

The Enthusiasm of Laughter:
Laughter in Kant's Aesthetic and Political Philosophy

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Abstract: Debates about the political significance of Kant's aesthetic philosophy have long been framed in terms of the beautiful and the sublime. This paper complicates these approaches by examining a different aesthetic experience featured in the *Critique of Judgment*, namely laughter. I explore the political significance of Kant's theory of laughter in §54 and offer three critical insights. First, laughter in Kant obeys the logics of both the sublime and the beautiful: it follows the sublime in featuring a pleasurable discord between the faculties, but this discord arises between imagination and the understanding, the two faculties at play in judgments on the beautiful. Second, I show that laughter discloses and enacts a disruption in the *sensus communis*, the aesthetic common sense that denotes what can be seen and heard by subjects in common prior to concepts of interest, truth, or morality. Laughter imaginatively reorganizes the domain of the publicly communicable, and it likewise constitutes a moment of heightened political opportunity and danger. I conclude by arguing that the political stakes and democratic potential of Kant's aesthetic philosophy are illustrated most vividly not by the *Analytics of the Beautiful* or the *Sublime* alone, but rather in their intersection in §54's theory of laughter.

The Enthusiasm of Laughter:
Laughter in Kant’s Aesthetic and Political Philosophy

When asked to identify the most important philosophical text for contemporary debates about aesthetics and politics, one would be hard pressed to name anything besides Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment (CJ)*. Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment as public, universal, and free from prudential and moral considerations throws into sharp relief the crucial connections between aesthetic and political experience. It is not by chance that virtually every theorist who examines the aesthetic dimensions of political life (or alternatively, the political dimensions of aesthetic life) returns in some way or another to arguments advanced in this classic text (e.g., Arendt 1968, 1992, 2007; Deleuze 2007; Derrida 1981; Ferguson 1999; Lyotard 1988, 1994, 2009; Panagia 2009; Rancière 2004, 2006, 2009).

Theorists generally follow one of two avenues of analysis in their interpretations of *CJ*. A first group (mainly Hannah Arendt and her followers) focuses on the Analytic of the Beautiful (*CJ* §1–22). These commentators emphasize how subjects who make judgments of taste engage in a public practice of world-building free from the constraints of cognitive, moral, or utilitarian rules. As Arendt writes: “the activity of taste decides how this world, independent of utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it” (Arendt 1968, 222; cf. Arendt 1992, 2007; Beiner and Nedelsky 2001; Markell 2014; Villa 1992; Zerilli 2005). A second, smaller group focuses on the Analytic of the Sublime (*CJ* §23–29). Eschewing the intersubjective agreement and consensus suggested by the beautiful, Jean-François Lyotard (for example) emphasizes how the feeling of the sublime disrupts the domain of the sensible and serves as a “call” to think and act beyond what one finds in experience: “Sublime violence is like lightning. It short-circuits thinking with itself...Thinking defies its own

finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness. It is this desire for limitlessness that it feels in the sublime” (Lyotard 1994, 54–55). Under the influence of these two modes of analysis, the beautiful and the sublime have come to constitute a grid of intelligibility for assessing the political significance of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy and aesthetic experience more broadly.

The present paper aims to complicate this grid by examining a different and as yet under-theorized aesthetic experience featured in *CJ*. Kant’s theory of *laughter* in §54 places the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime into a unique relation with one another that points to a new, unexpected way Kant’s aesthetic philosophy can illuminate our understanding of politics. This paper explores the political significance of laughter in Kant, and it offers three main critical insights. The first concerns how to make sense of the “incongruity” theory of laughter Kant advances in §54 within the context of the Third *Critique*.¹ I argue that when we interpret §54 in the terms provided by Kant’s critical project, we find that laughter constitutes an analog of the sublime within the realm of the beautiful. That is, laughter features the discordant, yet pleasurable relation between the mind’s cognitive powers that characterizes the sublime, but this relation obtains between the understanding and the imagination, the two powers at play in judgments of taste on the beautiful. The second critical insight concerns the relation between laughter and politics in Kant. Following Arendt and Lyotard who both point to the political importance of revolutionary enthusiasm in Kant’s *Contest of Faculties*, I claim that laughter reflects a modality of enthusiasm. Whereas enthusiasm signals historical-political progress for Kant, laughter performs a political enactment that discloses and imaginatively disrupts the *sensus communis*, or what can be seen and heard by subjects in common. The enthusiasm of laughter

¹ An incongruity theory explains laughter in terms of a discrepancy between a subject’s expectations, habits, or concepts and his actual experience (Morreall 1983, 1987).

thus follows the sublime in enacting a disruption, but this disruption occurs within the shared aesthetic sense Kant identifies as a necessary presupposition of judgments of taste. The third critical insight follows from the first two. I contend that the political stakes and democratic potential of Kant's aesthetic philosophy are illustrated most vividly not in the *Analytic of the Beautiful or Sublime* alone, but rather in their intersection in §54's theory of laughter. In short, my account of laughter in Kant employs the categories of the beautiful and the sublime in order to expand the repertoire of politically significant aesthetic experiences in the Third *Critique* beyond these categories and the possibilities they offer.

