past and contemporary conflicts and emancipatory struggles in order to identify their aesthetic dimensions, for aesthetic misrecognition is a *sui generis* phenomenon. What is more, we must stop shoehorning instances of aesthetic misrecognition into frameworks of legal, moral, economic or political misrecognition. This chapter illustrates what it can look like to take aesthetic misrecognition in democratic life seriously, that is, as a phenomenon that complements (our sophisticated) accounts of legal and moral (mis-)recognition.

5.2. Demands for ‘safe spaces’: A case study

Demands for ‘safe spaces’ on university campuses cannot be adequately understood unless we take into consideration their aesthetic dimensions, for such demands are often fuelled by individuals’ sense that how they perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine something is treated as irrelevant or as less relevant than how others perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine a situation. In short, demands for ‘safe spaces’ are often also conflicts about aesthetic (mis-)recognition.

‘Safe spaces’ demands have received considerable media attention in recent years. However, such demands are not a new phenomenon. They can be traced back to the feminist and LGBT movements of the 1970s.² With regard to ‘safe

¹ For a view along these lines, see, for instance, Kirchick (2017). He argues that the students confronting Nicholas Christakis, the Master of Yale’s Silliman College, are simply ‘ridiculous’, ‘rude and insubordinate’ (Kirchick 2017). Kirchick therefore ‘instruct[s]’ these ‘students to “grow up”’ and laments that ‘Yale has’ in the end ‘decided to award’ two of the protesting students and portray them ‘as paragons of communal healing’ (2017).

² See Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019: 276). My analysis of ‘safe spaces’ thus complements my discussion of feminist consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s in Chapter 3.

spaces', we can distinguish two kinds of (interconnected) demands.³ Demands of the first kind are concerned with establishing a protected interior space or a space deemed safe for those inhabiting it. Demands of the second kind then emerge from within such 'safe spaces' and bear on how the spaces outside ought to be transformed.

'Safe spaces' are spaces into which individuals who experience oppression, hate, marginalization and so on can retreat to feel safe and be in community with others who face similar challenges. 'Safe spaces' enable individuals, as I have pointed out in my discussion of feminist consciousness-raising, to come together and collectively explore, among other things, how it is for them to live on campus (or in this society) as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings. What emerges from such collective explorations are accounts of those aspects of their lives that they experience as oppressive or in other ways negative as well as ideas about how the world outside this 'safe space' needs to be transformed. *The Black Justice League* at Princeton University, 'a student group dedicated to fighting anti-Black racism' demanded, for instance, the 'creation of affinity housing and spaces for Black students, cultural competency training for faculty, an undergraduate distribution requirement dedicated to the history of marginalized peoples, and the removal of Woodrow Wilson Class of 1879's name from the policy school and residential college' (Li and Farrah 2020).

It is important to appreciate this link between 'safe spaces' and the generation of demands for change that typically address the wider academic or political community. Some demands originating from 'safe spaces' are moral or legal in character. Think, for instance, of demands pertaining to protecting individuals against hate crimes and sexual violence. However, such moral and legal demands often also possess an aesthetic dimension, since they also arise from how students perceive and emotionally respond to aspects of their life and how they re-imagine on this basis the status quo. This aesthetic dimension is, in my view, clearly in play in a controversy at Yale University's Silliman College that involved Erika and Nicholas Christakis.

Erika and Nicholas had only taken on their new roles as Associate Master and Master of Silliman College a couple of months earlier when a row broke out in the wake of Erika sending out an email to Silliman students in October 2015. In this email, Erika sets out her permissive views about (in-)appropriate Halloween costumes while acknowledging that she is aware of 'concerns about cultural and personal representation' and the expectation that it is her job to

³ See also Shulevitz (2015).

reinforce the message that Halloween costumes should be approached with ‘a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense’ (Christakis 2015).

In response to this email, students gathered in the courtyard of Silliman to express their disagreement with and disappointment about Erika’s stance, for instance, by chalking the ground with messages like: ‘our culture is not a costume’. ‘Shortly after, Silliman College Master Nicholas Christakis appeared before the crowd. A conversation ensued, in which many in attendance demanded an apology for the email his wife sent’ (Wang and Wang 2015). I now want to consider what the predominantly non-white students had to say in this tense encounter in order to back up my claim that we are dealing with a conflict that is fuelled by a sense of aesthetic misrecognition.

Close to the beginning of this conversation a Black student called Michaela conveys to the Master the dramatic effect this email had on how she feels about Silliman College. Michaela makes clear that since Erika’s email, Silliman is no longer ‘a home’, in her view, ‘it is no longer a “safe space” for me’ (Clarissa 2015a). For my purposes, it is significant that she frames what is at stake in this debate from the very beginning in an emotional register. Furthermore, it matters that for her the key issue is that Silliman College no longer feels like a home and a ‘safe space’ for non-white students. For according to my interpretation of Hegel’s post-ideal aesthetics, the substantive purpose of modern aesthetic relating is the exploration of how we can be more or differently ‘at home’ in our social world as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings (Hegel 1975: 607).

One of the grievances that students express time and again in this conversation is that the Master and his wife ‘are not listening’ (Clarissa 2015a). The students maintain that neither of them takes a genuine interest in how they feel about Halloween costumes that appropriate or caricature certain cultural or ethnic features. In other words, the students charge the Master and the Associate Master with not being perceptively attentive and emotionally open. What is more, they have the sense that Erika and Nicholas don’t take them seriously as perceiving and emotional beings or as aesthetic subjects. Instead of taking into consideration and regarding it as equally relevant how her students perceive and feel about this subject-matter, Erika’s email is all about how she perceives and feels about Halloween dresses. This adds insult to injury, since the email conveys that she takes herself seriously as an aesthetic subject, but that she does not care (too much) about how other members of Silliman perceive and emotionally experience the issue of Halloween costumes. She writes, for instance:

I’ve always been a good mimic and I enjoy accents. I love to travel, too, and have been to every continent but Antarctica. When I lived in Bangladesh, I bought a

sari because it was beautiful, even though I looked stupid in it and never wore it once. Am I fetishizing and appropriating others' cultural experiences? Probably. But I really, really like them too. (Christakis 2015)

And she then concludes her letter stating the following: '[i]n other words: [w]hose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that' (Christakis 2015).

During the conversation in the courtyard, the students ask time and again that Erika and her husband apologize for not consulting them about how they perceive and feel about this issue, how they imagine the issue of costumes should be dealt with. A Black female student reminds Nicholas that he and his wife should have first listened to them, before issuing their 'no-guidelines'-guidelines for Halloween costumes for the College they represent. She insists: 'it was not your turn. It was our turn to send out an email about [Halloween costumes] to the students and tell them not to appropriate our cultures or denigrate us . . . it was not your turn Sir' (Clarissa 2015d). A male Black student then reinforces this point by stressing once more that the Master and the Associate Master did not care about their perspective: 'if you were to sit down with each of us, everyone here and many more students to discuss our experiences so you could better understand them, you could find that the message that you sent, proclaiming that cultural appropriation on Halloween is totally permissible, is hurtful. You would understand that' (Clarissa 2015c).

Tensions increased during this exchange because Nicholas's responses failed to inspire confidence in the students that he got that basic point and would henceforth consider his students' perceptive, emotional and imaginative responses to be just as important as those of his wife and himself. One Black female student expresses this frustration in the following way:

you had your opportunity . . . and I am not waiting. I am going to leave . . . knowing that I can't reach you. But I want you to understand that I am done, I am done personally, they should be done and I really hope that we all just go home and leave this man alone in this courtyard . . . I am done. (Clarissa 2015d)

The students are outraged, on the one hand, that Nicholas and his wife did not consider it necessary to involve them in the discussion about Halloween costumes and because they, on the other hand, obviously did not care much about how their students would react emotionally to the guidelines they proposed. In addition, during the exchange with the students in the courtyard, Nicholas is hesitant and ultimately unwilling to apologize for the hurt caused by their costume policy, despite students repeatedly making statements to that effect: 'you

guys [the Master and the Associate Master] have not said: “I hear you, I hear that you are hurting, and I am sorry I caused you to feel pain” (Clarissa 2015a). ‘We want an acknowledgement of hurt’ (Clarissa 2015b). Another student explains to Nicholas that he should think about the situation along the following lines:

‘I need to apologize because I have caused you pain.’ . . . What is the role of an apology. An apology is in order when someone has been hurt. Whether you inflicted that pain accidentally or on purpose. . . . What we want now is a response and a moving forward. Not: ‘I meant this’ or ‘Oh, you don’t understand me.’ . . . That’s all we are asking. . . . Can I ask you, what is so hard for you to say those words? What is holding you back? I don’t understand. . . . I don’t understand why we are still standing here and having this conversation. (Clarissa 2015b)

And a Black student named Michelle adds to this: ‘Silliman students need to hear from you that you are sorry . . . you should say sorry because feelings were hurt’ (Clarissa 2015c).

Instead of apologizing and assuring students that he and his wife will give, from now on, due consideration to how their students perceive and feel about a situation or policy, Nicholas keeps asking what he is supposed to apologize for in order to then deny that anything his wife or he said or did merits an apology. In response to this, one student states: ‘you understand the concept of gaslighting? Because that’s what you are doing!’ (Clarissa 2015d). To sum up, Nicholas isn’t able or willing to see or treat his students as equal aesthetic subjects. He doesn’t make it clear that he now understands that how his students perceive, feel and (re-)imagine issues like Halloween costumes is just as important as the way he and his wife perceive, feel about and (re-)imagine them.

Several students highlight that this controversy is ultimately not just about Halloween costumes, but about whether Silliman still is, or could become again, a home for them.⁴ In other words, what is at stake here is not whether Yale is a great place to study certain academic subjects. My sense is that students invoke the term home because a home is a place where it matters to everyone living with you how you perceive and feel about living at this place and where people take seriously your ideas for change (that are grounded in your perceptions and emotional experiences). Since Erika and Nicholas fail to give due consideration to how Silliman students perceive, feel about and re-imagine living conditions at Silliman, these students no longer feel at home at their college. In the words

⁴ See my discussion in Chapter 2 of Hegel’s claim that exploring ‘everything in which man as such is capable of being at home’ (Hegel 1975: 607) is the substantive purpose of modern or post-ideal aesthetics.

of Michelle: 'I love this place so much, and I am not saying you are a terrible person, . . . but I do think that somehow this home is broken' (Clarissa 2015c). And Jancy follows up: 'This is my home. And you came in here. You adapt to me. You understand that. You take care of me. And you haven't been doing that. I kept quiet' (Clarissa 2015c). She continues: 'you need to understand your community. This has been our home. Do you understand that?' (Clarissa 2015c).

Jancy makes another important point: Our individuality is cultivated and expressed through how we perceive and emotionally experience the world around us and how we (re-)imagine it. It is therefore unsurprising that students who feel ignored along these lines and thus misrecognized as aesthetic subjects by the leadership of their college do not feel appreciated as individuals. Jancy emphasizes this when she says to Nicholas: 'I am your head aid. You don't know who I am. You never tried to know who I am' (Clarissa 2015c).

It should now be clearer why the demands for 'safe spaces' in the Silliman case bear on aesthetic misrecognition. The Silliman case also highlights that those who are confronted with a struggle for aesthetic recognition can find it difficult to make sense of the aesthetic dimension of such conflicts. Think, for instance, of Nicholas who, by the looks of it, never fully grasped what this outrage was about. Perhaps Nicholas sought moral or legal fault in what his wife had done and therefore found nothing for which to apologize. The upshot of this case study is therefore that we need to get better at identifying and critically evaluating distinctly aesthetic demands for recognition. What is more, we must get clearer about the norms of aesthetic recognition that determine what it means to give each other the consideration that we deserve as aesthetic subjects who engage with the world perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively.

5.3. The failure to recognize the aesthetic dimensions of 'safe spaces' demands

Let us now look at two common but problematic strategies for dealing with aesthetic demands for 'safe spaces'. The first strategy recognizes that certain 'safe spaces' demands are grounded in how individuals perceive and emotionally experience aspects of their life but then dismisses these demands precisely because of this pedigree. Some imply, for instance, that demands for change emerging from how individuals perceive and emotionally experience something have no normative force. In short, we don't have to take them seriously. Others claim that the consideration given to these dimensions of our personhood in

today's society is excessive (and emphasize that in the event of conflicts between aesthetic demands, on the one hand, and moral or legal demands, on the other, the latter always take precedence).

Such modes of thinking are, for example, behind denouncing individuals as 'snowflakes', that is, as too sensitive or too easily offended. 'Snowflakes' are also misguided, according to this way of thinking, because they seem to think that how they perceive, emotionally respond to and re-imagine the status quo matters when it comes to establishing how we do things here. For example, in an opinion piece on the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign in Oxford for *The Telegraph*, the journalist Harry Mount states: '[i]t's time to say No to our pampered student emperors' (2015); and he then argues that movements like this one exist because this generation of students has been 'raised to believe that their feelings are all that matters' (Mount 2015).

Views associated with the first strategy of dealing with aesthetic demands can be problematic for several reasons. For instance, they often obfuscate that someone is not willing to treat certain (groups of) individuals as equal aesthetic subjects. For example, conservative and right-wing commentators who declare, in relation to the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign, that how individuals perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine aspects of their world is irrelevant for how we should live, often express sympathy for other activists who make demands on the same basis. Think, for example, of local groups opposing building projects such as wind turbines on the grounds that they would destroy the character of a landscape. These same commentators also typically had no problem with Brexit campaigners who expressed the feeling that their sense of Britishness is undermined by immigration and the UK's integration into a transnational political entity like the EU.

In short, the dismissal of aesthetic demands is often driven by (thinly veiled) *aesthetic discrimination*.⁵ For instance, aesthetic demands are sometimes dismissed because they are grounded in the perceptions and feelings of certain (groups of) individuals (who are ultimately not seen as equal aesthetic subjects). In other cases, aesthetic demands are not taken seriously because the (group of) individuals making them are framed or discredited as hypersensitive (whereas similar concerns by other individuals are taken seriously). In other words, we are still living under conditions in which how certain (groups of) individuals perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine the status quo is, at

⁵ For examples of further variants of aesthetic misrecognition in addition to aesthetic discrimination, see Chapter 6.

least by some, seen as mattering less than how other (groups of) individuals perceive, feel about and (re-)imagine the world.⁶

Another strategy for dismissing aesthetic demands is clothed in psychological terms. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, 2018) argue, for instance, in *The Coddling of the American Mind* that paying excessive attention to our perceptions and emotional responses is problematic, since the cultivation of this (aesthetic) mode of engaging with the world undermines the resilience of individuals and renders them more vulnerable to mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. However, even if this statement was true it does not follow that we should stop exploring how we perceptively and emotionally experience the world around us. For this mode of engaging with the world serves an important disclosive function and is thus crucial for our self-understanding, our understanding of the world and situating ourselves in it. To put it differently, aesthetic relating denotes an important way of cultivating our individuality, our sense of self and our awareness of problematic ways in which we treat each other and organize social life.

Furthermore, why assume *ex ante* that the world that is disclosed through aesthetic relating is not depressing and anxiety-stoking? Instead of pathologizing and reprimanding an entire generation for being excessively perceptive and emotional, Lukianoff and Haidt could, for instance, pay attention to and engage with what these aesthetic modes of engaging with our world disclose about it. In short, Lukianoff and Haidt's diagnosis of a generational pathological hypersensitivity remains unconvincing, especially since they fail to provide an unbiased criterion for when and why explorative uses of sense perception, emotions and the imagination are excessive. As a result, we would be ill-advised to follow their suggestion to discourage younger generations from relating aesthetically to the world and making aesthetically based demands on the grounds that doing so undermines their resilience and (allegedly) makes them more prone to certain psychological disorders.⁷

This brings me to another problematic strategy of dealing with aesthetic demands for 'safe spaces' that is popular among liberal commentators. Proponents of this strategy typically do not directly attack aesthetic relating.

⁶ There is therefore a link between what I call aesthetic discrimination and what feminists like Catherine MacKinnon (1994) call 'silencing' of women. See on this also Pismenny et al. (2024: 158).

⁷ The accusation that certain (groups of) individuals are 'over-sensitive' and their emotional responses 'unfounded' is a common phenomenon. This accusation is made in a range of contexts, for example, in situations in which individuals call out instances of 'systematic racism' (Pismenny et al. 2024: 158). See also Cherry (2018). From here, it is only a short step, as we have seen from Lukianoff and Haidt, to pathologize certain perceptive and emotional engagements with and responses to the world. See also Eickers (2023).

Instead, they either assume that moral and legal demands always trump aesthetic ones (which then leads to the dismissal of such aesthetic demands), or they translate aesthetic demands without further ado into moral or legal demands. The (typically unstated) assumption that informs such approaches seems to be the following: since aesthetic demands have no (or insufficient) normative force, we must examine whether they can be re-framed as moral or legal demands.