The paper proceeds in six sections. I begin by situating Kant's discussion of laughter within the *Critique of Judgment* and showing how laughter troubles his sharp distinction between critical and anthropological philosophy. In Part II, I propose that we can and should depart from Kant's insistence that laughter holds only anthropological and empirical significance, and I demonstrate how his reflections on the beautiful and the sublime allow for a productive reading of laughter within the critical-transcendental idiom. In Part III, I situate laughter within broader debates about the political importance of Kant's aesthetic philosophy. After reviewing the different ways Arendt, Zerilli, and Lyotard understand Kant's notion of revolutionary enthusiasm, in Part IV I demonstrate that laughter constitutes a modality of enthusiasm that discloses and enacts a historically specific rupture in the *sensus communis*, or in what is publicly communicable between subjects. Kant's theory of laughter points to a politics of rupture in how subjects see and hear the world in common. In Part V I briefly examine the Chinese government's recent "ban on puns" in order to illustrate these political stakes of Kant's theory. I conclude in Part VI by considering how an unexpected moment of laughter in Kant's

Metaphysics of Morals highlights the contribution his theory makes to understanding the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics, and I relate this contribution to readings of the Third *Critique* offered by Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia. I begin by introducing Kant’s theory of laughter.

I. Kant’s Theory of Laughter

Kant discusses laughter in §54 of the *Critique of Judgment* – a section titled simply “Comment”. This section completes a lengthy analysis of the relationship between taste and art (*CJ* §43–54) wherein Kant identifies a type of art that pleases a subject by stimulating his cognitive powers (“fine art”) rather than by providing sensuous gratification (“agreeable art”) (Kant 1987, 305). Fine art is *beautiful* art: it sends the cognitive powers into a harmonious, pleasurable play free of all empirical influence (Kant 1987, 306). Because we enjoy fine art only by virtue of an accord between the cognitive powers, we can demand that all others assent to our judgment (Kant 1987, 292–293, 306). Meanwhile, the empirical basis for the pleasure taken in agreeable art precludes judgment from commanding universal, necessary agreement. According to Kant, “Fine art...is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even though without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to [facilitate] social communication...Hence aesthetic art that is also fine art is one whose standard is the reflective power of judgment, rather than sensation proper” (Kant 1987, 306).²

After assessing the value of various artistic practices as fine art (e.g., poetry “holds the highest rank” while music “has less value than any of the other fine arts”), Kant concludes in §54 by considering a particularly problematic art form: the “play of thought” or “jest” that subjects

² Unless otherwise noted, all brackets and italics in this paper belong to the author or translator, and all Kant citations for *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *CJ*, and *Metaphysics of Morals* refer to the standardized page numbers.

engage in at dinner parties (Kant 1987, 326–332). Clever witticisms generate laughter among guests by playfully reversing the expectations they hold. Kant offers the following example:

Suppose someone tells us this story: An Indian at an Englishman’s table in Surat saw a bottle of ale being opened, and all the beer, turned to froth, rushing out. The Indian, by repeated exclamations showed his great amazement. — Well, what’s so amazing in that? asked the Englishman. — Oh, but I’m not amazed at its coming out, replied the Indian, but at how you managed to get it all in. — This makes us laugh, and it gives us hearty pleasure. (Kant 1987, 333).

Kant – unfortunately – provides several additional examples of this kind of lighthearted (though often vaguely racist) jesting and the laughter it produces (Kant 1987, 333–334).³ Importantly, Kant’s analyses of laughter in *CJ* and elsewhere in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* almost exclusively concern jesting that occurs at dinner parties (Kant 1987, 305–306; Kant 2006, 264–265, 280–281).⁴ Dinner parties are important for Kant, as they reflect an ideal method for reconciling man’s inclination to live well with the moral imperative to follow virtue (Kant 2006, 277–278). Jest constitutes the final stage of a dinner party where guests allow themselves a degree of sensuous pleasure after engaging in a robust philosophical discussion (Kant 2006, 280–281). Kant thus discusses laughter in extremely narrow terms (i.e., jesting at dinner parties), and we should not mistake the theory advanced in §54 as an all-encompassing “Theory of Laughter.”

Jest poses a problem for Kant’s distinction between fine and agreeable art, as the dinnertime exchange of witticisms contains elements that characterize both types of art. On the one hand, jest is a “play of thought” or “play of the power of judgment” that involves quick

³ One commentator suggests that the fact Kant found the above joke funny is *itself* the laughable incongruity of his “incongruity theory” (Smith 2009).

⁴ Kant briefly discusses laughter generated by two other practices, namely naiveté and whimsicality (Kant 1987, 335–336). His analysis of these sources of laughter is much shorter and, in my opinion, less theoretically rich than his examination of laughter generated by jest, and I focus only on the latter in this paper. For more on laughter produced by naiveté and whimsicality in Kant see Hounsokou 2012, 325–328.

changes in the presentations considered by the mind (Kant, 1987, 331, 335). Because laughter reflects a pleasure taken “in merely judging,” jest appears to constitute a kind of fine art (Kant 1987, 306). But on the other hand, Kant invokes the framework of agreeable art when he insists that laughter is an enjoyable vibration of the body’s organs that aids digestion (Kant 1987, 332; Kant 2006, 281). The following quote demonstrates how Kant vacillates between the two conflicting idioms of fine and agreeable art:

But music and something to laugh about are two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas, or for that matter with presentations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought; it is merely the change they involve that still enables them to gratify us in a lively way. This shows rather clearly that in both of them the quickening of the mind is merely bodily, even though it is aroused by ideas of the mind, and shows that all the gratification at a lively party, extolled as being so refined and inspired, consists in the feeling of health that is produced by an intestinal agitation corresponding to such a play. (Kant 1987, 332).

While acknowledging that a play within the faculty of judgment serves as the source of laughter, Kant concludes that the gratification provided by this play is ultimately bodily and that jest “deserves to be considered more an agreeable than a fine art” (Kant 1987, 332; cf. Kant 1987, 305).

As a bodily sensation, laughter cannot claim the *a priori* validity that critical philosophy in general aims to ground and legitimate (Kant 2009b, A11–12, B25–26). If jest fails to qualify as a fine art, why does Kant devote an entire section of *CJ* to laughter and jest? Kant explains that a key task of critical philosophy is “to institute a court of justice” that establishes boundaries between proper and improper objects of transcendental study (Kant 2009b, Axi–xii). §54 participates in this critical boundary drawing. Kant discusses laughter and jest because he worries that laughter’s source in a play of the power of judgment might lead readers into matters that ultimately carry only empirical significance and distract them from the proper object of

critical-transcendental analysis (the possibility of *a priori* judgments). Kant's efforts to disqualify jest as a fine art in §54 suggest, in other words, that laughter resides just beyond the borders of transcendental legitimacy.⁵ Due to its origin in a play of the power of judgment, laughter is more than a simple affect that Kant can easily write off as an empirical or anthropological issue, but its status as a bodily sensation ultimately precludes us from studying it as part of critical philosophy.

II. Kantian Laughter in the Critical-Transcendental Idiom

In what follows I depart from Kant and his insistence on treating laughter as an agreeable art with only empirical or anthropological value. I instead attempt to accommodate Kant's account of jest and laughter within his critical philosophy. Is this move possible? And if so, should we pursue it? The answer to the first question is undoubtedly "yes". Kant offers many reasons and resources for treating laughter produced by jest in the terms provided by his critical-transcendental philosophy. His concepts of the "sublime" and the "beautiful" prove particularly fruitful in elaborating the claim that laughter results from a "play of the power of judgment" (Kant 1987, 305). With respect to the second question (whether we *should* interpret laughter through the critical-transcendental idiom), this theoretical operation puts us on the road not taken (and actually forbidden) by Kant in §54. It involves a willingness to loosen Kant's critical restrictions ever so slightly in order to welcome into critical philosophy an experience that just barely missed the cut. This operation by no means aims to *abolish* or even *resist* Kant's central distinction between the critical-transcendental and anthropological-empirical; it simply

⁵ This is why Kant affords laughter such an important role at dinner parties. Because it straddles the boundary between physical and cognitive pleasure, laughter is uniquely positioned to satisfy the dinner party's mandate to mediate between the need for "good living" and the obligation to live morally (Kant 2006, 278).

employs the resources Kant provides to reconsider a borderline case.⁶ Inviting laughter into the critical-transcendental idiom inserts laughter into Kant’s rich philosophical economy that deals with questions of metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. My goal is to explore how laughter functions within this economy and the effects it exerts. In Part IV I argue that this approach yields significant benefits for our understanding of the relationship between laughter, aesthetics, and politics in Kant.

Laughter and the Sublime

Perhaps Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime* provides the most obvious foothold for analyzing laughter in critical-transcendental terms. According to Kant, the feeling of the sublime occurs when a subject attempts to “comprehend” a natural object that appears “absolutely large” or “large beyond all comparison” (e.g., a volcano or St. Peter’s Basilica) (Kant 1987, 248–249, 252, 261).⁷ Kant explains that this task poses a severe problem for the mind’s cognitive powers.⁸ Reason, armed with ideas which no intuition can express (e.g., the idea of freedom), demands that the mind comprehend the whole object in a single intuition (Kant 1987, 254, 314). The

⁶ My approach thus resembles William Connolly’s method of identifying and dramatizing key junctures or “flashpoints” in Kant in order to explore the philosophical possibilities that Kant’s system makes available but ultimately forbids. Like Connolly, I “admire the system because of the positive openings its rigorous approach creates before squeezing too many down,” and I “seek to crack that frame in order to create space for an alternative” (Connolly 2013, 98–99). F. Godfrey, in an apparently forgotten 1935 essay, pursues a similar method of analysis with respect to Kant’s theory of laughter. Godfrey writes: “Kant, who gave the first rational account of the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful and the sublime, deliberately declined to recognize laughter as aesthetic; laughter for him is essentially irrational...In spite of this, Kant’s analysis of the mental factors involved in laughter is shrewd and valuable” (Godfrey 1937, 127). Godfrey reads Kant’s theory of laughter *against* Kant in order to reach a conclusion that expands our understanding of Kant. In particular, he finds that laughter serves a unifying function within Kant’s rationalist system: “in laughter, as in taste generally, we may see the mind’s power of asserting its own unity, of keeping itself whole and sane” (Godfrey 1937, 129). I follow a method along the lines proposed by Connolly and employed by Godfrey, but unlike Godfrey I read Kant’s theory of laughter in order to alter and expand our understanding of the relation between politics and aesthetics in Kant, and I eschew his preoccupation with determining how laughter preserves the psychological integrity of the Kantian subject.