Approaches of this kind are problematic for (at least) two reasons: firstly, they lose sight of the distinctly aesthetic dimensions of 'safe spaces' demands; secondly, such approaches are underpinned by the problematic (and unargued for) view that how individuals perceive, emotionally respond to and (re-) imagine the status quo can, normatively speaking, never be decisive. In other words, proponents of approaches of this kind refuse to even consider whether aesthetic recognition is a phenomenon that deserves to be taken seriously in its own right. For what else would be the point of attempting *in general* to translate aesthetic demands into legal or moral demands?⁸

Allow me to illustrate my misgivings about this third strategy by invoking Jacob T. Levy's (2016) legal analysis of demands for 'safe spaces'. The question Levy asks is whether demands for 'safe spaces' on university campuses are backed by or incompatible with rights. Levy therefore determines in a first step the relevant rights. The candidates he considers are freedom of opinion and speech, the freedom of association and academic freedom.⁹ Levy convincingly argues that the relevant right in this context is academic freedom, not freedom of speech or freedom of association.

For instance, from the perspective of freedom of speech it is not a problem to solicit the help of ghostwriters, but neither students in relation to their coursework nor academics in connection with their research can employ ghostwriters. By the same token, neither academics nor students can use dedicated lecture and seminar time to discuss whatever they want. What they talk about must be relevant in relation to the educational purpose of the teaching event. Yet, if freedom of speech was the relevant liberty in this context, there would be

⁸ To be clear, I am not saying that moral, legal, economic and political (or strategic) considerations are not at stake in relation to demands for 'safe spaces'. I am also not saying that these non-aesthetic considerations are irrelevant. Rather, I am arguing that when we are dealing with demands for 'safe spaces', we need to distinguish between legal, moral, political, economic and aesthetic demands. Furthermore, when forming all things considered judgements about such demands, all (relevant) types of demands must be considered and their relative weight in relation to the issue at hand must be assessed.

⁹ On freedom of speech, see also Dunt (2015); and on freedom of association and academic freedom, see also Munger (2019: 296).

no requirement to raise only issues that are linked with a specific educational curriculum.

By considering examples like this, Levy arrives at the following conclusion: '[u]niversities as a complex association are deeply linked to their enterprise. Universities are not purposeless civil associations, they are devoted to structured learning, research and inquiry of particular kinds, organized around serious intellectual communities to create questions that channel debate in productive ways, and then have moments of debate across' (Levy 2016).

What follows from this analysis, according to Levy, is that demands for 'safe spaces' must be justified in terms of the university's purpose, namely to provide effective conditions for learning and research; and the right that plays a key role in delivering such an environment is academic freedom. In short: to distinguish valid from invalid demands for 'safe spaces' one therefore must establish whether such demands can be backed by academic freedom.

Levy argues that academic freedom itself 'creates safe spaces', for the 'university setting' that academic freedom brings about is a space composed of multiple sub-units (such as academic departments and student associations) (Levy 2016). The point of this set-up is to foster and protect 'freedom of debate and freedom of inquiry' (Levy 2016). The university establishes, in other words, an internal 'safe space', that is, one that enables those inhabiting this space to effectively learn, research and debate. For the university is a space that protects those who learn, research and debate on campus from distractions and attacks from the outside that are irrelevant, given the purpose of the university. For instance, the university should not 'evaluate students' for 'political or religious opinions expressed off campus, outside the classroom, outside the academic world' (Levy 2016).

The problem with Levy's analysis is not that it is wrong, but that it is one-sided. He simply assumes that demands for 'safe spaces' can be comprehensively evaluated in terms of academic freedom. This unargued for assumption makes it then appear as if there is no issue with simply dismissing demands that cannot be cashed out in terms of academic freedom. What is problematic about Levy's otherwise perceptive analysis comes to the fore in his discussion of examples from American campus universities, for instance, his legal analysis of the controversies ensuing from Erika's email about Halloween costumes at Yale's Silliman College.

In order to apply academic freedom to this controversy, Levy is forced to argue that this conflict is about conditions for learning and researching. Since the demands that the students made during their exchange with Nicholas, the

then Master of Silliman College, are not directly about learning or researching, Levy shifts his attention to preconditions for effective learning and researching. He maintains, for instance, that students living on campus universities need spaces to retreat, relax and recover, since studying is 'psychologically and emotionally draining' (Levy 2016). In short, academic freedom can be invoked to back demands for conditions in dorms and colleges that enable students to recover mentally and physically.

One implication of Levy's framing is that how students perceive and emotionally experience aspects of university life, as well as their ideas for change (that are shaped by their perceptive and emotional engagement with their learning environment), is only relevant if it can be demonstrated that they have an impact on students' ability to be effective learners and researchers. In other words, how students perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine their life on campus is not seen as important in its own right.

Levy's legal analysis is far-fetched in the case of Silliman College. Firstly, Halloween is a one-off event every year, so it is not plausible to claim that this event is significant in terms of whether students can be effective learners and researchers. Furthermore, in their conversation with the Master, not a single student says anything that supports the assumption that what they are really concerned about are their learning conditions. There is also no indication that they think the Halloween dress-code guidelines keep them from relaxing or recovering from their studies. As documented above, they complain about the Master and his wife not deeming it necessary to take into consideration how they perceive, feel about and imagine Halloween at Silliman College. They complain that Nicholas and Erika did not apologize for the hurt caused by the email about the dress code, and they say that they no longer feel at home at Silliman.

Regardless of all these statements, Levy provides the following (re-) interpretation of one female Black student's remark:

I think it is almost certain that what she was saying was not 'I want all of Yale to be an environment in which my feelings are protected.' She was not saying 'I don't want there to be debates at Yale'. She was saying 'this place, this residential college, this dorm that you are the faculty member associated with, this needs to be a place where I can go catch my breath.' (Levy 2016)

To repeat: nobody suggested as part of this encounter that 'there should be no more debates at Yale' and therefore Levy is, I guess, justified to assume that the student in question did not mean to demand that. What I would like to take issues with, however, is Levy's brushing aside of what is, in my view, the students'

core demand, namely that the Silliman College leadership team ought to pay (more) attention to and show consideration for students' perceptions, feelings and ideas for change. This is what aesthetic recognition is all about. Instead of engaging with students' straightforwardly expressed aesthetic demands, Levy simply dismisses their aesthetic demands (after rephrasing them) as absurd and then changes the topic (to something the students never mentioned).

Let's come back to the allegedly absurd demand that Yale should be a place where students' 'feelings are protected'.¹⁰ What exactly is absurd about this demand? It is Levy himself who generates the sense of absurdity by re-framing this (aesthetic) demand as a legal one that is grounded in academic freedom. But that is Levy's problem (or the problem of this kind of approach to aesthetic demands), not the problem of the students. Not even for a moment does Levy consider the possibility that what could be at stake here is the misrecognition of students as equal aesthetic subjects (as opposed to equal legal subjects). He therefore reaches the conclusion that the student in question cannot really mean that all individuals should have a legal right that states that their feelings always have to be protected. Such a rights-based claim would indeed be absurd. But the student does not make such a rights-based claim (and nothing they say indicates, for instance, that they would have a problem with a situation in which one student tells another one in an appropriate fashion that they are no longer interested in continuing a friendship, even if that degree of honesty results in negative emotions).

Levy's essay is, in my view, symptomatic. Liberal theorists tend to reframe aesthetic demands, to the extent that they engage with them at all, as legal or moral ones, for this enables them to assess these demands from the perspective of their preferred moral or legal theory. Of course, this overreach can also happen in the reverse direction. Individuals making aesthetic demands can go too far by insisting that the legal framework ought to always reflect their aesthetic views.¹¹

In any case, Levy maintains that the students on the courtyard simply emphasize that Silliman 'needs to be a place where I can go catch my breath', even though this is not what they are saying (Levy 2016). None of the students claimed that their ability to be effective learners is in any way compromised. In fact, these

¹⁰ Again, I do not believe any of the students involved in the courtyard encounter with Nicholas actually said these words (based on the video recordings that I was able to access).

¹¹ I am grateful to Tom Whyman for pointing out to me that overreach can happen in both directions. The issue raised here is a complex one. It is in any case important to conceptually distinguish between moral, legal and aesthetic demands. However, transpositions of one kind of demand into another kind can make sense under certain circumstances. For instance, some actions are so immoral that we want to prohibit them by law, and some actions can have such detrimental effects on individuals as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings that we want to endow individuals with rights that

students deliberately *sacrificed their study time* because it was important to them to make a completely different point, namely that they feel misrecognized as aesthetic subjects. And when one student heard enough and got the sense that she ‘can’t reach’ Nicholas, the Master, she said: ‘I am not waiting. I am going to leave. . . . I am going to do my work. I am going to do my homework.’ (Clarissa 2015d) In other words, the student takes it for granted that her environment is one in which she can be an effective learner. Her problem is a different one; she doesn’t know how to make Nicholas understand that he owes his students consideration as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. In sum, Levy never questions or defends his assumption that what is at stake here is a matter of legal recognition. This, in turn, blinds him to the aesthetic dimension of the Silliman case (which he himself chose as a case study).

The problems with exclusively moral and legal framings of demands for ‘safe spaces’ also become apparent in relation to Levy’s discussion of another phenomenon at American universities. Levy reports that white students frequently involve their black peers in conversations about affirmative action. Levy states:

Under the circumstances of the kinds of debates that characterize multiethnic/multiracial universities in American life, very often it may be the case that there are racially tense and fraught debates that happen over and over and over again. At a large majority white institution like Yale, it can be the case that from the perspective of any given white student saying ‘well I think everyone should be admitted to university on their own merit and we should abolish affirmative action.’ That’s the first time they’ve every had that conversation and they’re really into it. It is never the case at a large majority white institution like Yale that for any given African American student it’s the first time they’ve heard it. And when the African American students say ‘we want a moment in our day, we want a space on the campus where we can step back.’ They aren’t saying ‘we want to shut down debate on campus.’ They’re saying something that is perfectly within everyone’s range of reasonable emotional and psychological needs: ‘Stop boring me with this argument about whether I belong here or not, I have work to do.’ (Levy 2016)¹²

protect them from actions such as hate speech. In sum, overreach between moral, legal and aesthetic recognition can happen in all directions. Furthermore, it can make sense to incorporate, for instance, an aesthetic dimension into a legal right.

¹² The grammatical issues with this quote are due to this being ‘an unedited transcript’ of a talk that Levy gave at Georgia State University in February 2016. This talk was subsequently published (with permission of the author) on the *Bleeding Heart Libertarian* website.

Levy's choice of example is again very perceptive. But I do not think that this example shows what he thinks it shows. What we can learn from this example is that *we can give others* (consciously or unconsciously) *the impression that we do not think they 'belong here'* (as much as others do) *by way of relating to them as legal and moral subjects*. Affirmative action and university admission regulations are clearly relevant moral and legal issues that affect university life. What is more, debates about these issues are covered by academic freedom, since reflecting on aspects of academic life (e.g. admissions, marking) is part of academic life. Nevertheless, being regularly faced with white students who want to debate the merits of affirmative action is one of the issues that can trigger demands for 'safe spaces' by non-white students because such interactions affect non-white students emotionally; that is, they can have an impact on their sense of belonging, their sense of being (seen as an) equal members of their academic community.

What is at stake here is therefore (also) an aesthetic matter, since we are dealing with individuals' emotional responses and sense of belonging. Consequently, we need to engage with students' perceptions and emotional responses to adequately understand and evaluate the phenomenon that Levy invoked. In other words, if we look at this phenomenon exclusively from a moral and legal perspective, we cannot grasp what is (potentially) problematic about it. For engaging others in a debate about a relevant moral or legal issue does not show up as problematic from a moral or legal perspective. It is therefore impossible to explain in legal and moral terms how, for instance, debates about affirmative action can give rise to (legitimate or comprehensible) demands for dorms and study spaces for non-white students. To make sense of this desire, we must appreciate the impact of repetitive interactions of this kind on non-white students' sense of belonging, their feeling welcome, included and at home at their academic institution.

Once more, Levy attempts to re-frame this aesthetic issue as a legal one. He argues, drawing again on the notion of academic freedom, that non-white students are distracted by white students from focussing on their studies and from relaxing. What these non-white students really mean to express by making their demands for 'safe spaces' is, according to Levy: '[s]top boring me with this argument about whether I belong here or not, I have work to do.' (Levy 2016) But how plausible is it to claim that non-white students cannot find enough time to study and relax because white students regularly attempt to involve them in debates about affirmative action? I do not want to deny that there is such a repetitive pattern. What I find implausible is Levy's (implicit) assumption that such conversations take up enough time to undermine (a precondition of)

academic freedom. By contrast, if we appreciate that what is at stake in relation to repetitive conversations about affirmative action is non-white students' sense of belonging (equally) to the academic community, then we can easily see how this sense of belonging can be profoundly affected by being regularly involved in such conversations, even if they don't take up a lot of time.

Another aspect that gets lost in Levy's interpretation is the second dimension of 'safe spaces'. One point of 'safe spaces' is to enable those who face forms of oppression, marginalization and so on to come together, to analyse and to re-imagine the space outside. In short, 'safe spaces' have from their very inception been linked with demands for the transformation of the space outside. The point of the envisioned transformations is to overcome the conditions that currently give rise to the felt need for 'safe spaces'. However, if debates about affirmative action are backed by moral freedom and academic freedom, there seems to be nowhere to go for non-white students in terms of grounding their demands for 'safe spaces' or changes that would reinforce their sense of belonging. That's why we need an account of aesthetic (mis-)recognition.

5.4. Conclusion

To bring this chapter to a close, I want to briefly consider another example that takes us beyond the confines of university campuses. Subsequent to the kidnapping and killing of Sarah Everard by a member of the Metropolitan Police in London, there was a debate in the UK about all the things women regularly do when walking back home at night: 'stop and look into a shop window to test out if they are being followed'; 'walk a longer route home if it is better lit or busier'; 'turn a corner and then run hard to put some distance between them and the person who may be following them'; 'double round the block so the person following them doesn't know where they live'; 'make or receive a fake or real phone call loudly to discourage an attack'.¹³ Lists like this should give us reason to pause and ask ourselves whether we can adequately capture the harm done in our societies to women in terms of legal and moral notions of recognition.

Millions of women are going out every week. Many of them end up not being treated with moral respect by men, and others suffer violations of their rights,

¹³ These are just a few examples that Hannah Jacobi mentioned from the top of her head in a conversation about this topic with her father, Rabbi Richard Jacobi.

for instance, because they become victims of sexual and physical violence. But what about those millions of women who do not become the target of morally inappropriate or illegal behaviour by men during their nights out? Haven't they still been wronged in some other sense? For these millions of women feel forced to use their sense perception and imagination in a defensive fashion, as is illustrated in the (much abbreviated) list provided above. Is it not a harm that is done to these women that they don't dare to let their eyes wander around freely when they walk home at night, take the route they find most scenic or focus on how they emotionally experienced the conversations and encounters that happened during that evening because they have a sense that they have to be always on their guard? Further, what about the fact that for millions of women going out remains linked with emotions like fear and anxiety? Does that not amount to wronging them emotionally?¹⁴ All of this is part of life when you are a woman or a member of other groups that are more affected than others by abuse and attacks in our societies.

What I am suggesting is that in our societies we still wrong women (and other groups) as aesthetic subjects in a large-scale way, but this is largely ignored or shrugged off. One of the reasons why this kind of perceptual and emotional wrong often goes unnoticed is that, unlike violations of moral norms and legal rights, we lack a vocabulary to talk about aesthetic injustices. It is my hope that the notion of aesthetic recognition will help to overcome this speechlessness by stimulating a debate about the norms of aesthetic recognition and aesthetic misrecognition or injustice.

The examples discussed in this chapter support my claim that there is real harm done by assuming that we can make sense of all the ways in which we wrong and make claims on each other (that deserve consideration) in moral, legal, economic and political terms. This assumption (problematically) implies that how we treat each other as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings is not in itself important. My argument that aesthetic recognition denotes a conceptually distinct and socially valid dimension of freedom challenges this assumption. Aesthetic recognition is linked with the social status of equal aesthetic subject. As aesthetic subjects we have the normative expectation that others, with whom

¹⁴ Pismenny et al. (2024: 161) discuss 'women . . . walking alone at night' as one example of a form of emotional injustice suffered by 'members of marginalized groups' who 'live in fear during daily activities': 'for Black people, it can be an encounter with police, or the simple act of driving; for people with Muslim names, it can be travelling by plane; for people who are queer, it can be showing public affection; for people who are trans or gender non-conforming, it can be strolling down the street. For many groups, mundane activities are precarious because the fear of being attacked prevents or complicates engagement in everyday activities that nonmarginalized groups take for granted.'

we stand in relevant ethical relationships, give due consideration to how we perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine the world. But the reality is this: we still marginalize and devalue the perceptions, feelings and imaginative ideas for change of many individuals and thus fail to treat them as equal aesthetic subjects. I am convinced that aesthetic misrecognition is in play in many past and contemporary social conflicts and debates (about gender transitioning, neurodiversity, etc.). I hope that the concept of aesthetic recognition will prove a useful tool for those seeking to better understand the aesthetic dimensions of a wide range of conflicts and debates, and for those who currently struggle for (equal) aesthetic recognition.

If we look at the history of modern democratic life from the perspective of aesthetic recognition, what we find is a long (and under-researched) history of aesthetic misrecognition and injustice (that complements and interacts with other well-established forms of misrecognition and injustice). This is a history of wronging for which we struggle to find words (and this has surely contributed to aesthetic misrecognition often being ignored, dismissed, trivialized or shoehorned into other categories). This is a history of wronging others as sensing beings by marginalizing and devaluing how they perceive the world. This is a history of wronging others as feeling beings by marginalizing and devaluing how they emotionally experience their world. This is a history of wronging others as imaginative beings by marginalizing and devaluing their ideas for how things could be otherwise. And as always, gender, class and race have played, and continue to play, an important and pernicious role in this history of aesthetic misrecognition. In the concluding chapter of this book, I therefore want to draw on the accounts of aesthetic recognition and democratic ethical life to outline a novel research programme: a critical theory of aesthetics.

A critical theory of aesthetics

Outline of a research programme

6.1. Introduction

My aim in this concluding chapter is to outline the research programme of critical theory of aesthetics. To develop this critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key, I draw on my account of aesthetic recognition and my expanded understanding of democratic *Sittlichkeit*.¹

According to this Hegelian understanding, ‘the ethical idea’ of equal individual freedom provides modern societies with their ultimate normative horizon (Honneth 2014: 64). Different relationships of recognition and their social institutionalization ‘represent specific functional’ and complementary ‘embodiments of the one universal value of individual freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 345n1). Against this backdrop, I argue that the point of a critical theory of aesthetics is to identify and criticize all the ways in which aesthetic recognition’s potential to contribute to democratic ethical life being a life of equal individual freedom for all is (avoidably) undermined. Invoking a terminology from the Frankfurt School tradition, one could say that a critical theory of aesthetics deals with pathologies of aesthetic recognition.² For the purpose of outlining my critical theory of aesthetics, it is helpful to break down this overall task into four subtasks, which I will illustrate with case studies.

The first task of a critical theory of aesthetics consists in identifying and criticizing pathological (socially efficacious) conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition. Such conceptualizations are problematic because they undermine, in one way or another, the potential of aesthetic recognition to contribute to equal individual freedom. I will engage first with two examples of conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition

¹ For my expanded account of democratic ethical life, see Chapter 3. For an outline of my account of aesthetic recognition, see Chapter 4.

² For discussions of the notion of social pathology, see, for instance, Honneth (2007, 2009), Freyenhagen (2018) and Neuhauser (2022).

that are pathological because they undermine aesthetic recognition's potential to promote our *freedom* (Section 6.2). My first case study is Hegel's rejection of romantic irony. Romantic irony denotes a pathological conceptualization of aesthetic recognition for two reasons: firstly, romantic irony rejects the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom, which is reflected in the various subspecies of recognition. In other words, romantic irony turns against the differentiated notion of freedom that underpins modern and democratic ethical life. Secondly, romantic irony provides a self-undermining and non-aesthetic grounding for aesthetic freedom, namely arbitrary willing. My second case study are conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition that focus one-sidedly on creativity. Such 'mere creativity' accounts, which have become increasingly popular in contemporary capitalist societies over the last few decades, value the play of imagination on instrumental grounds and therefore rob it of its freedom. Furthermore, they separate the play of imagination with an object from how the imagining subject itself perceives and emotionally experiences this object.

Conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition can also be pathological because they go against a normative expectation that underlies democratic ethical life, namely that it aspires to be a life of *equal* freedom (Section 6.3). What is at stake here is (groups of) individuals' being either (groundlessly) excluded from the recognition-theoretical status of aesthetic subject or (groundlessly) framed as inferior or less than equal aesthetic subjects. I will illustrate such pathologies of equality using three examples: after discussing aesthetic dictatorships that reserve the status of aesthetic subject exclusively for one political leader, I will examine Kant's (2011) racist inferiorization of non-white aesthetic subjects in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* from 1764. Finally, I will consider an example of aesthetic self-emancipation that Jacques Rancière describes in *Proletarian Nights* (2012): the joiner Gabriel Gauny asserts himself as a writer despite being excluded as a worker from the set of equal aesthetic subjects in nineteenth-century France.

The second task of a critical theory of aesthetics consists in reflecting on the propensity of even non-pathological conceptualizations of aesthetic freedom to set off dynamics that are problematic from the point of view of democratic ethical life's ambition to be a life of equal freedom for all (Section 6.4).³

Identifying social pathologies of aesthetic recognition is the third task of a critical theory of aesthetics (Section 6.5). Social pathologies of aesthetic recognition denote (avoidable) social mechanisms or dynamics that lead to certain (groups

³ Similarly, Axel Honneth explores in *Freedom's Right* the tendencies of exercises of moral and legal freedom to set off pathologies of moral and legal freedom. See Honneth (2014: 86–94; 113–20).

of) individuals not being given adequate or equal consideration as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings. Social pathologies of aesthetic recognition come in many shapes and forms. I will discuss first an example of aesthetic oppression that is based on Simone Weil's account of the treatment of factory workers in the 1930s. I will then examine how emotions and emotional self-expression are undermined in the contemporary world of work and argue that this amounts to an example of aesthetic heteronomy. Finally, I will consider whether it could be regarded as an aesthetic misdevelopment that aesthetic consumption tends to crowd out more meaningful variants of aesthetic engagement with the world in contemporary capitalism.⁴

A critical theory of aesthetics cannot exempt exercises of aesthetic relating from critical scrutiny; especially in cases where the way people perceive the status quo, react emotionally to it and (re-)imagine it shapes their (political) demands regarding how we should live together (Section 6.6). We therefore need to systematically explore what it might mean to critically engage with other subjects' explorative exercises of sense perception, emotions and the imagination as well as what emerges from them. Furthermore, in developing a critical theory of aesthetics, we also must ask how we can adjudicate between different aesthetic demands and identify cases in which aesthetic recognition unduly interferes with other variants of recognition (such as moral and legal recognition) and vice versa (Section 6.7).

In short, this final chapter outlines the research programme of critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key by way of determining its tasks and illustrating what it can mean to engage in them. This approach to aesthetics expands Honneth's critical theory of recognition that is so far lacking an aesthetic dimension. My critical theory of aesthetics is a subspecies of critical theory, since it expands our understanding of, and lends support to, the emancipatory struggles 'of the age' (Marx 1975: 209). For it sheds light on and legitimizes past and ongoing emancipatory struggles for equal aesthetic freedom.

6.2. Pathological conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition I: Pathologies of freedom

Most of the literature on the aestheticization processes that 'increasingly determine[. . .] the shape of late modern society' is sociological in nature (Reckwitz 2017: vii); and almost all contributions to this field are inspired by

⁴ For another example of aesthetic discrimination, see my discussion of demands for 'safe spaces' in Chapter 5.

Boltanski and Chiapello's pathbreaking study *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005). Sociological approaches of this kind provide insightful accounts of how aestheticization processes have transformed modern and contemporary social life. However, they fail to systematically address philosophical or conceptual questions like the following: what is modern aesthetics? How exactly (if at all) does the aesthetic bear on freedom? How do modern aesthetics and aesthetic recognition, which emerge in the eighteenth century, interact with contemporary conceptualizations of the aesthetic?

One consequence of not exploring such philosophical questions is that sociologies of aesthetics do not amount to a critical theory of aesthetics. For instance, they do not tell us whether and for what reasons notions of aesthetics that are currently influential are problematic or pathological. My critical theory of aesthetics therefore complements these sociological studies of aestheticization processes by enabling us to identify and criticize pathological conceptualizations of the aesthetic. In other words, a critical theory of aesthetics sheds light on why and how certain socially effective conceptualizations of aesthetics have a negative impact on our freedom.

Pathological notions of aesthetic recognition either fail to adequately take into account the three valuable dimensions of our personhood that underpin modern aesthetics (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) or run counter to core features of the notion of democratic *Sittlichkeit* by (avoidably) thwarting its ambition to denote a life of equal freedom for all. Three features of democratic ethical life are key when it comes to diagnosing conceptualizations of the aesthetic as pathological: firstly, freedom is modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit's* overarching 'the ethical idea' (Honneth 2014: 64). Any (socially effective) conceptualization of the aesthetic is therefore pathological that (avoidably) undermines the potential of aesthetic freedom to make its distinct contribution to our freedom. The second requirement stems from the fact that modern *Sittlichkeit* denotes a form of life that is constituted by the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom. For a notion of aesthetic recognition to be compatible with the requirements of democratic ethical life, it therefore has to accept that the recognition relationship of aesthetic freedom denotes only one of many relationships of freedom. Any notion of recognition that claims to be absolute or represent all there is to freedom is for this reason pathological, since such a claim renders this notion of recognition incompatible with the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom (into moral, legal, aesthetic, personal, economic and political freedom) that gives modern and democratic *Sittlichkeit* its distinct shape. The third requirement is linked with the fact that we

are dealing with a *democratic* notion of ethical life, that is, a notion of *Sittlichkeit* that is committed to *equal* freedom for all. In a *democratic* society ‘all subjects must enjoy equal support in their striving for individual freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 64). Like any other social status that is part of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, the status of aesthetic subject must therefore be conceptualized in an egalitarian or inclusive fashion.

Against this backdrop, we can now consider two examples of conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition that are pathological because they undermine aesthetic recognition’s potential to contribute to our freedom, before turning in the next section to conceptualizations that are pathological because they violate the requirement to frame aesthetic recognition in an egalitarian fashion.

6.2.1. Case study: Hegel’s critique of romantic irony (or aesthetic anti-*Sittlichkeit*)

My first example of a pathological conceptualization of aesthetic recognition is provided by Hegel himself as part of his critique of romantic irony or romanticism.⁵ According to Hegel, romantic irony denotes an approach to art *and* to life.⁶ He therefore criticizes romantic irony both as a mode of living ‘an ironical artistic life’ (Hegel 1975: 66) and as a principle of art.⁷

Hegel characterizes romantic irony as pathological and displaces it from modern ethical life because it runs afoul of two requirements that are linked with modern *Sittlichkeit*: firstly, romantic irony embraces a problematic and self-undermining notion of freedom; secondly, romantic irony fails to recognize the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom. As a result, Hegel regards romantic irony as anti-*sittlich* and warns that if it were to become socially effective and guide the behaviour of a significant number of people in modern

⁵ Romanticism or romantic irony should not be confused with romantic (ideal) art. For an account of the three forms of ideal art that Hegel distinguishes, namely symbolic, classical and romantic art, see Chapter 2. I will sidestep here the legitimate question of whether Hegel’s portrayal of romanticism and romantic irony is accurate. On this issue, see, for example, the following contributions by Bohrer (1989), Heyde (2000), Norman (2007: 131–44), Pöggeler (1956), Rebentisch (2010: 174–9) and Reid (2014, 2018: 241–57).

⁶ This characterization of romanticism is somewhat surprising, since Hegel equates the discipline of aesthetics with the ‘*Philosophy of Art*’ in his *Aesthetics*, and he also announces in the ‘Introduction’ that he will concern himself exclusively with ‘*Fine Art*’ in this study (1975: 1). However, when Hegel discusses romanticism, he tacitly expands the scope of the discipline of aesthetics because he is now also criticizing an aesthetic mode of living one’s life.

⁷ In relation to art, Hegel maintains that arbitrary willing, i.e. the principle underpinning romantic irony, is ‘the most inartistic of all principles’ (Hegel 1975: 68).

societies, this would (inevitably) lead to social disintegration and jeopardize the freedom that modern ethical life affords.⁸

Romantic irony aspires to be a notion of aesthetic freedom. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel characterizes romantic irony as a mode of 'abstract freedom' that revolves around the 'individuality of the ironic artist' (Hegel 1975: 64, 67). There are a whole range of features that render romantic irony problematic as a conceptualization of freedom: firstly, romantic irony is grounded in arbitrary willing. In other words, the romantics 'elevated' the 'arbitrary will of the subject into a principle in the practical sphere', giving it 'divine status in relation to the good and the beautiful' (Hegel 1991: 184). From the point of view of the romantics, the aesthetically free subject 'knows *itself* as that which *wills and resolves in a particular way* but may *equally well* will and resolve otherwise' (Hegel 1991: 182).⁹

What Hegel seems to be pointing at is a particular lifestyle of individuals who care about nothing but their own ideas and desires (whatever they happen to be), who are so self-absorbed that they see everything merely as an opportunity to show off their own creativity and ingenuity; and who are so caught up in their infatuation with their own whims that they do not form meaningful relationships with others (ultimately, these others are just objects for their capricious play). Although we may not know any true romantics (or even be able to imagine them), we have certainly encountered the character traits that define romantics; and we probably share Hegel's view that, despite sometimes being entertaining, such character types leave a sad impression, since they are not serious about anything that they do or say.

Hegel argues that setting up aesthetic freedom in this fashion undercuts the value of aesthetic freedom. Romantic-ironic consciousness attributes value only to what it wills (to do). At the same time, this consciousness is aware that in relation to everything that it wills (to do), it might have equally well willed (to do) something else (for that is what it means to ground romantic irony in arbitrary willing). As a result, the romantic subject is unable to attribute any value to what it wills (or brings about); it cannot 'find satisfaction' in what it

⁸ Hegel describes what it means to live one's life as an ironic artist in the following way: 'I live like an artist when all my action and my expression in general, in connection with any content whatever, remains for me a mere show and assumes a shape that is wholly in my power. In that case I am not really in *earnest* either with this content or, generally, with its expression or actualization. For genuine earnestness enters only by means of a substantive interest, something of intrinsic worth like truth, ethical life, etc. . . . When the *ego* that sets up and dissolves everything out of its own caprice is the artist, to whom no content of consciousness appears as absolute and independently real but only as a self-made and destructible show, such earnestness can find no place, since validity is ascribed only to the formalism of the *ego*' (1975: 65).

⁹ See also Hegel (1975: 64).

wills (or brings about) (Hegel 1975: 66). All appears ‘hollow and empty and . . . mere vanity’ (Hegel 1975: 66). This predicament then gives rise to the romantic subject’s ‘craving for the solid and the substantial, for specific and essential interest’ (Hegel 1975: 66). However, romantic irony denotes a notion of freedom that cannot fulfil this desire. For romantic irony dissolves the substance and value of everything it touches, since it is grounded in arbitrary willing.

Romantic-ironic subjects are incapable of integrating themselves into modern *Sittlichkeit* because they only ‘enjoy’ themselves and their ‘own caprice’, that is, they ‘merely play’ with others and the ‘practical sphere[s]’ in which they encounter them, and in so doing they undermine *Sittlichkeit* as such (Hegel 1991: 182).¹⁰ Romantic ironists also pose a threat to modern ethical life, for they aim to establish a community of romantic ironists by converting others to this peculiar aesthetic way of life. Hegel deliberately uses the temporal marker ‘still’ when he emphasizes that the romantic-ironic subject ‘looks down . . . on all other men . . . inasmuch as law, morals, etc. *still* count for them as . . . essential . . . and obligatory’ (Hegel 1975: 66).

Another problem with romantic irony consists in the fact that it ‘remains . . . formal’ and abstract, since arbitrary willing transcends every content (Hegel 1975: 64). The upshot of this combination of formality and abstractness is that ‘every particularity, every characteristic, every content’ that becomes the subject-matter of a romantic-ironic engagement ends up being ‘negated’ (Hegel 1975: 64).¹¹ This critique of romantic irony shares many features with Hegel’s critique of Kant’s understanding of moral freedom, which is underpinned by the categorical imperative procedure.¹² As in the case of moral freedom, Hegel is not objecting to aesthetic freedom possessing an active-creative moment. What he takes issue with is the idea that one can simply abstract from the concrete socio-historical reality or completely suspend its normative standing. To put it differently, Hegel insists that as part of conceptualizing a recognition relationship of freedom one must take the passive-receptive moment seriously, for it is this moment that keeps the subject connected with the fabric of social life.

Hegel’s objection to the ‘beautiful soul’ is motivated by a similar concern. The beautiful soul denotes the will ‘to be’ or remain ‘beautiful’ by not determining

¹⁰ My reconstruction of Hegel’s critique of romantic irony brings to light an affinity between romantic irony and one of the two forms of the dissolution of (ideal) romantic art, namely ‘contingent subjectivity’ (Hegel 1975: 609). See also Chapter 2.

¹¹ See also Hegel (1975: 64–6).

¹² For Hegel’s critique of empty formalism, see Honneth (2014: 111) and Freyenhagen (2012).

itself or not committing itself to anything (Hegel 1991: 47).¹³ An individual that aims to preserve its beautiful soul takes the abstractness that is implicit in romantic irony to the extreme, thereby rendering its inadequacy even more apparent. For the beautiful soul – or the will that refuses to determine itself – does not acquire any content and thus cannot attain ‘actuality’ (Hegel 1991: 47). The soul that aspires to be a ‘beautiful’ soul therefore ends up being ‘dead’, ‘characterless’ and unable to (re-)connect with the world (Hegel 1991: 47).

The shortcomings of romantic irony as a notion of aesthetic freedom give rise to a dilemma: according to one horn of the dilemma, the romantic subject equates its aesthetic freedom with arbitrary willing, which, as I explained above, leads to the erosion of freedom’s value; according to the other horn of the dilemma, the romantic subject resolves to remain a ‘beautiful soul’ by refusing to will anything or to determine itself (Hegel 1975: 67).¹⁴ By choosing the path of complete abstraction, the romantic subject avoids having to face the valuelessness of what it wills (does and brings about). But this refusal comes at the price of not attaining actuality or reality. In sum, the life of the romantic subject is either a life of ‘yearning’ for the substantial that sabotages the substantial (via arbitrary willing), or it is a life of ‘desire for reality’ to which it cannot give in (since giving in to this desire will confront the romantic subject with the fact that all that it wills, does and brings about is devoid of value) (Hegel 1975: 67).