⁷ As the translator Pluhar notes, “comprehend” (*Zusammenfassung*) here means simply “to collect and hold together” in the mind, *not* “to understand” (Kant 1987, 251n14).

⁸ For the sake of consistency I follow Pluhar in referring to the understanding, reason, and the imagination as the mind’s “cognitive powers”. Others refer to these as “faculties” of the mind (e.g., Lyotard 1994; Deleuze 2007).

imagination, however, cannot present to the mind something that is essentially “unpresentable” (i.e., something large beyond all comparison) (Kant 1987, 232, 251–252).

Reason asks the imagination to do something of which it is not capable, and the two cognitive powers arrive at an impasse. A pleasure unexpectedly issues from this impasse:

the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination’s inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason, but is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgment, namely, that even the greatest power of sensibility is inadequate, is [itself] in harmony with rational ideas, insofar as striving for them is still a law for us. (Kant 1987, 257).

The imagination’s failure to comprehend the sensuous object does not, as we might expect, demonstrate the mind’s impotence with respect to the natural world. It instead reveals the strength of the subject’s power of reason because only a being endowed with rational ideas would ever demand that the mind present the unpresentable. Kant writes: “the subject’s own inability uncovers in him the consciousness of an unlimited ability which is also his, and that the mind can judge this ability aesthetically only by that inability” (Kant 1987, 259).⁹ The sublime is a pleasure taken in the revelation that the subject possesses the power of rational ideas within himself.

There are important similarities between Kant’s theory of laughter and his account of the sublime. First, laughter and the sublime both reflect emotions or “agitations of the mind” where an initially unpleasant frustration and discordance ultimately yields pleasure (Kant 1987, 247, 258, 334). The pleasure of laughter consists in how a joke frustrates and exercises the mind:

⁹ Guyer explains how in addition to uncovering reason’s theoretical vocation, the sublime also reveals the “unlimited ability” of reason in its practical employment. This distinction explains why Kant describes both a “mathematical” and “dynamical” sublime (Kant 1987, 247). The mathematical sublime pleases the subject by revealing (theoretical) reason’s demand that the imagination present the whole, while the dynamical sublime pleases the subject by revealing (practical) reason’s demand that it realize human freedom even in the face of the most fearsome natural forces (Guyer 1993, 207–208, 259–260)

The joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment. That is why, when the illusion vanishes, into nothing, the mind looks at the illusion once more in order to give it another try, and so by a rapid succession of tension and relaxation, the mind is bounced back and forth and made to sway; and such swaying, since whatever was stretching the string, as it were, snapped suddenly...must cause a mental agitation and inner bodily agitation in harmony with it...which gives rise to fatigue while yet also cheering us up. (Kant 1987, 334).

The feeling of the sublime originates in a similar dis/pleasurable mental vibration or back-and-forth motion: “In presenting the sublime in nature, the mind feels *agitated*...This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object” (Kant 1987, 258). Laughter and the sublime both constitute pleasures paradoxically generated by displeasurable mental agitations.

In addition to originating in discordant mental activities, laughter and the sublime occur when a subject encounters something incongruous with his faculty of judgment. Kant claims that laughter reflects a response to an event that contradicts the subject’s expectations. He writes: “Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). *Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing*” (Kant 1987, 332). The feeling of the sublime also arises when the subject senses that the world is incongruous with his cognitive powers (namely, when a natural object exceeds the imagination’s capacities to comprehend it all at once). Kant writes: “if something arouses in us...a feeling of the sublime, then it may indeed appear, in its form, contrapurposive for our power of judgment, incommensurate with our power of exhibition, and as it were violent to our imagination” (Kant 1987, 245). Like laughter, the sublime occurs when the world of appearances has departed from its normal mode of operating in harmony with the subject’s cognitive powers: “it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses

our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruthless disarray and devastation” (Kant 1987, 246). Both laughter and the sublime occur when an experience of incongruity launches the cognitive powers into a dis/pleasurable mental agitation.