Having considered why Hegel regards romantic irony as a problematic and self-undermining conceptualization of freedom, we can now look at another feature of romantic irony that renders it pathological from the point of view of modern ethical life: romantic irony fails to recognize freedom’s conceptual and social differentiation, whereas benign conceptualizations of aesthetic freedom acknowledge that aesthetic freedom is just ‘*one moment*’ or dimension of freedom (Hegel 1975: 69). To put it differently, a pathological notion of aesthetic freedom like romantic irony aspires to denote the ‘*whole*’ of freedom (Hegel 1975: 69). A notion of freedom thus turns pathological or ‘*crosse[s] a line*’ by rejecting and ‘*replac[ing]*’ other conceptually distinct and socially effective notions of freedom (Seel 2014: 277). Hegel highlights that this is the case with respect to romantic irony, since romantic ‘*subjectivity . . . knows itself as the absolute*’ (Hegel 1991:

¹³ The notion of a ‘beautiful soul’ was first developed by Goethe and Schiller and then picked up by the romantics (Hegel 1991: 182). See Wood (in Hegel 1991: 399 n2) as well as Schiller’s *On Grace and Dignity* from 1793 and Goethe’s description of Natalie’s aunt in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* from 1795. According to Wood, Hegel regards the following authors as paradigmatic examples of romanticism: ‘Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Friedrich von Hardenberg (“Novalis”) (1772–1801), J.F. Fries (1773–1843), Friedrich Bouterwek (1766–1828), and Wilhelm Traugott Krug (1770–1842)’ (Wood in Hegel 1991: 434n21).

¹⁴ See also Hegel (1991: 47, 182).

182) or regards its own arbitrary willing as an ‘absolute principle’ (Hegel 1975: 64; 67). In sum, arbitrary willing is framed as all there is to freedom (and thus as the only source of value). Nothing can be ‘treated . . . as valuable in itself, but only as’ willed and ‘produced by’ the romantic-ironic subject (Hegel 1975: 64).

According to Hegel, romantic irony has two philosophical sources, which the romantics misrepresent and distort: the first source is Socrates’ notion of ‘irony’ (Hegel 1991: 180). However, unlike the romantics, Socrates deploys irony as a ‘method’ in conversations ‘to defend the Idea of truth and justice against the complacency of the uneducated consciousness and that of the Sophists’ (Hegel 1991: 180). The point of reference of Socratic irony is thus ‘not the Idea itself’, but the ‘consciousness’ of particular individuals with the intention to prompt an ‘essential movement of thought’ and to end ‘the to and fro of . . . subjective opinion’ (Hegel 1991: 180).¹⁵ The second source of romantic irony is Fichte’s philosophy, ‘which maintains that the “I” is absolute’ (Hegel 1991: 184). Hegel bestows the dubious honour of misunderstanding and amalgamating both sources to Friedrich von Schlegel. For it is Schlegel’s interpretation that turns Fichte’s ‘I’ into ‘an expression of an extravagant, self-indulgent (even self-deifying) subjectivism’ that is ‘irrational’ and ‘unserious’ (Wood in Hegel 1991: 433).¹⁶

In short, romantic irony’s claim to absoluteness renders it incompatible with the very idea of modern ethical life and it is for this reason pathological.¹⁷ This line of argument also has a precursor in Hegel’s critique of Kantian moral freedom, for Hegel maintains that moral freedom turns pathological if it claims to be all there is to freedom. A moral subject thus adopts a pathological stance if it ‘ignore[s] all of our already existing norms of action and take[s] up the perspective of a universal, detached legislator’ whose task consists in generating the whole social world (again and from scratch) by drawing only on the categorical imperative (Honneth 2014: 118).

Against the backdrop of characterizing romantic irony as a self-undermining notion of freedom that rejects the conceptual and social differentiation of freedom, Hegel arrives at the conclusion that this conceptualization of aesthetic freedom is pathological. Consequently, he displaces it from modern ethical life. Unfortunately, Hegel does not outline a non-pathological account of aesthetic freedom in his *Philosophy of Right*, that is, one that conceptualizes aesthetic recognition in a way that is compatible with the requirements that underpin

¹⁵ See also Vlastos (1987).

¹⁶ See also Hegel (1975: 66).

¹⁷ See also Honneth (2014: 65–6).

modern ethical life and takes seriously our situatedness in the here and now.¹⁸ My account of aesthetic recognition aims to fill that void.¹⁹

6.2.2. Case study: Mere creativity (or aesthetic one-sidedness)

I now want to turn my attention to ‘mere creativity’ accounts of aesthetic freedom in order to show, drawing on my own account of aesthetic relating, what is one-sided and therefore pathological about them. My account of aesthetic recognition insists that to fully realize the potential of the aesthetic to contribute to our freedom, we have to endorse an account of aesthetics that encompasses all three substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics (i.e. sense perception, emotions and the imagination) and ensures the free exercise and interplay of these dimensions.²⁰ We therefore have to reject conceptualizations of aesthetics that are one-sided. A case in point are socially prevalent and efficacious notions that reduce aesthetic freedom to mere creativity. Such accounts are one-sided because they focus exclusively on the play of the imagination, while undermining, at the same time, the freedom of the imagination, since they treat and value the imagination only as a means or as an instrument for promoting pre-given goals. Furthermore, by focussing entirely on the play of imagination, mere creativity accounts reject the significance of the free interaction of the imagination with a subject’s perceptive and emotional explorations of a phenomenon. I therefore argue that our aesthetic freedom is diminished if such one-sided accounts of aesthetic recognition become socially effective and crowd out other non-pathological understandings of aesthetic recognition.

Recent studies in the sociology of aesthetics highlight that creativity has permeated all aspects of contemporary life (from the way in which we evaluate ourselves, our relationships with others and the careers we are pursuing).²¹ According to these studies, this development has been mainly driven by capitalism’s appropriation of creativity since the 1970s. In the UK context, it was the New Labour government that first ‘advance[d] a rhetoric of creativity as having an economic value’ and ‘forge[d] a brand-new growth agenda based on knowledge, entrepreneurship and innovation’ (Mould 2018: 17). Blair’s

¹⁸ Like me, Hegel seems to be after a notion of aesthetic freedom that denotes a distinct mode of engaging with one’s own situatedness in a concrete socio-historical context. One feature that renders romantic irony pathological is that it amounts to a form of disengaged aestheticism.

¹⁹ I outline this account of aesthetic recognition in Chapter 4. For my outline of Hegel’s post-ideal conception of aesthetics, see Chapter 2.

²⁰ For my account of the agential structure of aesthetic relating, see Chapter 4.

²¹ See, for instance, Mould (2018) and Reckwitz (2017).

government also ‘created the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)’ that is still tasked with promoting and showcasing the UK’s ‘creative industries’ (Mould 2018: 17–18).

While sociologists offer insightful accounts of the rise of creativity in contemporary capitalist societies, they do not critically scrutinize creativity as a notion of aesthetics or aesthetic recognition.²² However, it is important to make explicit what exactly is deficient about creativity as a notion of aesthetic freedom. Furthermore, we must shed light on how creativity is implicated in undermining our freedom. For example, Oli Mould writes a ‘book . . . against creativity’ (Mould 2018: 24), since this notion is propping up contemporary capitalism; and Andreas Reckwitz (2017) highlights that creativity has become key to how we are governed and subjectivized. Yet, both sociologists fail to offer *a critique of creativity that explains what exactly is problematic about mere creativity accounts as a conceptualization of aesthetic freedom*. Thus, while being informed by this sociological literature, my study aims to go one step further. For my notion of aesthetic recognition enables us to re-engage with the ideological debate surrounding the aesthetic in today’s capitalist democracies. For this purpose, we need a conceptualization of aesthetic recognition that explains what contribution the aesthetic can make to our freedom in democratic ethical life.

What, then, is one-sided about the ubiquitous notion of creativity? Allow me to weave my answer to this question into a biographical anecdote. During my year of national social service (then an alternative to serving for a year in the German military), I spent a lot of time thinking about the subject I wanted to study at university. One option I considered was applying to a higher education institution specializing in performing arts, since I was, at the time, impressed by the works of dramatists like Christoph Schlingensiefel and Heiner Müller.²³ I started to regularly go to the theatre and even embarked on writing a play myself. In short, I pondered a career as a playwright or dramaturg. With this idea in mind, I went to the local *Arbeitsamt* or job centre to find out more about this career path. The *Arbeitsamt* in Germany used to stock files and leaflets (this was before everything became available on the internet) about all possible professions and offered personal consultations with career advisors. The leaflets

²² For a philosophical critique of creativity, see, for example, Thomä (2010: 163, 167).

²³ I first encountered Christoph Schlingensiefel and Heiner Müller as Alexander Kluge’s late-night conversation partners on German private TV. To this day, I feel a deep sense of gratitude to Alexander Kluge. His television work turned my teenage bedroom in a suburb of Stuttgart into a place where strangely illustrated conversations (about opera, theatre, history, politics, war, capitalism, Nazism, communism, etc.) took place, conversations that were radically different from anything I had hitherto encountered. For an excellent account of the distinct version of critical theory that Alexander Kluge developed with Oskar Negt, see Samaniego (2021).

informed me, for example, about the colleges that offered relevant degrees, the importance of internships and the poor job and income prospects associated with my envisaged career.

Then it was time for my conversation with the advisor. He quickly established that I was attracted to working creatively with texts, but then the conversation took an unexpected turn. The advisor tried to shift my attention away from playwriting and directing to degrees that prepare students for careers as advertising copywriter or speech writer. The advisor argued that these career paths would provide me with *everything* that I was looking for, since these alternative careers are all about working creatively with language, while offering much better employment and income prospects. I remember sitting there feeling tricked. I intuitively knew that being an advertising copywriter and being a playwright of the ilk of Schlingensiefel and Müller were very different things, and that Schlingensiefel and Müller would have never traded the latter profession for the former. But in this moment, I struggled to explain to the advisor why these are not like-for-like substitutions, even though all of these ‘professions’ involve, in one way or another, working creatively with texts.

Remembering this conversation more than a quarter of a century later, my account of aesthetic recognition now feels to me like a belated explanation. I now also appreciate that the advisor’s move is characteristic of our times: he (problematically) equated aesthetics with creativity. At the *Arbeitsamt*, a part of aesthetics was, with the help of the ‘rhetoric of creativity’, sold to me as all there is to aesthetics (Mould 2018: 23). The advisor’s suggestion amounted to the following: keep the play of imagination but leave behind your ambitions to explore how the world perceptively and emotionally appears to you. Of course, this offer diminishes the value of the part of aesthetics that I was supposed to keep. For the play of imagination that is valuable in terms of our freedom is rooted in how we perceive and emotionally respond to the world. Further, the play of the imagination that is associated with creative professions is no longer free either. In the case of copywriting, the play of one’s imagination serves a predetermined purpose (e.g. to make a product appear more appealing and to increase sales); in the case of speech writing, one’s imagination is tasked with finding ways to effectively promote the speaker’s agenda (whatever it is). In short, the creative professions that the career advisor suggested to me rob the play of the imagination of its freedom and its grounding in individuals’ own free perceptive and emotional explorations.

By contrast, my account of aesthetic recognition insists that the play of imagination must be free and inspired by how individuals’ perceptions and

emotions disclose the world to them. To link it back to my example: what made watching, reading and listening to Christoph Schlingensiefel and Heiner Müller so precious to me in my late teens and early twenties was that they introduced me to completely different ways of perceiving, emotionally experiencing and imaginatively engaging with phenomena like capitalism, the German reunification process, the history of the German Democratic Republic, Brecht, Greek mythology and various operas. It is simply absurd to suggest that, for instance, Heiner Müller would still be Heiner Müller if you kept his imagination but got rid of his unique perceptive and emotional receptivity. For what is valuable about Müller's imagination is internally linked with the way in which (he expresses how) he perceives and emotionally experiences the world.

The point of telling this anecdote is not to suggest that we should abolish creative professions like speech writer or copywriter. Rather, I wanted to explain what exactly is problematic about equating mere creativity with aesthetic freedom. We must reject the assumption that encouraging us to use our imagination playfully in the context of our work is sufficient for us to realize ourselves as aesthetic subjects. One-sided approaches to aesthetics such as mere creativity accounts therefore undermine the potential of the aesthetic to contribute to our freedom, especially if they become socially dominant and crowd out comprehensive accounts of aesthetic relating and recognition.

6.3. Pathological conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition II: Pathologies of equality

I now want to turn my attention to two pathologies of equality, that is, conceptualizations of aesthetic freedom that violate the *equal* freedom for all requirement of *democratic* ethical life because they (groundlessly) deny certain (groups of) individuals the status of aesthetic subject or frame them as inferior or less than equal aesthetic subjects.

6.3.1. Case study: Aesthetic dictatorship (or aesthetic exclusion)

My first examples are extreme cases of aesthetic exclusion: two authoritarian and dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century.²⁴ In *The Total Art of Stalinism*,

²⁴ To be clear, I am not saying that the denial of equal aesthetic recognition is the only problematic or the most problematic feature of these dictatorial regimes. I am also not attempting to comprehensively

Boris Groys offers an account of the ‘Soviet state’ that sheds light on the modern artistic ideas that inspire it (2011: 122). What matters for my purposes is that Groys characterizes the Soviet state during the period of Stalin’s leadership as an ‘Aesthetic Dictatorship’, since only Stalin’s vision and ‘political imagination’ ultimately mattered (2011: 129). In other words, we are dealing with a regime in which Stalin’s aesthetic subjectivity is a key element, while the recognition of the aesthetic subjectivity of everyone else is denied or suppressed.

My second example is the National Socialist state that emerged from the Nazi movement’s assault on the liberal-democratic Weimar Republic. Again, I want to only look at one feature: the Nazis’ ideological rejection of equal aesthetic recognition. To do this, I rely on Rainer Stollmann’s (1978) article ‘Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art’ that discusses speeches, letters and other writings of Joseph Goebbels, the man running Hitler’s propaganda operations. Stollmann’s analysis of these documents leads him to argue that a distinct aesthetic model underpins National Socialist politics. Goebbels himself describes this aesthetic politics in the following way: “Politics . . . is an art, perhaps the highest and most far-reaching of all, and we who shape modern German politics feel ourselves to be artistic people, entrusted with the great responsibility of forming out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a *Volk*.” (Goebbels quoted after Stollmann 1978: 47).²⁵

Goebbels goes on to portray the dictator Hitler as supreme artist. Hitler’s aesthetic subjectivity is presented as being of utmost importance for the regime and the ‘German *Volk*’. At the same time, Goebbels denies everyone else’s status as aesthetic subject, for he depicts the individuals that make up the ‘German *Volk*’ as completely passive material (like clay), which the ‘*Führer*’ needs to (be able to) use in whatever way he sees fit. In a letter addressed to the eminent conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, Goebbels writes:

“The statesman is also an artist. To him the *Volk* is nothing more than stone is to a sculptor. Leader and masses, that is as little a problem as, say, painter and paint. . . . Forming a *Volk* from the masses and a state from the *Volk* – that has always been the most profound purpose of politics.’ (Goebbels quoted after Stollman 1978: 47)

engage with all the aesthetic wrongs that have been committed by these regimes. I merely want to highlight one form of aesthetic misrecognition that is an integral part of their ideological core, so to speak. In short, I am offering one piece of a more comprehensive aesthetic critique of such regimes, which, in turn, complements other critical engagements with them (that are moral, legal, political and economic in character).

²⁵ See also Feola (2018: 3–20).

In this statement, Goebbels is alluding to Schiller's well-known account of how freedom is in play in the relationship between artists and their material, on the one hand, and political leaders and citizens, on the other. However, a look at Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* from 1795 reveals that Goebbels is Schiller's antipode in the intellectual history of German aesthetic politics. For Schiller puts the issue of equal aesthetic freedom and individual freedom at the heart of his aesthetic politics. Schiller insists that there is a crucial disanalogy between the artist or artisan and the political leader. Schiller writes:

When the artisan lays hands upon a formless mass in order to shape it to his ends, he has no scruple in doing it violence; for the natural material that he is working merits no respect for itself, and his concern is not with the whole for the sake of its parts, but with the parts for the sake of the whole. . . . With the . . . political artist things are very different indeed. For him man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives. In this case the end turns back upon itself and becomes identical with the medium; and it is only inasmuch as *the whole serves the parts* that the parts are in any way bound up to submit to the whole. The statesman-artist must approach his material with a quite different kind of respect from that which the maker of beauty feigns towards his. The consideration he must accord to its uniqueness and individuality is not merely subjective, and aimed at creating an illusion for the senses, but objective and directed to its innermost being. (Schiller 2005a: 94)

In sum, Schiller embraces the goal of aesthetic freedom for all, whereas Goebbels attacks this democratic and emancipatory legacy of modern aesthetics. According to Goebbels, only the *Führer* ultimately is (or counts as) an aesthetic subject. What is more, he rejects Schiller's insistence that there is an essential difference between the artist and the political leader. What we can learn from this case study is that one guise in which fascist, totalitarian and dictatorial tendencies can manifest themselves is in attacks on the assumption that all individuals deserve equal consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings.