These close connections between the logics of laughter and the sublime have not gone unnoticed by commentators (Banki 2014; Borch-Jacobsen 1987; Godfrey 1937; Marmysz 2001; Nichols 2005; Hounsokou 2012). For example, Stephen Nichols argues that laughter constitutes the “anti-sublime” (Nichols 2005). Nichols depicts laughter in dark and serious tones, as a sudden gesture of the body that generates a critical, though sometimes frightening distance between a subject and himself. Through laughter, previously inexpressible or unimagined possibilities for selfhood become more plausible: “Laughter is a gesture that comprises a sort of existential attitude where one takes the liberty of laughing at his abject self” (Nichols 2005, 381; cf. Connolly 1991, 120, 180).¹⁰ Nichols associates this vision of laughter with the Kantian sublime. As in the terrifying (yet pleasurable) breach that the sublime introduces within the subject (specifically, between his powers of imagination and reason), the subject experiences “a kind of dread and awe” at the disjunction his laughter introduces between him and himself (Nichols 2005, 381). Crucially, however, the pleasure of laughter does not reaffirm the subject’s rational powers like the sublime. Quite the opposite, in fact:

The emotional release Kant ascribes to the sublime arises from a recognition of the mind’s capacity to impose unity on multiplicity...Gesture [of laughter], however, produces the opposite result: a sense of the body as grotesque and abject, linked to the self in a mocking caricature of identity, with the mind actively questioning what this means, while yet incapable of formulating answers, let of alone of imposing order – in essence, a kind of negative or anti-sublime. (Nichols 2005, 381–82, 384; brackets mine).

¹⁰ Here we might note Kant’s claim that in laughter, “the rogue within ourselves is exposed” (Kant 1987, 335).

For Nichols, laughter obeys the logic of the Kantian sublime but reverses its sign (cf. Banki 2014; Borch-Jacobsen 1987, 749–750). Put differently, Nichols takes seriously Kant’s contention that laughter results when an expectation transforms into *nothing* (Kant 1987, 332). Rather than culminating in the triumph of reason, laughter reflects a mental discordance that proliferates incongruity and difference across the subject and provides no promise of reconciliation.

Nichols presents a compelling case for describing laughter as the anti-sublime. Kant’s theory of laughter indeed shares a close relationship with his account of the sublime, even as the two experiences work in diametrically opposed directions. However, reading laughter solely in terms of the sublime fails to attend to key passages in §54 that suggest we instead interpret laughter in terms of Kant’s other form of aesthetic judgment – judgment on the beautiful.

Laughter and the Beautiful

The *Critique of Judgment* begins with an analysis of judgments of taste, or judgments about whether an object is beautiful. A beautiful object is one whose form arouses a completely disinterested feeling of pleasure in the subject (Kant 1987, 211, 224–225). Because the subject takes no sensuous, intellectual, or moral interest in the object (Kant 1987, 205–209), a judgment of taste necessarily makes a claim to be universally valid and immediately communicable to all others: “Judgments about the beautiful are put forward as having general validity (as being public)” (Kant 1987, 214). The universal validity and communicability of a judgment of taste does not rest on an objective concept (or rule) provided by the understanding that “defines” beauty; this validity and communicability is instead merely subjective and due to an activity of the cognitive powers that a subject can expect in all other rational humans (Kant 1987, 210, 214–

216). Grasping this cognitive activity is key to understanding how laughter functions in Kant's critical philosophy.

The feeling of the beautiful arises when an object's form launches the imagination and understanding into a "free play" (Kant 1987, 217). While in a determinant judgment the understanding provides a concept or rule for the other cognitive powers to obey, in a judgment of taste, the imagination and the understanding interact "freely" and on an even footing: the imagination presents the "manifold of intuition" to the understanding, and the understanding provides only its indeterminate lawfulness or "unity of the concept" required to yield a cognition in general (Kant 1987, 217–218, 241). The two cognitive powers stimulate one another, and this interaction produces a feeling of pleasure (Kant 1987, 217). Kant describes "the facilitated play of the two mental powers (imagination and understanding) quickened by their reciprocal harmony. A presentation that, though singular and not compared with others, yet harmonizes with the conditions of the universality that is the business of the understanding in general, brings the cognitive powers into that proportioned attunement which we require for all cognition" (Kant 1987, 219). Because the pleasure produced in a judgment of taste is grounded in nothing other than the free, harmonious relation between the understanding and the imagination, the subject can demand that all others agree with his judgment.

Kant offers many reasons for interpreting §54's discussion of laughter through the lens of the beautiful rather than the sublime. First, as I have already noted (Part I), §54 seeks to determine whether the category of fine (i.e., beautiful) art can accommodate the practice of jest responsible for laughter. We see Kant's preoccupation with the beautiful in his references to jest as a "harmony, with its beauty" and as a "beautiful play" (Kant 1987, 332). Second, Kant

describes the capacity to produce laughter as an ability akin to *genius*, the talent of producing fine art (Kant 1987, 307, 334). Third, judgments of taste and laughter both originate in a disinterested play of the faculties. Jest constitutes a “play of thought” that “does quicken the mind” while lacking “an underlying interested intention” (Kant 1987, 331). Kant’s description of laughter as a *play* of thought is itself significant because the cognitive powers enter into a “play” in the beautiful, while “seriousness” characterizes the mind’s attitude in the sublime (Kant 1987, 245; cf. Nichols 2005). Fourth, and further afield from *CJ* §54, Kant repeatedly links laughter to the feeling of the beautiful rather than the sublime in his pre-critical essay “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime” (Kant 2007, 26–28, 35, 40, 47, 54–55). Despite the important similarities between laughter and the sublime, Kant’s discussion of laughter is deeply entrenched in the structure and vocabulary of his arguments around the beautiful.