6.3.2. Case study: Kant's aesthetic racism (or aesthetic inferiorization)

Aesthetic dictatorship is an extreme example of *aesthetic exclusion*. For everyone, except for the dictators themselves, is excluded from the set of individuals who are treated as aesthetic subjects. In this section, I want to focus on another pathological phenomenon: *aesthetic inferiorization*. By this, I mean the framing of individuals as inferior or less than equal aesthetic subjects. My claim is that

conceptualizations of aesthetics and, by implication, aesthetic recognition that portray some (groups of) individuals as less than equal aesthetic subjects are pathological because they are incompatible with the equal freedom for all requirement that is a core feature of democratic ethical life.

At the heart of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, which is composed of a range of recognition relationships, is the 'category of the person' or the 'valorization' of different dimensions of personality (Gikandi 2011: 4). Despite this, modern democratic history is replete with (arbitrarily) denying (groups of) individuals the social status of equal or 'full persons' (Mills 2017: 101). Consequently, modern democratic history offers countless examples of emancipatory struggles of groups aiming to overcome their inferiorization, including their aesthetic inferiorization.

Unlike in the cases of legal, moral, economic and political inferiorization, philosophers and democratic theorists have paid little attention to how individuals are conceptualized as less than equal aesthetic subjects. What is more, struggles for (equal) aesthetic recognition (or the aesthetic dimension of struggles for recognition) have also been, by and large, overlooked. It would be a big mistake to infer from this theoretical silence that aesthetic inferiorization does not exist or that it does not do a lot of damage. Once you start looking for aesthetic inferiorization, it is easy to find myriad examples of (groups of) individuals being conceptualized as less than equal aesthetic subjects. There are also clear indicators that such inferiorizing framings have social effects, which, in turn, means that many individuals have been oppressed and disadvantaged 'in their striving' for 'individual freedom' (Honneth 2014: 64). Individuals who are seen and treated as less than equal aesthetic subjects are not provided with equal and adequate opportunities to develop and exercise their aesthetic capacities. To the extent such individuals nonetheless engage in exercises of aesthetic relating, what emerges from such exercises is regarded as deserving less consideration and being of inferior aesthetic value (whereby such aesthetic judgements are not based on an open-minded engagement with the exercises of aesthetic relating themselves or their products, but inferred from the inferior aesthetic status that is assigned to certain groups of individuals).²⁶

A lot of work has been done in recent decades to draw attention to the pernicious impact that notions of gender, race and class have played, and continue to play, when it comes to framing individuals as less than 'full persons'

²⁶ See, for instance, W.E.B. Du Bois' (1994) talk at the NAACP conference in 1926 which addresses and illustrates all these aspects in relation to Black citizens in the USA.

in relation to their status as equal moral, legal, economic or political subjects (Mills 2017: 101). The notions of race, gender and class have also had, and continue to have, a devastating influence with regard to the status of equal aesthetic subject. A critical theory of aesthetics therefore needs to (re-)examine, among other things, how notions of race, gender and class have been invoked, and continue to be invoked, in distinct socio-historical contexts to legitimize the aesthetic inferiorization of certain (groups of) individuals.²⁷ To render this point a bit more concrete, I now want to consider Immanuel Kant's racist aesthetic inferiorization of non-whites that has, so far, received very little attention.²⁸

We owe a great debt to philosophers whose contributions make it abundantly clear that we cannot simply present Kant's moral and political philosophy as an expression of enlightened universalism, that is, the belief that 'all humans are . . . equal . . . persons', since Kant provides us also with racist portrayals of non-whites and non-Europeans (Mills 2017: 92). Charles Mills, for instance, convincingly argues that for Kant, at least during certain periods of his intellectual life, 'whiteness' is a 'prerequisite for full personhood' (Mills 2017: 92).²⁹

Whether or not individuals are granted the social status of 'full persons' depends on whether individuals are seen as possessing certain valuable capacities (to an equal or sufficient degree) (Mills 2017: 101). For instance, the 'capacity for autonomy' underpins, according to Mills' reading of Kant, individuals' status as equal moral, legal or political subject (2017: 91–2). Mills then identifies several passages in which Kant denies that non-whites possess this capacity to an equal or sufficient degree. By implication, Kant fails to recognize them as equal (moral,

²⁷ For a discussion of how racism leads to aesthetic injustices and how both are bound up with colonial projects, see Dalaqua (2020).

²⁸ For an exception, see Roelofs (2014: 29–56). Representations of non-whites as inferior human beings are 'nearly as old as Europeans' first contact with West Africa' (Goff et al. 2008: 292). The question of how 'people attribute "humanness" to others' has, however, only recently become the subject-matter of social psychological studies (Goff et al. 2008: 293). Such studies are particularly relevant for our purposes, when they engage the substantive dimensions of modern aesthetics and consider how race, gender and class modulate the readiness of individuals to fully ascribe certain valuable capacities and thus full personhood to others. For instance, some studies suggest that 'emotions such as jealousy, sympathy, or hope are routinely denied to out-groups and preferentially attributed to in-group members. . . . This feeling of superior "humanity", then contributes to feelings of intergroup antipathy and in-group bias while simultaneously obstructing attempts at intergroup empathy and prejudice reduction' (Goff et al. 2008: 293). See also Vaes et al. (2003). Whether or not we ascribe 'secondary emotions' to others is relevant if we want to know how the 'infrahumanization' of other human beings works (Goff et al. 2008: 293n1). See also Leyens et al. (2001).

²⁹ The debate about Kant and race, which authors like Robert Bernasconi and Charles Mills helped to kick off, has inspired a large number of contributions. Mikkelsen (2013: 1–40) provides a helpful overview in his 'Translator's Introduction' to *Kant and the Concept of Race*. For the initial critique of Kant, see Eze (1997) and Bernasconi (2001a, 2001b). For responses to this first wave of criticisms, see, for example, Boxill and Hill (2001) and Louden (2000). For Charles Mills' key contributions to this debate, see Mills (2014; 2017). For more recent contributions, see, for instance, Basevich (2020), Boxill (2017) and Kirkland (2018).

legal and political) subjects.³⁰ Simon Gikandi added the status of equal aesthetic subject to this list, which presupposes, according to Gikandi, the capacity for ‘aesthetic judgements’ (Gikandi 2011: 4).

For the purposes of this study, it is of relevance that Kant (2011) explicitly discusses the capacities that underpin modern aesthetics and the status of equal aesthetic subject, namely sense perception, emotions and the imagination in relation to non-white individuals in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* from 1764.³¹ In this work, Kant claims that non-white individuals’ aesthetic capacities are diminished or pathologically constituted. For instance, with respect to the capacity for emotions, Kant maintains that the emotional life of white individuals is significantly more differentiated and profound than that of non-white individuals. The flipside of Kant’s racist claims about the emotional superiority of white individuals is the racially motivated aesthetic inferiorization of non-white individuals as aesthetic subjects. Kant states, for example, that ‘[t]he Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that arises above the ridiculous’ (2011: 58); regarding Asians like the ‘Japanese’, Kant maintains that they ‘demonstrate few marks of a finer feeling’ (2011: 58); and with respect to the ‘natives’ of North America, Kant asserts that they ‘show few traces of a character of mind which would be disposed to finer sentiments, and an exceptional lack of feeling constitutes the mark of these kinds of human beings’ (2011: 60).

In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant also considers another substantive dimension of modern aesthetics that plays a central role in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790: the power of imagination (2000). Kant maintains that there is something constitutively deficient about non-white individuals’ capacity for the imagination, which renders them aesthetically inferior to their white peers. Again, Kant invokes a range of racist examples: for instance, ‘the Arab’, according to Kant, ‘the noblest human being in the Orient’, is depicted as possessing a pathologically ‘inflamed power of imagination’ (2011: 58). He then invokes this fact to account for why

³⁰ Kant maintains, for instance, that *only* white individuals “‘contain all the impulses of nature in affects and passions, all talents, all dispositions to culture and civilization and can as readily obey as govern. They are the only ones who always advance to perfection.’” (Kant quoted after Mills 2017: 95). See also Bernasconi (2001a: 147–8).

³¹ Kant makes sweeping racist claims in this work that bear on the recognition of non-white individuals as equal persons more generally. For example, he describes ‘the difference between these two human kinds’, i.e. Black and White individuals, as ‘[s]o essential’ that ‘it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color’ (Kant 2011: 59).

‘the Arab’ is only capable of producing ‘unnatural and distorted images’ (Kant 2011: 58). He then goes on to make similar racist remarks about ‘the Chinese’, who only produce ‘paintings’ that are ‘grotesque and represent marvelous and unnatural shapes’ (Kant 2011: 58).

In sum, Kant is (also) an aesthetic racist because he argues that non-white individuals’ emotional and imaginative capacities are inferior to those of white individuals. Against the backdrop of this racially motivated conceptualization of non-white individuals as inferior or less than equal aesthetic subjects, Kant generally regards what emerges from non-white individuals’ exercises of aesthetic freedom as deserving less consideration or as being of inferior aesthetic value. This becomes apparent in his endorsement of the racist aesthetic views of another towering figure of the Enlightenment: David Hume. Hume writes that ‘not a single’ Black individual ‘has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art’, despite ‘hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries’ and the fact that ‘very many of them have been set free’, ‘while among the whites there are always those who rise up from the lowest rabble and through extraordinary gifts earn respect in the world’ (Hume quoted after Kant 2011: 58–9).

Aesthetic inferiorization has a long and pernicious legacy that stretches from the eighteenth century to the present. It shapes, for instance, how many white individuals imagine that non-white individuals perceive, emotionally experience and imagine the world. This, in turn, affects how white individuals perceive, emotionally respond to and judge non-white individuals’ aesthetic expressions, as the following example from the nineteenth century highlights.

Ina von Binzer was a ‘German educator’ who sent letters from Brazil to her sister back home in Germany (Dalaqua 2020: 2). In these letters, she confesses to her sibling that she is ‘incapable of ascribing any value to the cultural practices of the “Latinos”’ (Dalaqua 2020: 3). She describes attending a local piano recital in the following way:

Then, a very fat woman with very dark eyes sat in front of the piano. . . . Some people had told me she played masterfully and hence I allowed myself to listen to her attentively. Ach! Grete! Am I too Germanic that I can’t find these Latinos talented or interesting? I couldn’t feel otherwise and to me those quick fingers didn’t say anything. . . . All the faces in the audience were filled with admiration by that ‘impeccable’ performance, all but one. It’s been a few days since a young Italian architect arrived in this house . . . the poor thing seemed to feel the same way I did. I looked at him and smiled, for our common European sensibility

makes us apprehend the things done here in the exact same manner. With an expression infinitely sarcastic, he rolled his eyes. (Binzer 1994: 29)³²

Of course, these brief case studies on Kant and von Binzer do not even begin to address the history and legacy of racist aesthetic inferiorization. But they hopefully make clear that racist aesthetic inferiorization is a phenomenon that needs to be taken seriously. We must study this phenomenon and draw attention to those who fight (or were fighting) against their aesthetic inferiorization. The ‘anti-colonial, anti-slavery, anti-imperialist, and anti-segregationist struggles of people of color . . . for the recognition of equal non-white personhood’ also possesses an aesthetic dimension (Mills 2017: 94). A critical theory of aesthetics therefore must identify and criticize all the ways in which notions of race, gender or class frame individuals as inferior aesthetic subjects.³³

6.3.3. Case study: Rancière on a carpenter’s fight against classist aesthetic inferiorization

My next case study is concerned with a form of aesthetic inferiorization that is based on classist prejudices. However, this time I want to focus on the struggle of an individual against this aesthetic inferiorization. Modern aesthetic discourse is shot through with prejudices pertaining to social class since its inception in the first half of the eighteenth century, prejudices that continue to have detrimental effects to the present day.³⁴ The fight against class-motivated aesthetic inferiorizations is therefore as old as modern aesthetics itself. Already in the eighteenth century there is a debate about ‘who was to be counted as part of’ art’s ‘public’, a debate in which some took an egalitarian or inclusive stance, insisting that ‘the term “public” in relation to the arts ‘means all the people’ (Shiner 2001: 94). However, most participants in this debate in the eighteenth century disagreed with this radically democratic view and argued that only ‘the worthy part of society’ is capable of adequately appreciating the arts (Shiner

³² Quoted after Dalaqua (2020: 3). In ‘another letter’ she mentions that the ‘Latin American music’ appears to her European ears as “disharmonious” . . . “noise” that is “deafening” and “insipid” (Binzer 1994: 39; quote after Dalaqua 2020: 3).

³³ For instance, with regard to Kant one could also scrutinize whether what he ‘actually says about women’ implies that he conceives of them as inferior aesthetic subjects (Mills 2017: 106). Feminist philosophers have long identified a tension between Kant’s apparent universalism regarding personhood, on the one hand, and his views about the inferiority of women, on the other, which leads him to regard them as inferior political, moral and economic subjects (Mills 2017: 106). See, for instance, Kleingeld (1993) and Schröder (1997). However, yet again the issue of equal aesthetic subjecthood has so far been neglected.

³⁴ See, for instance, my discussion of Du Bos’s classist views in Chapter 1.

2001: 94); and this 'worthy part of society' was then typically characterized in terms associated with the aristocracy.³⁵

Some maintained, for instance, that due to their tough living and working conditions, the perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities of the working class were too stunted for them to be able to engage aesthetically with the world. Even the increasingly wealthy members of the bourgeoisie were sometimes presented as inferior aesthetic subjects, typically by members of the established aristocratic elite. Their personalities were said to be so dominated by the pursuit of 'selfish interests' and making money that they were incapable of reflecting disinterestedly on their perceptions and emotions and letting their imagination play freely (Shiner 2001: 94). In short, in the eighteenth century there was a 'broad agreement that the lowest orders were incapable of appreciating the fine arts' (Shiner 2001: 94). At the same time, we can already witness the struggles of 'people from the middle and lower ranges of the social order' to be recognized (by members of the upper middle and upper classes) as equal aesthetic subjects (Shiner 2001: 94).³⁶

In their struggle for equal aesthetic recognition, members of the emerging middle class adopted a whole range of strategies. Some made themselves indispensable for the 'the new art institutions' such as art schools and public art museums by serving as curators, directors or artists (Shiner 2001: 94). Others attempted to prove their status as equal aesthetic subjects by mimicking the aesthetic practices and behaviours of 'those in the ranks above, whether by attending a concert or exhibition or, in the case of the more affluent, by acquiring a harpsichord or hiring a portrait painter' (Shiner 2001: 94).³⁷ Of course, despite

³⁵ See also Barrell (1986) and Chartier (1988).

³⁶ This tension between an exclusive or aristocratic understanding of modern aesthetics, on the one hand, and an inclusive or democratic understanding, on the other, is, for instance, a feature of Lord Kames' influential *Elements of Criticism* from 1762. He maintains that the appreciation of the fine arts brings together 'the nobility, gentry, and educated middle class' (Shiner 2001: 96): '[t]he Fine Arts have ever been encouraged by wise Princes not simply for private amusement, but for the beneficial influence in society. By uniting different ranks in the same elegant pleasures, they promote benevolence' (Kames quoted after Shiner 2001: 96). Yet, Kames makes it clear that 'laborers and artisans were definitely not included' in art's public (Shiner 2001: 96).

³⁷ See also Bourdieu (2010). There is an interesting parallel between these mimetic strategies and Rancière's favourite example of aesthetic-democratic politics: the 'secession of the Roman plebeians on the Aventine Hill' (1999: 23). The 'plebs' stages 'a political conflict in which the entire issue at stake involves finding out whether there exists a common stage where plebeians and patricians can debate anything' (Rancière 1999: 23). The plebeians' aesthetic-political strategy consists in reconfiguring the order of the sensible such that the patricians (learn to) see them as (equal) political subjects. To achieve this, the plebeians act as if they were patricians. 'They . . . execute a series of speech acts that mimic those of the patricians: they pronounce imprecations and apotheoses; they delegate one of their number to go and consult *their* oracles; they give themselves representatives by rebaptizing them. In a word, they conduct themselves like beings with names' or equal political subjects (Rancière 1999: 24). Witnessing these performances, 'the consul Menenius imagines he has

all of these efforts, members of the higher social classes still looked down on and ridiculed them for their pathetic attempts to appear as something they were, at least in their view, clearly not: equal aesthetic subjects.³⁸

Jacques Rancière's (2012) *Proletarian Nights*, a study that discloses how members of the working class in the nineteenth century assert themselves as equal aesthetic subjects, belongs in this context. The first part of the book entitled 'The Man in the Leather Apron' is dedicated to the joiner and writer Gabriel Gauny (1806–1889).³⁹ Gauny challenges the hegemonic classist assumption that workers are inferior aesthetic subjects because their entire life is consumed by hard, mind-numbing labour and preparing for the next workday (e.g. by eating or sleeping), interrupted only by brute forms of entertainment that have no aesthetic value. Gauny demonstrates that even under social and material conditions that are detrimental to the development and explorative exercise of their aesthetic capacities, workers can assert themselves as equal aesthetic subjects.