The most decisive evidence in favor of treating laughter in terms of the beautiful concerns the cognitive powers at play in laughter. We simply cannot get very far in comparing laughter to the sublime because the sublime feeling results from a discordant relation between the imagination and reason. As I show below, however, laughter for Kant instead involves a relation between the imagination and the *understanding* – the two powers at play in the beautiful. Careful attention to the pairings of the cognitive powers is essential here. As Lyotard notes, “the difference between the sublime and the beautiful is not one of emphasis. It is a transcendental difference. The ‘transition’ from one to the other signifies to the imagination that its ‘faculty’ partner will change” (Lyotard 1994, 60). Determining how laughter functions in Kant’s critical philosophy thus requires (a) identifying the cognitive powers at play in laughter, (b) describing

how they interact with one another, and (c) tracing how this interaction compares and contrasts to that found in the beautiful and the sublime.

Two key passages in §54 help in these tasks. The first is a statement of Kant’s “incongruity theory”. Kant writes: “In the exhibition involved in jest, the understanding, failing to find what it expected, suddenly relaxes, so that we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the vibration of our organs, which helps restore their equilibrium and has a beneficial influence on our health” (Kant 1987, 332). Because my objective is to translate Kantian laughter into the critical-transcendental idiom, I will set aside the second half of this sentence which focuses on laughter as a bodily sensation. The sentence’s first half identifies the *understanding* as the cognitive power involved in laughter. The subject laughs when the understanding fails to make sense of the world with the concepts and rules it normally employs. As the world of appearances diverges from the subject’s expectations, the understanding experiences a certain frustration before suddenly relaxing and enjoying the pleasure of laughter. Why does the subject laugh instead of recoiling in anger or resentment when faced with the inadequacy of its concepts and rules?¹¹

¹¹ Jeremy Arnold identifies Kantian laughter as an affect that “opens new possibilities for an affirmative democratic ethos” (Arnold 2009, 8). Instead of recoiling and re-entrenching its expectations and beliefs, the subject who laughs affirms the contingency he encounters in the world: “If...the loss of our sense of humor is connected to fundamentalist, even totalitarian, politics, then it may be laughter, more than any other affect, which we need in dark times” (Arnold 2009, 20). The problem with Arnold’s account is that Kant at no point describes laughter as an ethical stance that subjects can take in response to unexpected contingency. For Kant, laughter is a specific reaction to contingency in the world, and our task is to elucidate the conditions under which this reaction occurs and the activity of the cognitive powers that characterizes it. Arnold is concerned with Kant’s theory insofar as it reveals the productive role laughter can play in contemporary politics, whereas I aim to trace how laughter operates *within Kant’s philosophical system* and to determine how this illuminates the type of political enactment performed by laughter as well as the political significance of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. This shift in perspective is subtle, but I believe necessary for revealing the full political potential of Kant’s theory.

The second key passage in §54 introduces the imagination into the equation and suggests an answer to this question. Kant writes: “But music¹² and something to laugh about are two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas, or for that matter with presentations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought; it is merely the change they involve that still enables them to gratify us in a lively way” (Kant 1987, 332). The important point here is Kant’s claim that laughter results from a “play with aesthetic ideas”. While Kant appears to reduce aesthetic ideas to “presentations of the understanding,” his more detailed discussions of aesthetic ideas in *CJ* §49 and §57 do not allow for such a quick move. An aesthetic idea, Kant explains, is a presentation of the *imagination* that the understanding cannot account for with its concepts and rules: “by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no *concept* can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it” (Kant 1987, 314). Aesthetic ideas express the imagination’s creative power free from interference or regulation by the understanding: “An aesthetic idea cannot become cognition because it is an *intuition* (of the

¹² Jest and music share a close relationship in Kant’s aesthetics, and while Kant often considers the two arts in the same breath, he does not hold music and jest in equal esteem (Kant 1987, 331–332). At different points in *CJ* Kant includes and excludes music from the category of fine art (Kant 1987, 329–330, 332), but he always describes jest as an agreeable art (Kant 1987, 305, 332). The proximity of jest to an ambiguous artistic practice like music further evinces the liminal status of jest and laughter in Kant’s philosophical system.

imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found” (Kant 1987, 342).¹³ In an aesthetic idea the imagination goes into overdrive and “creates, as it were, another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it,” allowing the mind to “restructure experience” (Kant 1987, 314). Poetry manifests the power of aesthetic ideas most dramatically (Kant 1987, 314). Kant’s description of laughter as “a play with aesthetic ideas” is decisive because it transforms laughter from a judgment concerned solely with the understanding into a judgment that involves a particular *relation* between the understanding and the imagination.¹⁴

How can we describe this relationship between the understanding and the imagination in laughter? As the first passage above indicated, the understanding carries a tense set of expectations that it regularly employs to make sense of the world. Jest, however, confronts the mind with aesthetic ideas that the understanding cannot comprehend with its concepts and rules.

¹³ Kant leaves somewhat unclear the relationship between aesthetic ideas and (1) the understanding’s indeterminate lawfulness and (2) ideas of reason. With respect to (1), Kant suggests that aesthetic ideas are destined to harmonize with the indeterminate “unity of the concept” provided by the understanding. Aesthetic ideas are “referred to an intuition, according to a merely subjective principle of the mutual harmony of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding)” (Kant 1987, 342; cf. Guyer 1997, 359). However Kant also claims that “an aesthetic idea cannot become cognition because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found,” and genius, “the ability to [exhibit] aesthetic ideas” is needed to exhibit aesthetic ideas in a form that can enter into an accord with the understanding’s indeterminate lawfulness and yield the pleasure of the beautiful (Kant 1987, 342, 344). Kant writes: “Genius actually consists in the happy relation...allowing us...to hit upon a way of *expressing* these ideas that enables us to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that those ideas produce” (Kant 1987, 317). I subscribe to a view which emphasizes how, absent the intervention of genius, aesthetic ideas remain inaccessible to the understanding. With respect to (2) (the relation between aesthetic and rational ideas), Kant at times suggests that aesthetic ideas serve primarily to render the unrepresentable ideas of reason more palpable to the subject: “[Aesthetic] ideas...do at least strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience, and hence try to approach an exhibition of rational concepts (intellectual ideas), and thus these concepts are given a semblance of objective reality...A poet ventures to give sensible expression to rational ideas” (Kant 1987, 314; brackets mine). Commentators from diverse traditions emphasize these passages in their accounts of aesthetic ideas (e.g., Guyer 1993, 39; Deleuze 2007, 56–57). Nevertheless, Kant’s description of the creative power of aesthetic ideas (see body paragraph above) suggests they may serve a function beyond merely expressing the ideas of reason (cf. Zerilli 2005, 180–181). The discussion of laughter illustrates this possibility most vividly. If laughter results from “a play with aesthetic ideas,” it is difficult to imagine which idea of reason is being made more palpable by, for example, Kant’s joke about the overflowing bottle of beer (Kant 1987, 332–333). On my reading, “an aesthetic idea is the **counterpart**...of a *rational idea*,” not the servant of it (Kant 1987, 314; emphasis mine). To sum up then, aesthetic ideas express the power of the imagination in its radical autonomy from both the understanding and reason.

¹⁴ To my knowledge, F. Godfrey is the only other theorist who identifies the central role played by the imagination in Kant’s theory of laughter (Godfrey 1937, 130).

“The understanding is entrapped and its concepts and train of thought spoiled” (Godfrey 1937, 134). After trying and failing to subsume these aesthetic ideas under its concepts, the understanding suddenly relaxes, and the subject laughs. Kant insists that the understanding simply surrenders in its encounter with the imagination’s aesthetic ideas; its expectations are “transformed into *nothing*,” rather than into their opposite (Kant 1987, 332). This claim at first seems mysterious because we often laugh upon encountering something we do not expect, yet can still understand. But Kant’s stipulation about expectations transforming into nothing makes sense within the framework he has established. Kant, after all, deals only with lighthearted jesting at dinner parties, and the understanding is unlikely to latch onto the punchline of a ridiculous joke as a new “expectation” or rule. But even more importantly, the understanding cannot account for aesthetic ideas even after the subject laughs because aesthetic ideas remain entirely foreign to the understanding.¹⁵ Rather than comprehending these ideas with new rules or concepts, the understanding simply relents, and this change in the understanding’s posture yields laughter (Kant 1987, 332–333). Consequently, the mind does not recoil in resentment when it fails to make sense of the aesthetic ideas introduced in jest because, according to Kant’s account, there is literally nothing for the mind to get angry about.

Laughter constitutes a failure of the understanding and the imagination to achieve the harmonious accord experienced in the feeling of the beautiful. Recall that in a judgment of taste the understanding and the imagination enter into “a reciprocal subjective harmony” with one another: the imagination in its freedom harmonizes with the understanding in its indeterminacy (Kant 1987, 218). This is not the case with laughter. Here, the imagination and the

¹⁵ *Supra* note 13.

understanding work at cross purposes. The imagination overburdens the understanding with ideas it cannot comprehend, and the understanding clings to a set of expectations it would rather abandon completely than accommodate to these ideas. From both sides, the harmony of the beautiful is foreclosed, and laughter reflects a certain pleasure taken in this failure of the beautiful. The pleasurable discord in laughter mirrors that experienced between the imagination and reason in the sublime. Considered in the terms provided by Kant's critical-transcendental philosophy, *laughter is the analog of the sublime in the realm of taste*. Kantian laughter applies the sublime's logic of discord and impasse to the cognitive powers of the imagination and the understanding at play in judgments of taste.

III. The Politics of Kant's Aesthetic Philosophy

While my re-reading of §54 suggests a way to incorporate laughter into Kant's critical philosophy, at this point it does not appear to tell us much about the political significance of laughter in Kant. However, I contend that the above critical-transcendental account allows us to see how laughter performs a political enactment that imaginatively disrupts how subjects see and hear the world in common. Elucidating and defending this claim requires briefly leaving Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and turning to *The Contest of Faculties*, a text that has attracted considerable attention from theorists interested in the political stakes of Kantian aesthetics.