For instance, laying parquet flooring in a rich person's apartment, Gauny interrupts making instrumental use of his perceptive capacities to freely explore the world around him and to reflect on his perceptions and their emotional impact on him. This is an act of aesthetic resistance, for it amounts to an 'elevation' or 'sanctification of the senses', 'of one's ear . . . and . . . of one's gaze' (Rancière 2012: 80–1). Gauny ascribes intrinsic or aesthetic value to non-instrumental or explorative uses of his senses, emotions and imagination. In doing this, he emancipates himself from the restrictions imposed on his perceptivity, emotionality and imagination by his socio-economic position and re-frames himself as an equal aesthetic subject, a status culturally denied to him as a member of the working class in nineteenth-century France.

Furthermore, Gauny produces literary accounts of such self-emancipatory episodes of aesthetic relating during the night.

Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out on a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination towards the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences. (Gauny quoted after Rancière 2012: 81)⁴⁰

heard the plebs speak' (Rancière 1999: 23). What is more, '[t]hrough transgression', i.e. by acting like patricians, the plebeians themselves 'find that they too . . . are endowed with speech that does not simply express want, suffering, or rage, but intelligence' (Rancière 1999: 24–5).

³⁸ See also Porter (1990: 65) and Shiner (2001: 95).

³⁹ See also Davis (2010: 52–7, 133–4).

⁴⁰ See also Rancière (2009b) and Rockhill (2014: 174–6).

In his literary work, Gauny reflects on how he, the proletarian, uses all three aesthetic capacities and asserts himself as (at least) the aesthetic equal to those inhabiting these spaces of privilege (for he is able 'to enjoy' the 'spacious view' even 'better than the possessors'). Dedicating precious time during the night to his literary activities is itself an act of defying social expectations pertaining to how members of the working class are to make use of their time, since they are not regarded as capable of engaging aesthetically with the world.

Gauny's struggles for aesthetic self-emancipation as well as his literary works bear witness to a 'joiner's individual experiences and his personal appropriation of the power of writing' (Rancière 2009b: 274). Gauny's 'narratives' are, as Rancière points out, 'much more than descriptions of everyday experience', for '[t]hey reinvented the everyday', proposed 'a reframing of' his 'individual experience' that he then shared with others by publishing his literary works 'in one of the numerous and ephemeral newspapers that blossomed during the French revolution of 1848' (Rancière 2009b: 274). Gauny is, in other words, one of myriad examples of workers struggling against their aesthetic inferiorization as perceiving, feeling and imaginative beings.

Gauny was fully aware that as a carpenter he was, compared with other labourers, in a privileged position.⁴¹ Writing about a carpenter like himself, he states:

[t]his man is made tranquil by the ownership of his arms, which he appreciates better than the day-labourer because no look of a master precipitates their movements. He believes that his powers are his own when no will but his own activates them. He also knows that the entrepreneur is hardly upset by the time he spends at his work, provided that the execution is irreproachable. He is less aware of expectation than the day-labourer. He believes he is obeying only the necessity of things, so much does his emancipation delude him. But the old society is there to treacherously sink its horrible scorpion claws into his being and ruin him before his time, deluding him about the excitement of the courage that he uses for the benefit of his enemy. But this worker draws secret pleasure from the very uncertainty of his occupation. (Gauny quoted after Rancière 2009b: 274).⁴²

The upshot of these case studies is that a critical theory of aesthetics must revisit the history of modern democratic life in order to learn more about the ways in which (groups of) individuals who have not been recognized as equal aesthetic

⁴¹ See also my discussion of Simone Weil's account of the aesthetic predicament of factory workers in this chapter.

⁴² See also Rancière (2012: 82).

subjects have struggled against their aesthetic exclusion and inferiorization. According to the sociologist of aesthetics Ève Chiapello, demands for aesthetic freedom ‘started out as . . . the rallying cry of a very small band of artists and writers marked by the peculiar nature of their position in the field of cultural production’, but over time their demand was adopted by ‘other types of actors’, for instance, ‘intellectuals, journalists, and many other media professionals’ (2004: 589).⁴³ This movement for inclusion then culminates, in Chiapello’s view, in the ‘May 1968 French student’ protests, when the demand for aesthetic ‘freedom’ was fully democratized (2004: 589). My critical theory of aesthetics legitimizes struggles for equal aesthetic recognition and frames them as an important dimension of emancipatory politics, since they make a distinct contribution to the ‘democratic promotion of equal freedoms’ (Chiapello 2004: 589).

6.4. Pathological tendencies of non-pathological notions of aesthetic recognition

A comprehensive critical theory of aesthetics also needs to look out for pathological effects of benign conceptualizations of aesthetic recognition, that is, we must examine whether, or under what conditions, exercises of aesthetic freedom undermine individuals’ overall freedom or have a negative impact on democratic *Sittlichkeit*’s aspiration to be a life of equal freedom for all. For the purposes of outlining my research programme, I confine myself in what follows to highlighting features of aesthetic relating that make it prone to producing such pathological consequences.

Aesthetic relating can be rewarding, for it involves taking ourselves and our individuality seriously. In exercise of aesthetic freedom, we reflect on how we perceive and emotionally respond to things, and on what happens when we let our imagination play freely with them. However, it is possible to transition from asserting one’s individuality through exercises of aesthetic freedom to becoming self-absorbed or egocentric. In other words, our exercises of aesthetic freedom can become excessive and crowd out other dimensions of freedom.

Further, individuals who are enthralled by their own exercises of aesthetic freedom might not give due consideration to how others perceive and

⁴³ Unlike Chiapello, I argue that acts of aesthetic self-assertion and resistance from those who are not granted the status of equal aesthetic subjects accompany modern aesthetics since its inception in the eighteenth century. See, for instance, my discussion of the aesthetic dimension of the early socialists’ critique of bourgeois capitalism in the wake of the French Revolution in Chapter 3.

emotionally respond to the world and how they (re-)imagine it. Aesthetic egocentricity and conventionalism are, if you wish, dangers at the opposing ends of the same spectrum. In the case of conventionalism, the danger is the ‘death of the individual’ that ensues from individuals merely following convention or ‘custom’ without habitually ‘asserting’ themselves as individuals (Hegel 1991: 195; trans. modified).⁴⁴ With regard to aesthetic egocentricity, the danger is that *all* individuals end up caring about is exploring and expressing their own individuality, that is, how they themselves perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine something. Such a stance is problematic because democratic ethical life is composed of a range of recognition relationships of freedom. Each individual ought to give due consideration to each valuable dimension of their own personality and that of others. In short, if all one cares about is exercising one’s own aesthetic freedom, one ends up with a ‘solitary worship of the self’ (Hegel 1991: 182).

The second feature of benign aesthetic recognition that can drive pathological tendencies is the open-ended character of all three moments of aesthetic relating. Individuals can get lost in exercises of aesthetic freedom. When it comes to explorative uses of the capacities of sense perception and emotions, there is always more to be perceptively and emotionally explored. And contemporary capitalism’s consumerism exploits both aesthetic temptations systematically and incessantly.

Finally, aesthetic relating can turn everything into the subject-matter of an imaginative-transformative play that is, in principle, open-ended. But Hegel reminds us that if we dedicate our lives to the playful generation of ever new possibilities, we never ‘enter actuality’ (Hegel 1991: 47). As a result, we fail to render our relationships with others and our ‘individuality real’ (Hegel 1975: 65). Honneth interprets such an inability to give one’s life reality as a pathology of legal freedom. In *Freedom’s Right*, he describes a ‘personality type’ that is characterized by ‘indecisiveness’ (Honneth 2014: 92–3). Such individuals are ‘merely “drifting along” [*Getriebensein*], display ‘a light-hearted and . . . self-ironic tendency to put off any major decision’, ‘are permanently sceptical about long-term value attachments and pre-emptively form a merely temporary self-understanding’ (Honneth 2014: 93–4). For Honneth, the ‘only’ way of accounting for the ‘emergence of this new personality type’ consists in assuming that ‘personalities even outside the legal sphere’ are formed by the idea of negative legal freedom (2014: 92). To put it differently, the ‘manner in which rights

⁴⁴ For a discussion of conformism, see Chapter 3. See also Seel (2014: 276–8).

suspend obligations' and communicative relationships serves such individuals as a model for their way of life: 'the merely postponing and interruptive function of the institutionalized form of' legal 'freedom would thus be misunderstood as the suggestion that we live our lives with permanent reservations, avoiding the formulation of profound aims' (Honneth 2014: 93–4).

Let's assume that the phenomenon Honneth describes exists, since my worries pertain to the claim that we are dealing here with a pathology of legal freedom.⁴⁵ This interpretation is problematic, in my view, because these individuals neither conceive of themselves as de-individualized legal persons nor do they equate their freedom (as a whole) with 'the sum of' their 'individual rights', as Honneth claims (2014: 88). In fact, it is a feature of this personality type to pay close attention to all aspects of their life and to constantly imagine other ways of living. Such individuals are unable to commit to anything that would give their life a distinct and stable form. Instead, they imaginatively create ever more possibilities and interpretations of who they could be and become. In my view, it makes more sense to understand this phenomenon as a pathology of aesthetic freedom, for the individuals in question equate their lives with a never-ending exercise of aesthetic freedom. In any case, we are not dealing with a pathology of legal freedom, as Honneth suggests, since the de-individualized notion of legal freedom cannot account for this process of generating ever more attentive-creative self-interpretations.

These few illustrations hopefully suffice to render apparent why a critical theory of aesthetics also must watch out for ways in which exercises of (a benign conception of) aesthetic freedom might negatively affect individuals' overall freedom.

6.5. Social pathologies of aesthetic recognition

Another key task of a critical theory of aesthetics consists in scrutinizing the social context in which individuals develop and exercise their aesthetic freedom. In this section, I will use the term 'social pathologies of aesthetic recognition' to refer to alterable social mechanisms or dynamics that undermine the potential of aesthetic recognition to contribute to our freedom. In other words, I will

⁴⁵ As evidence, Honneth invokes contemporary novels that feature such personality types – for instance, Benjamin Kunkel's (2005) *Indecision* and Judith Hermann's (1998) *Sommerhaus, später* – since he is not convinced that sociological methods are sufficiently fine-grained to capture a phenomenon like this.

be concerned with social mechanisms that bring about conditions in which certain (groups of) individuals are not given adequate and equal consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative subjects. In the following, I will consider two examples of aesthetic misrecognition and one example of a problematic social trend that negatively impacts aesthetic self-realization.

6.5.1. Case study: Weil on the aesthetic oppression of factory workers

Simone Weil's (1946) essay 'Factory Work' offers a powerful illustration of the fact that factory workers in the first half of the twentieth century were not only economically exploited but also aesthetically oppressed. Having worked in Parisian plants for nearly two years in the 1930s, Weil made it her mission to raise awareness among socialists that being a factory worker is not just an economic position but also an aesthetic constellation. Drawing on her firsthand experiences, Weil describes the impact that working in a factory has on human individuals as aesthetic subjects by giving an account of how workers perceive and emotionally respond to this environment and how it suppresses their capacity to re-imagine the status quo.

'From the moment' the workers enter the factory and are 'clocked in', the experience they have of themselves is that of 'an inert object that anyone may move about at will' (Weil 1946: 370). The workers are acutely aware of the fact that in the factory they are 'alien[s]', for they encounter an environment that is evidently not built with an eye to how it would be for them to inhabit this space (Weil 1946: 370). The workers 'cannot feel at home in the plant' (Weil 1946: 370).⁴⁶ Rather, they experience the factory as an environment in which it is 'as though someone were repeating in' their 'ear[s]' at every passing moment and with all possibility of reply excluded: "Here you are nothing. You simply don't count" (Weil 1946: 370). In sum, factory workers have the sense that they are 'given admittance only in' their 'capacity as intermediary between machines and the things to be machined' (Weil 1946: 370).

The factory environment which does not give workers any consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings 'enters into' their 'body and soul' (Weil 1946: 370). For instance, it gives rise to a 'pervasive anxiety', for example, 'the anxiety of not working fast enough' (Weil 1946: 371). What is more, it

⁴⁶ I argue in Chapter 2 that, according to Hegel's post-ideal aesthetics, the exploration of what it might mean for us as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings to be more or differently at home in our world is the purpose of engaging aesthetically with the world.

burdens the workers with ‘the weight of the monotony’ while, at the same time, ‘depriv[ing]’ them of the option ‘of hushing and lulling the mind to a point where it may become insensitive to pain’ (Weil 1946: 371). The production process is organized such that workers find themselves trapped in a ‘perpetual recoil upon the present’, a state that ‘produces a kind of brutish stupor’ (Weil 1946: 371). The processes of production also make impossible what otherwise ‘comes natural to’ aesthetic beings and ‘befits’ them, namely ‘to pause on having finished something, if only for an instant, in order to contemplate’ what they have done and to ‘imagin[e] a change’ (Weil 1946: 372, 371). What is more, there is a ‘straw-boss’ who is ‘busy harassing working men and women’ to ensure ‘that they do not raise their faces even for the time necessary to exchange a glance’, ‘[n]othing could be more bitter’ (Weil 1946: 372).⁴⁷

What we can learn from Weil is that factory workers are *aesthetically oppressed* because they have no control over whether and how they can engage aesthetically with their work environment; and whatever emerged from their aesthetic engagement with their working environment would be dismissed anyway. The ‘plant’ therefore completely disregards workers as beings with a ‘capacity to think, feel, be moved’ (Weil 1946: 372). As a result, they ‘leave[...] the plant emptied; and yet’, they have ‘put nothing of’ themselves in their ‘work, neither thought, feelings, nor even, save in a feeble measure, movements determined by’ them (Weil 1946: 372). The factory thus conveys to workers that they don’t count as aesthetic beings, only machines are ‘objects of solicitude’ and consideration (Weil 1946: 372).⁴⁸

6.5.2. Case study: Honneth on aesthetic heteronomy at the workplace

In ‘Organized Self-Realization’, Axel Honneth (2004) discusses another social misdevelopment pertaining to the contemporary working environment that I want to characterize as an example of a social pathology of aesthetic recognition and classify as an instance of *aesthetic heteronomy*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The factory set-up thus encompasses modes of surveillance and discipline that oppress potential acts of aesthetic self-assertion and self-emancipation à la Gauny, which I discussed above.

⁴⁸ Simone Weil’s essay ‘Factory Work’ belongs in the same tradition as Jacques Rancière’s *Proletarian Nights* (2012). Her self-experiment sheds light on how factory workers in the twentieth century are misrecognized as aesthetic beings; and by giving a literary voice to the aesthetic wrongs done to workers, she highlights that their emancipatory struggle also has an aesthetic dimension. See also Davis (2010: 52–7, 133–4).

⁴⁹ Honneth’s diagnosis mirrors in certain respects that of Arlie Hochschild (1983) who studied ‘jobs that involve interaction with customers’ and in which ‘employees must often exhibit positive

Since the 1970s, that is, in response to the aesthetic critique of capitalism, it has become increasingly common to present wage labour itself in terms of self-realization and to highlight the importance of employees' emotional experiences. However, the way in which this valuable dimension of their personality has been incorporated into professional life is often very problematic and ultimately undermines the goal of aesthetic self-realization. For employees are confronted with a situation in which employers assert, on the one hand, the significance of employees' emotional experiences as well as the link between work and self-realization but, on the other hand, employees are encountering expectations from their employers regarding their emotional states.

For instance, employees find themselves in situations in which their employers demand from them to do their work while being in, or at least conveying, certain emotional states. For example, employees are expected to be enthusiastic or convey enthusiasm about working on a new project or dealing with a new client, instead of encouraging employees to explore and communicate how they actually perceive and emotionally respond to a situation. In other words, employers are scripting the emotions that their employees are expected to feel and convey. This tendency also manifests itself in job advertisements which are often shot through with the rhetoric of individual self-realization and saturated with descriptions of emotional states. Employers are looking for consultants who get excited about complex problems and train dispatchers who are passionate about giving each commuter the best possible experience. And if you are an academic at my university and participate in an Applicant Day, you are expected to ooze the Essex Spirit which, I am told by our marketing team, encompasses a 'rebels with a cause' kind of mentality crossed with an impatience for change.

What is pathological about the sketched transformation of the world of employment is the way in which it incorporates a substantive dimension of aesthetic recognition: emotions. Employers convey to employees that they care about how they emotionally respond to their work environment but then use this explicit commitment to make demands on their employees that pertain to this emotional dimension. Instead of encouraging their employees to freely explore and express how they perceptively and emotionally respond to various aspects of their job, employers suggest to their employees, in one way or another, that they expect them to feel a certain way about their work and to convey certain emotional states while discharging their tasks. In short, employers treat their

emotions', arguing that such employees 'become an extension of the company and are pressured to internalize these feelings to such a degree that their own reactions as individuals get displaced or repressed' (Pismenny et al. 2024: 164).

employees inner and outer emotional life as falling within the remit of their employment relation, which entitles employers to make demands pertaining to how their employees emotionally experience their work and what emotions they express while at work. Employees' emotional states have effectively become part of their job description.

If we look at this phenomenon through the lens of my account of aesthetic recognition, it is easy to appreciate why this social dynamic is detrimental to aesthetic and individual freedom. Employees find themselves in a difficult situation if employers demand certain emotional responses from them. Firstly, by turning emotional states into something one can have legitimate expectations about, these emotional states are treated as something the employees can be held responsible for ('You need to become more resilient'). To put it differently, employers act as if employees should be able to manipulate their emotional states, at least if they are provided with the right kind of support ('Why don't you take this resilience training?'). By contrast, aesthetic relating, as I understand it, frames emotional responses as being (mainly) passive-receptive, that is, our emotional responses are disclosed when we pay attention to them and find ways to express them. If freely initiated passive-receptive reflections on and expressions of our emotional experiences are crucial for our individual self-realization, then it is difficult to see how treating emotional states as something individuals can manipulate at will and in accordance with the expectation of others can in any way be associated with (individual) self-realization (apart from negatively, of course).

Secondly, employees who, in such a context, are unable to see their job as an integral part of their self-realization and who do not feel about their work in the way they are expected to incur an additional emotional burden. For it is suggested to them that this amounts to a personal failure. Again, the contrast with aesthetic recognition could not be starker. In proper exercises of aesthetic relating, individuals freely explore and find expressions for their emotional experiences of the world. The point of such exercises is to disclose whatever emotional responses there are to be disclosed; and since individuals are not expected to be in certain emotional states, there is no basis for treating any disclosed emotional state as a personal failure.

This brings me to the third aspect that is problematic about the way in which emotions are invoked in the contemporary world of work. Workers who are not in the expected emotional state still need to convey that expected emotional state to others. As a result, employees must engage in emotionally draining performances of emotions that they are not feeling. For many employees, the

demand to be self-realizing and emotional at work thus morphs into a situation in which they are forced to conceal their actual emotional states and to pretend to be in states they are not.

Being socially pressured to continuously engage in this kind of play-acting amounts to a drastic intrusion into employees' emotional lives. For instance, in order to stir up and credibly display positive emotional states such as enthusiasm and excitement, employees will have to tap into and make instrumental use of personal emotional memories (i.e. situations in which they actually felt the way they are expected to feel at work) and imagine to be in such situations that solicit the expected emotional state. In short, this new world of employment misrecognizes employees as feeling (and imaginative) beings under the guise of caring for their emotions and self-realization. What is more, employees find themselves increasingly in contexts in which they are expected to instrumentalize their private emotional lives to fulfil their work-related role obligations.

In this section, I argued that the mode in which the aestheticized contemporary world of employment incorporates employees' emotions brings in its wake a form of aesthetic heteronomy. Employees are encouraged to ignore their actual emotional experiences and to convey to others emotional states they are not in. It is suggested to employees that it is legitimate for employers to have expectations pertaining to their emotional states and to script such states for them. Such an environment also makes it appear as if employees can, or should be able to, manipulate their emotional responses at will. It is therefore not surprising that critical theorists associate the emergence of this new world of employment with the rise of a range of problematic psychological and emotional 'symptoms' such as an acute sense of alienation, 'inner emptiness, . . . and of absence of purpose' (Honneth 2004: 463).⁵⁰

6.5.3. Case study: Aesthetic consumption (or the crowding out of non-profit-driven exercises of aesthetic relating)

In this section, I argue that aesthetic consumption denotes one of the main ways in which contemporary capitalism co-opts the aesthetic.⁵¹ We all continuously participate in capitalist consumption. My claim is that contemporary capitalism involves and overwhelms us as aesthetic subjects because it manages to engage us in aesthetic consumption. Furthermore, I maintain that aesthetic consumption

⁵⁰ See also Ehrenberg (2010).

⁵¹ I am grateful to Marie Guillot whose question during my *Essex Lectures in Philosophy* in May 2021 prompted me to think about this case study.

has detrimental effects on our aesthetic or individual freedom, especially if it manages to crowd out other modes of aesthetic relating that are not driven by profit.

In a first step, I want to outline, however, how aestheticizing consumption bears on the issue of capitalism's legitimacy. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello demonstrate that the artist critique of capitalism gained significant traction in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In response to the ensuing legitimization crisis, capitalism intensified its attempt to co-opt the aesthetic.⁵² What I am adding to their account of capitalism's co-optation of the aesthetic is, on the one hand, my notion of aesthetic recognition and, on the other hand, an analysis of how aestheticized capitalist consumption has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in deflecting an aesthetic critique of capitalist social life.

Contemporary capitalism can claim that the artist critique of capitalism is out of place, since consumption has been extensively aestheticized in recent decades. Contemporary capitalist life offers endless opportunities for aesthetic self-realization (were it not for the wretched issue of our disposable income being limited), and virtually all individuals in capitalist societies participate in aesthetic consumption. It could therefore be argued that contemporary capitalism is underpinned by a notion of the aesthetic that is truly inclusive and democratic. Furthermore, it could be claimed that contemporary capitalism is promoting an aesthetic engagement with the world, since our consumptive activities rely on aesthetic engagements with advertised products. In short, it is possible to legitimize contemporary capitalism (also) aesthetically by way of claiming that it has democratized the aesthetic via consumption. In this way, capitalism appears no longer as a target of aesthetic criticism, but as a champion of aesthetic self-realization.

Before scrutinizing capitalism's aesthetic self-legitimization, I want to explain why consumption in contemporary capitalism (whether real or imagined) requires our aesthetic engagement. There are several reasons for this: firstly, no matter what we are buying (e.g. jeans, a car, a wedding cake, food), we are always confronted with a staggering range of choices (and sometimes we, as consumers, even have to get actively involved in completing or customizing the product, for it can only be bought after we selected specifications in accordance with our preferences). In short, whenever we purchase something (or ask ourselves what we would buy if we had the money), we choose from a sizeable range of options

⁵² See Chapter 3 for my reconstruction of Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005: 419–82) views on this matter.

(think, for instance, of the ‘compare with similar items’ function on the *Amazon* webpage).

Secondly, to make progress with our purchase-related decisions, we engage aesthetically with the various products on offer (and we are expected to do just that, since a lot of resources and research go into product presentation and design). We use our perceptive capacities; that is, we have a good look at the options that capture our attention to establish the ways in which they are similar and different. In a next step, we reflect on how we emotionally respond to the products in question, e.g. whether some excite us more than others. Finally, we imagine how our life would be if we possessed those products. Think, for instance, of individuals who buy a coat or a car. They probably browse through a significant number of images and videos online and then perhaps also visit multiple stores or dealerships. While doing that, they will repeatedly ask themselves questions like: Do I like that colour scheme and pattern more than the other one? Does this more unusual pocket style look cool or ridiculous? Does this coat go better with the other clothes that I usually wear? How would I feel wearing this coat to work? And individuals purchasing a car might ask themselves: which of the compact cars on offer looks more sporty or powerful? Which colour appeals to me most, considering that I see this car daily and won’t be able to afford another one for quite some time? Which car best matches my personality type or the personality I want to project (e.g. quirky, serious, unpretentious, joker, family type, adventurer).

In sum, as consumers we continuously engage with products by exploring them with our senses, paying attention to our emotional responses to them and imagining how it would be to have one product rather than another. For instance, we might imagine how it would be for us to drive this kind of car to work, see friends, go on dates or holidays. And, of course, it does not stop here. We also relate aesthetically to the consumer choices of others that are relevant to us (e.g. ‘Should I buy this kind of car or coat, given that my manager or brother just bought a very similar one?’).

Since we all have no choice but to make purchase-related decisions all the time, we all continuously engage aesthetically with consumer goods. Contemporary capitalism therefore has a story to tell about taking all of us seriously as aesthetic subjects. However, there is another way to describe the same phenomenon. We are subjected to a continuous aesthetic onslaught that is consumption under the conditions of contemporary capitalism. However, we have become so accustomed to it that we hardly notice it anymore. Raymond Geuss’ (2020) biographical essay ‘Who Needs a Worldview’ might help us regain a sense of how

extraordinary and potentially problematic the capitalist co-optation of aesthetic relating through aesthetic consumption really is.

The consumer world, full of an infinite quantity and variety of commodities all being loudly promoted, is something that we take for granted. If we don't, we at least are encouraged to assume that those who do not have access to this world would like nothing more than to enter it as fully fledged, fully engaged (and monetary adequately endowed) members. It was a very important experience for me to see, at a young and impressionable age, that this is not the only possible reaction one could have. It would be hard to overestimate the shock, confusion, and trauma which Hungarian emigrants in the late 1950s experienced when they first encountered this huge, creepy, unknown universe with its mysterious laws and puzzling customs. Several of them said to me more or less the same thing: They could understand why there might be two kinds of soap in the shops – a strong kind for deep, persistent stains and a milder kind for the face; maybe there might be a reason to have three or four different kinds, although it wasn't clear what that reason would be, but there couldn't possibly be any reason for there to be twenty different kinds of soap. There must be something wrong there. Either there was no difference between most of them, and then the potential buyer was being imposed on, deceived, and duped: he was enticed into spending his time trying to figure out what non-existent difference there were between them. (The parallel to the political situation was obvious.) Or there were some arcane differences between them, but who was such a shallow person that he had nothing better to do with his time than try to distinguish between types of soaps? Our economic system predisposes us to think that 'choice' (especially consumer choice) is exceedingly important and that the larger the range of products on offer the greater the freedom. But, as Kriegler [Geuss's teacher at his Hungarian Catholic school close to Philadelphia] would have put it, the notion of variety of consumer choice is dialectical: at a certain point more reverses itself into less. Your power of effective choice between three kinds of soap (mild, strong, and very expensive and pampering) may be greater by virtue of being limited than is a choice between thirty soaps, because then the choice set becomes unsurveyable except by exerting oneself to an extent not warranted by the value of the choice. Making simple consumer choices was not actually that important and should not be made that difficult. (Geuss 2020: 10–11)

A critical theory of aesthetics must explain what, if anything, is problematic about the way in which contemporary capitalism engages us as aesthetic subjects through our consumptive activities. Several features are relevant in this regard: firstly, aesthetic relating is supposed to be also free in the sense that we freely choose the objects that we relate to aesthetically. We are supposed to

encounter them, find ourselves drawn to them. By contrast, under conditions of contemporary capitalism, we are continuously exposed to and flooded with advertisements for products that have been intentionally put there by others in order to make a profit.⁵³ The shock of the Hungarian emigrants consists, at least in part, in the fact that it is impossible to avoid engaging aesthetically even with the most commonplace consumer goods (such as soap), since there is no alternative way to satisfy one's consumptive needs.

Secondly, Geuss's story reminds us how *aesthetically exhausting* our consumptive practices really are. Engaging in ordinary consumptive behaviour in contemporary capitalism is, aesthetically speaking, so demanding that it tends to overwhelm us. And since we cannot avoid consumption, aesthetic consumption then starts to *crowd out* other exercises of aesthetic relating that are not driven by profit-making.

Thirdly, if consumption is the dominant mode of aesthetic relating in capitalist societies, then we need to ask ourselves how relevant these (imposed) exercises of aesthetic engagement really are for our aesthetic self-realization or individual freedom. To put it differently, what do we take (the value of) our individuality to be, or what has happened to our sense of individuality, if the dominant form in which we relate aesthetically to the world consists of making (pointless) distinctions between consumer products. In fact, it becomes difficult to see the point of that individuality if it mainly amounts to, and expresses itself in, the cars we buy, the coats we wear and the *Netflix* series we watch. Especially, since these are all products that have been invented with the intention to manipulate us into desiring them.⁵⁴

These are some of the issues lurking behind the astonishment of the Hungarian emigrants, who wondered 'who was such a shallow person that' they 'had nothing better to do with' their free 'time than try to distinguish' with the help of explorative exercises of their perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities 'between' different products of the same kind, e.g. 'types of soaps', cars, mobile phones, jeans, flatscreen TVs and sneakers (Geuss 2020: 11)? This is, of course, a rhetorical question, for the answer is: we are all that shallow. From the perspective of a critical theory of aesthetics, being that shallow is,

⁵³ By virtue of carrying our smartphones with us everywhere and all day long, we are now continuously exposed to advertisements and product placements that are not only designed to capture our attention, but tailored to us based on what previously captured our attention. This means that the periods of our day are radically diminishing in which we might notice and explore something else that might have spoken to us (something that hasn't been designed to jump at us in order to serve the commercial interests of a company).

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the worry that capitalist advertisements and products manipulate our desires, see Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 439).

however, not a personal failing, but the result of contemporary capitalism's strategic and effective aestheticization of consumption, which involves us being continuously bombarded with advertisements for products that are designed to elicit an aesthetic engagement on our part. It is these mechanisms driving the aestheticization of consumption that a critical theory of aesthetics ought to concern itself with, especially if these processes increasingly crowd out other exercises of aesthetic relating that are not instruments of profit generation.

6.6. An aesthetic critique of exercises of aesthetic relating (and what emerges from them)

In addition to identifying and criticizing aesthetic pathologies, a critical theory of aesthetics must also reflect on what it might mean to subject others' exercises of aesthetic relating and what emerges from them to an *aesthetic* critique?⁵⁵ A critical theory of aesthetics starts from the assumption that we have to take seriously how others perceive and emotionally as well as imaginatively respond to the world they inhabit. However, recognizing each other as equal aesthetic subjects is compatible with, perhaps even requires, engaging critically with how others perceive, emotionally respond to and (re-)imagine the world.⁵⁶ Arguably, by scrutinizing others' aesthetic relating and what emerges from it, we convey that we take them seriously as sensing, feeling and imaginative subjects.

Such a critical engagement is part of all relationships of recognition, including aesthetic recognition. For instance, if individuals make moral demands or judgements (e.g. pertaining to the moral permissibility of abortion), we take them seriously as moral subjects by scrutinizing their moral justifications. What is more, since others can make demands relating to how we should live together based on how they perceptively, emotionally and imaginatively disclose the world, a critical theory of aesthetics must explore what it might mean to engage critically with others' aesthetic relating and what emerges from it.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Of course, we can also scrutinize our own exercises of aesthetic relating and what emerges from them.

⁵⁶ When I say that a critical theory of aesthetics subjects others' exercises of aesthetic relating to an aesthetic critique, I am not implying that we should refrain from scrutinizing what emerges from such exercises in moral, legal, economic and political terms. I am simply making the point that it also matters that we develop the conceptual tools that enable us to scrutinize them in aesthetic terms.

⁵⁷ See, for example, my discussion of aesthetic 'safe spaces' demands on university campuses in Chapter 5.

A critical engagement with others' aesthetic relating to the world can take different forms, since different aspects of such an engagement can be problematic. Firstly, one can *scrutinize the way in which others make use of their perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities* in particular instances. In this case, what is subjected to criticism is not what emerges from someone's aesthetic engagement with a phenomenon, but how they deploy their perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities. Imagine, for instance, that my daughter calls me to come to the living room to listen to a tune she composed on the piano. She notices that I am playing with my phone throughout her performance. She therefore doesn't even bother asking me what I made of it; instead, she grabs my phone and says: 'but this time, listen!' Inattentiveness is, of course, only one form this first variant of aesthetic critique can take. How someone uses their perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities can also be subjected to criticisms on other grounds. For instance, there can be instances in which how others go about looking at something can be deemed problematic. For example, someone exploring a Chinese handscroll might unroll it from left to right. In this case, it seems appropriate to ask if they are aware that these scrolls have been designed to be unrolled section by section from right to left.

A *second mode of aesthetic critique focuses on what emerges from a perceptive, emotional and imaginative exploration of a phenomenon*. For instance, how someone aesthetically discloses a phenomenon can be one-sided or distorting. W. E. B. Du Bois (1994) criticized, for example, in an address he delivered at a NAACP conference in 1926 not only how black individuals and communities are represented by 'anti-black racists' but also took issue with how some fellow 'pro-black' activists depicted them (Taylor 2016: 98–9).⁵⁸ Based on his own perceptual familiarity with 'black people', he characterized some of these representations as 'one-sided', since they depict 'black people' as 'angels, without faults or problems, and often enough . . . without sexual desires or pleasures' (Taylor 2016: 98–9). Such representations are out of synch with his understanding of aesthetic critique and emancipatory aesthetic politics, since correcting such distorting and one-sided perceptions and representations is, in Du Bois's view, one of the points of an open and dialogical aesthetic critique. Emancipatory aesthetic politics thus relies on a critical aesthetic dialogue because all imaginative '[a]cts of expression are necessarily partial, selective,

⁵⁸ Du Bois maintains that 'all Art is propaganda and ever must be' (Du Bois 1994: 103). For '[a]ll expressive objects orient themselves to public systems of ethical value . . . and cannot plausibly claim to proceed solely from aesthetic and abstractly individual sources. Thus all art is propaganda' (Taylor 2016: 98). Du Bois then moves on to distinguish between good and bad propaganda.

and provisional, just by virtue of human finitude. But this unavoidable partiality does not mean that we have to cultivate partiality by artificially excluding or suppressing views that conflict with ours' (Taylor 2016: 98).

The *third mode of aesthetic critique scrutinizes whether the three capacities involved in aesthetic relating interact appropriately*. The question of what it might mean for our perceptive, emotional and imaginative capacities to interact appropriately in acts of aesthetic relating is a complex one that deserves a thorough investigation. My aim here is merely to highlight the issue. My conceptualization of aesthetic relating presupposes the free interaction of these three capacities, since our emotional responses to phenomena are supposed to emerge from perceptively familiarizing ourselves with them, and our imaginative engagements with these objects are supposed to be informed by how our senses and emotions disclose objects to us. For instance, if my daughter wants to figure out whether she likes asparagus, she must try it, focus on how it tastes and how this taste makes her feel (e.g. disgusted). However, if she likes asparagus and embarks on inventing a dish that features asparagus as an ingredient, she will need to take her cues from how her senses and qualitative experiences have disclosed asparagus and other potential ingredients to her.

Of course, aesthetic relating is not a one-way street that takes us from perception to emotions and from there to the imagination. For instance, prejudices, stereotypes and biases can be understood as reified and entrenched expressions of how certain (groups of) individuals are imagined to be by some, which, in turn, influences how they perceive these (groups of) individuals and emotionally respond to them.⁵⁹ The question of how we can challenge such harmful imaginative views (and the role the aesthetic plays in this) therefore rightly receives attention.⁶⁰ If senior figures in government, like former Tory home secretary Suella Braverman, speak of an 'invasion' in relation to asylum seekers arriving on UK shores in small boats, then they portray them as an existential danger and imply that it is essential for the security and prosperity of the British people to 'Stop the Boats'. This way of talking will then also impact how British citizens perceive and emotionally respond to asylum seekers that manage to arrive on UK shores and what they imagine will happen if these boats keep coming.⁶¹ In short, the 'imagination' not only influences perception but

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Siegel (2020).

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Miller (2021).

⁶¹ Unfortunately, there are countless similar examples from other countries. Consider, for instance, the dangerously misleading and malicious statements by Alice Weidel from the right-wing German AfD party. For example, in the context of a debate on the budget in the German parliament on 16 May 2018, she blended her description of Syrian refugees who have settled in Germany since 2015

'may' also 'inflare emotions,' for instance, 'sustain outsized anxieties and fears' (Gosetti-Ferencei 2023: 4). Since aesthetic relating is based on the interaction between sense perception, emotions and the imagination, a critical theory of aesthetics must develop ways of telling apart problematic from appropriate interactions of these capacities.⁶²

From the perspective of aesthetic relating, the lack of interaction between perception, emotions and imagination also amounts to a shortcoming. In some cases, individuals might simply project their emotions onto others (e.g. in instances of scapegoating). Getting to the bottom of such projections of emotions (as well as other problematic exercises of perception and imagination) might require us to engage with psychoanalysis. I have no problem with that. In fact, I think there are family resemblances between aesthetic relating and psychoanalysis, for both approaches are grounded in practices that rely on individuals opening up to, expressing and reflecting on how they perceive and emotionally as well as imaginatively respond to aspects of their life.

Fourthly, it is also possible to criticize others for not appreciating, diverting attention from or denying the significance of the aesthetic dimension of certain phenomena. One could call this a *critique of an-aestheticization*. A case in point is, in my view, transitioning in relation to gender. Clara Moreton makes the convincing case that the process of transitioning is, first and foremost, driven by an aesthetic engagement with (one's own) gender.⁶³ Transitioning is grounded in how individuals perceive and emotionally experience inhabiting their body and socially available gender roles. Against this backdrop, transitioning individuals then turn their gender into the object of an imaginative play that is, in principle, open-ended. Moreton argues that by framing gender transitioning as an exercise of aesthetic relating, as I understand it, we can better account for how transitioning is experienced from a first-personal standpoint than by conceptualizing it as a

with hateful stereotypes. For instance, she associated all male refugees with Islamic terrorism and referred to them as 'knife-wielding men on benefits,' thereby prompting German citizens to see and imagine them as a threat to life and limb as well as to their 'wealth . . . and especially the welfare state' (Weidel 2018). In short, political interventions often operate on an aesthetic level, since the point of many political speech acts is to influence how others perceive and feel about a phenomenon as well as to shape how others imagine what the future will look like (unless people start supporting a particular party or policy). For this reason, it is important to subject contributions to political debates also to an aesthetic (alongside a moral, economic and ecological) critique.

⁶² Aesthetic relating, as I understand it, requires more than a perceptive engagement with an object. For instance, we train our Art History students to visually explore, analyse and describe artworks and other phenomena of visual culture (e.g. their compositional and stylistic features). However, in addition to such a perceptive engagement, aesthetic relating requires that students also pay attention to their emotional and imaginative responses to these visually analysed artefacts.

⁶³ Moreton (2021) makes this case in her excellent BA dissertation which draws on my understanding of modern aesthetics and aesthetic recognition.

matter of moral or legal recognition. What is more, this aesthetic account of transitioning also avoids three problematic non-aesthetic alternatives: firstly, the pathologizing of transitioning individuals (or the adoption of a reductive medicalized view of the process of transitioning); secondly, the embracing of a view that reductively grounds gender in biology (and rejects on this basis the very idea of a free imaginative play with gender roles that is rooted in individuals' perceptive and emotional explorations); and, thirdly, the framing of gender as a contingent social construct (for such an approach turns gender into something that can only manifest itself in arbitrary ways).

By contrast, Moreton stresses that the imaginative play of transitioning individuals with (their own) gender is linked with them taking seriously how they perceive and emotionally respond to the gendered expectations they are confronted with in relation to their body, behaviour, comportment etc. It is this grounding that connects the attentive and imaginative process of gender transitioning, a phenomenon that is both existential and social, with individual freedom. Further, this aesthetic framing also renders apparent that transitioning denotes a phenomenon that everyone can (or perhaps even does) engage in, for most of us will, at certain points in our lives, pay attention to our own bodies, how our bodies and clothing etc. manifest gendered expectations, and how it feels for us to be confronted with gendered expectations. What is more, we might, albeit in different degrees, experiment in real life or fantasy with our own gendered bodies and lives. What this example shows is that an aesthetic critique can also involve drawing attention to the fact that others fail to appreciate the significance of an aesthetic dimension in relation to a phenomenon (like gender transitioning).

We have looked at different modes of engaging critically with exercises of aesthetic relating and what emerges from them. Against this backdrop, it might be helpful to zoom out for a moment and look at the bigger picture. My notion of aesthetic recognition is supposed to underpin the research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics that provides a comprehensive and differentiated account of different forms of aesthetic misrecognition and considers how they can be criticized and resisted. Even though I have provided illustrations of aesthetic pathologies and examples of aesthetic misrecognition, I haven't attempted to generate a comprehensive taxonomy. Generating such a comprehensive taxonomy would be part of delivering on this research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics. What is more, I have outlined four modes of engaging critically with others' aesthetic relating to the world and what emerges from it. Refining and unpacking these modes of critical engagement will (also) require

engaging with (recent) works on aesthetic normativity and injustice (and how it pertains to everyday life),⁶⁴ emotions and emotional injustice⁶⁵ as well as the imagination and imaginative injustices (like stereotypes)⁶⁶ that don't share my recognition-theoretical framing. In fact, the claim I want to make is that my account of aesthetic recognition, which is grounded in the assumption that sense perception, emotions and imagination denote valuable dimensions of personality, provides a basis for arguing that perception, emotions and imagination are all linked with distinct kinds of unfreedom, misrecognition and injustices.

If we are (also) aesthetic subjects who owe each other forms of consideration as perceptive, feeling and imaginative beings (including adequate social support in terms of the development and free exercise of these capacities), then we can start asking what kinds of treatment amount to aesthetic unfreedom, misrecognition or injustice. My synthetic approach to aesthetic (mis-)recognition also highlights how important it is to look at the interplay of sense perception, emotion and the imagination. It therefore serves as a corrective to a tendency among philosophers and aestheticians to focus either on perception, emotions or the imagination.

Allow me to quickly illustrate this interplay with the help of two case studies that are frequently mentioned in debates about emotional injustice: firstly, the "Resting Bitch Face" (RBF), where women's neutral faces are often perceived as angry' (Pismenny et al. 2024: 157);⁶⁷ and secondly, 'Black Americans' being perceived as 'aggressive and threatening' (Pismenny et al. 2024: 158).⁶⁸ In both cases, we are dealing with problematic, entrenched and widely held stereotypes which express how many imagine (or have learned to imagine) individuals who they associate with certain groups. How they imagine these individuals to be and act, then affects how they perceive them (e.g. as angry) and how they emotionally respond to them (e.g. with frustration or fear) as well as how they interact with them (e.g. men feeling entitled to tell women that they expect them to always have a pleasing smile on their face, or police officers using excessive force when dealing with non-white suspects). In critically engaging with such forms of aesthetic misrecognition and to effectively challenge them, we need to pay attention to perceptive, emotional and imaginative aspects and how

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Lopes (2024) and Nanay (2019, 2024).

⁶⁵ See also Srinivasan (2018), Whitney (2018), Archer and Mills (2019), Cherry (2019), Gallegos (2021) and especially Pismenny et al. (2024).

⁶⁶ See, for example, Gosetti-Ferencei (2020, 2023).

⁶⁷ See also Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2009), Barrett (2017) and Cherry (2019).

⁶⁸ See also Curry (2017), Ferber (2007), Hester and Gray (2018); Kleider Offutt et al. (2017) and Táiwò (2020).

they interact. My synthetic approach to aesthetic recognition is therefore better equipped to do that than approaches that exclusively or primarily focus on perception, emotions or the imagination.⁶⁹

6.7. Aesthetic recognition's interaction with other dimensions of recognition

To bring my overview of the research programme of a critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key to a close, I want to draw attention to two further complex questions. My claim is that we owe each other consideration as sensing, feeling and imaginative beings and that some demands we make on each other are grounded in how we sense, emotionally respond to and re-imagine the status quo. However, this raises the question of how to adjudicate between conflicting aesthetic demands. In developing a critical theory of aesthetics, we must therefore link the problem of aesthetic recognition with debates about aesthetic normativity in everyday life.⁷⁰

Secondly, we must develop ways of determining whether aesthetic recognition unduly interferes with other variants of recognition (such as moral and legal recognition) or vice versa. Allow me to illustrate this issue with one recent case (among many) from the university context: Emmanuel College Cambridge, the Faculty of Philosophy and the Leverhulme Trust have faced calls to cut their ties with the race realist philosopher Nathan Cofnas who, among other things, argued in a blog post that '[u]nder a colorblind system that judged applicants only by academic qualifications, blacks would make up 0.7% of Harvard students' (Cofnas 2024). Furthermore, he maintained that '[i]n a meritocracy, Harvard faculty would be recruited from the best of the best students, which means the number of black professors would approach 0%. Blacks would disappear from almost all high-profile positions outside of sports and entertainment' (Cofnas 2024).

My intention in citing this case is merely to show that demands for aesthetic recognition also play a role and that these are in tension with certain dimensions

⁶⁹ Of course, a critical theory of aesthetics must think also about all the mechanisms that influence how individuals perceive, emotionally respond to and (re-)imagine a phenomenon. For instance, we encounter more and more phenomena in a mediated form (e.g. through a content provider on the internet). Critical media studies, widely conceived, is thus related to the project of a critical theory of aesthetics, for we have to ask ourselves what is (and what isn't) presented to us, and how these modes of presentation impact our perception of, emotional response to and imaginative engagement with a phenomenon.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Matherne and Riggle (2020, 2021), Pismenny et al. (2024) and Riggle (2023).

of legal recognition. Consider, for instance, the response to Cofnas's blog post by Professor Bhaskar Vira, Cambridge University's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, who first reiterated the commitment of the university to '[f]reedom of speech within the law' and academic freedom, i.e. matters of legal recognition, before he went on to state: some 'students . . . are understandably hurt and upset by these views and feel that they undermine their presence at Cambridge' (2024); finally, he insisted that 'no-one at this University should be made to feel like this' (Vira 2024).

According to my interpretation of Vira's message, it encompasses a confirmation of legal and aesthetic recognition. Allow me to illustrate why I think aesthetic recognition is in play: firstly, he directly invokes the emotional dimension of aesthetic recognition: 'no-one at this university should be made to feel that way'. In other words, Vira seems to imply that Cofnas aesthetically wronged (Black) students and staff because he did not consider or care how his comments would affect them emotionally or in terms of their sense of belonging to a higher education institution like Cambridge or Harvard. Arguably, there is also a perceptual aesthetic wrong in play, for Cofnas' racialized way of seeing others is itself problematic. What is more, his blog post reminds Black students that their institution promotes research that aims to convince others to inferiorize them or not regard them as individuals who (can) equally belong (or who equally deserve to belong) to their academic community. Finally, it is also problematic that Cofnas invites others to imagine a future as 'better' or 'fairer' in which Black students and academics (who are already an underrepresented group that faces structural injustices of various kinds) will have completely disappeared from elite universities.

At the time of writing, the only institution that has terminated its relationship with Cofnas is Emmanuel College on the grounds that Cofnas's blog post 'could reasonably be construed as amounting to . . . a rejection of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion' (Singer 2024). In my view, this justification is also aesthetic, as a commitment to inclusion and inclusivity necessarily involves aesthetic dimensions. If a university or college wishes to create an environment in which individuals from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and at home, then that institution will need to see or frame these individuals (without ifs or buts) as equals and take into consideration how those individuals perceive, emotionally experience and re-imagine this institutional context.⁷¹

⁷¹ See also my discussion of a controversy over a Halloween costume policy at Yale University's Silliman College in Chapter 5.

Perhaps the decision to revoke Cofnas' status as a Junior Research Fellow at Emmanuel College has to do with the fact that a Cambridge College, unlike the Leverhulme Trust and the Faculty of Philosophy, is not only an institution that promotes learning and research but also a place of communal living. To put it differently: being a home to students and promoting an inclusive and flourishing communal life are among the College's constitutive functions. These features give more weight to what I call aesthetic recognition.

However, this has not prevented a backlash from academics calling for Cofnas' dismissal from Emmanuel College to be reversed and for all ongoing investigations into the case by the Leverhulme Trust and the Faculty of Philosophy to be dropped.⁷² According to these academics, legal recognition (of free speech and academic freedom) always takes precedence over aesthetic considerations in academic contexts. As already indicated, it is not my aim to settle the question of who is right in this controversy. I invoke this case study to illustrate that aesthetic recognition is socially effective and already the subject-matter of controversial debates, even if the participants in these debates do not yet use and fully appreciate the notion of aesthetic recognition. Finally, I wanted to highlight that the question of how to adjudicate conflicts between moral, legal and *aesthetic* recognition in particular cases and contexts is one that requires further scrutiny.

6.8. Conclusion

This book makes contributions to aesthetics, social and political philosophy and critical theory. In Chapter 1, I outline a novel, capacity-based interpretation of modern aesthetics that is based on my reconstruction of shared structural features of Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetics of perception, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's aesthetics of emotions and Joseph Addison's aesthetics of the free play of the imagination. I argue in this chapter that, at the most basic level, modern aesthetics is about the valorization and emancipation of three human capacities: sense perception, emotions and the imagination.

Chapter 2 provides the first account of Hegel's post-ideal conception of art and aesthetics. I maintain that Hegel's post-ideal conception of aesthetics is a version of the capacity-based account of modern aesthetics that integrates sense perception, emotions and the imagination. Furthermore, I argue that

⁷² See Woolcock (2024).

Hegel clarifies the purpose of post-ideal aesthetic relating: the exploration of what it might mean for sensing, feeling and imaginative beings like us to be more or differently at home in their world. Against this backdrop, I demonstrate that Hegel has never claimed that (the concept of) art has come to an end. In his opinion, it is rather the ideal conception of art that has come to an end, giving way to a post-ideal conception of art that continues to make valuable contributions to modern ethical life's ambition to be a life of equal freedom for all.

In Chapter 3, I argue that relationships of aesthetic recognition are an integral part of democratic *Sittlichkeit* and that displacing this recognition relationship from our standard accounts of modern and democratic ethical life renders them unsatisfactory and incomplete. To put it positively: aesthetic recognition makes a distinct and essential contribution to our individual and political freedom and is part of the fabric of modern and democratic ethical life.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to elaborating this original account of aesthetic recognition that expands the range of recognition relationships familiar from Hegel and Honneth.

Chapter 5 delineates, invoking the case study of demands for 'safe spaces' on university campuses, how this notion of aesthetic recognition can be used to identify instances of aesthetic misrecognition and make sense of struggles for aesthetic recognition.

Against this background, I then outline a novel research programme in Chapter 6: a critical theory of aesthetics in a recognition-theoretical key. The point of this critical theory of aesthetics is to identify pathologies of aesthetic recognition that undermine the potential of aesthetics to contribute to our freedom. Furthermore, I explore what it might mean to scrutinize exercises of aesthetic relating and what emerges from them. Finally, I address the questions of how to adjudicate between conflicting aesthetic demands, on the one hand, and conflicts between demands for aesthetic recognition and demands for moral and legal recognition, on the other hand.

Taken together, these chapters thus open up a range of new perspectives on aesthetics and the role it plays in democratic life and for our freedom. I hope to be able to further explore some of these new avenues of research in the future, and would be delighted if, inspired by this study, others would join me in walking some of these paths and finding others.

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