In *The Contest of Faculties* Kant poses a historical-political question: "is the human race continually improving?" (Kant 2009e, 177). He argues that answering in the affirmative requires identifying a historical event that signals the existence of a moral disposition in man (Kant 2009e, 181). If humanity is disposed toward morality, then we have reason to hope for its

continued progress toward a peaceful system of republican government (Kant 2009e, 184). Kant points to the *enthusiasm* of spectators of the French Revolution as such an event:

We are concerned here only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political changes is taking place: for they express universal yet disinterested sympathy for one set of protagonists against their adversaries...Their reaction (because of its universality) proves that mankind as a whole shares a certain character in common, and it also proves (because of its disinterestedness) that man has a moral character, or at least the makings of one...This revolution has aroused in the hearts and desires of all spectators who are not themselves caught up in it a *sympathy* which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race. (Kant 2009e, 182).¹⁶

According to Kant, revolutionary enthusiasm signals that man is the cause and author of his moral improvement, and it allows us to predict that humanity will continually progress. That Kant identifies enthusiasm for the French Revolution as the sign of progress is somewhat surprising given his strict and repeated moral prohibition against revolution (Kant 2009a; 2009c, 81; 2009d, 126–127). Kant’s argument in *CF* has garnered significant interest for what it reveals about the relationship between his moral, aesthetic, and political philosophies (Arendt 1992; Beiner 1992; Carroll 1984; Foucault 1986; Lyotard 1988, 2009; Habermas 1994; Zerilli 2005), and I will focus on three such readings.

In her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Hannah Arendt connects Kant’s discussion of the enthusiastic spectators of the French Revolution to his Analytic of the Beautiful. According to Arendt, Kant’s claim that the sympathy expressed by the spectators is “universal, yet disinterested” suggests that they make a kind of judgment of taste on what they witness (Arendt 1992, 15, 61–62, 65). She argues that Kantian judgments of taste serve as the

¹⁶ While Kant appears to hedge on the status of the spectators’ attitude when he describes it as a sympathy that “borders almost on enthusiasm,” (Kant 2009, 182; italics mine), he unequivocally identifies this sympathy as “enthusiasm” three times on the next page (183).

model for a practice of *political* judgment (Beiner 1992, 141; Villa 1992, 294). One judges political matters in the same way one judges beautiful objects – that is, as a disinterested spectator who proceeds without a rule and in such a way that the judgment can be communicated universally (Arendt 1992, 71–73). The specificity of a political judgment consists in how its validity is not determined by individual or collective interests, truth criteria, or moral laws but by an appeal to the *sensus communis*, the aesthetic common sense that Kant claims all subjects share with one another by virtue of the free play of their cognitive powers in a judgment of taste (Kant 1987, 238–240, 293–296). Arendt writes: “One always judges as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis* (Arendt 1992, 75; cf. Arendt 1968, 222). Political judgments achieve universal communicability when they aim for the disinterested, “enlarged mentality” exemplified by Kant’s enthusiastic spectators in their judgment of taste (Arendt 1992, 71–74). Arendt concludes that “when one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator” (Arendt 1992, 75–76). For Arendt, the enthusiastic spectators in Kant employ and exemplify the “specifically political ability” of taste that enables them to see things from the point of view of others and, in doing so, appear in and share a common world together (Arendt 1968, 221–223).

Linda Zerilli offers a slightly different take on Kant’s enthusiastic spectators in her essay “We Feel Our Freedom” (Zerilli 2005). Departing from Arendt’s account of the imagination as merely the power of *re*-presentation (Arendt 1992, 79; Zerilli 2005, 163–164, 173–174), Zerilli emphasizes how the imagination’s freedom as a presentational power (in its creative production of aesthetic ideas) means that judgments of taste modify and expand the bounds of the *sensus*

communis. The enthusiastic spectators' aesthetic judgment serves as a model for political judgment because it alters what counts as publicly communicable (Zerilli 2005, 178–181). A political/aesthetic judgment appeals to the *sensus communis* not so much as a “guide” for judgment (Arendt 1992, 75), but rather as a shared sense about what is communicable that is itself shaped by judgment: “Far from guaranteeing agreement in advance, *sensus communis* allows differences of perspective to emerge and become visible. *Sensus communis* is not a static concept grounded in eternal truths but a creative force that generates our sense of reality” (Zerilli 2005, 173). The enthusiastic spectators judge events “in their freedom” (that is, without reference to interests, truth, or morality) such that the sense of what is publicly communicable changes. Zerilli writes:

Kant's judgment of the French Revolution expand[s] our sense of the real, for it refuses to judge on the basis of victory and defeat, of any interest or end whatsoever. The judgment that at once expands our sense of reality and affirms freedom is possible only once the faculties are ‘in free play,’ as Kant puts it. Only where the imagination is not restrained by a concept (given by the understanding) or the moral law (given by reason) can such a judgment come to pass. (Zerilli 2005, 178; brackets mine).

For Zerilli, the spectators' enthusiasm for the French Revolution exemplifies how judgments of taste inspire a practice of political judgment oriented toward expanding and altering the *sensus communis*, or what counts as publicly communicable.

Lyotard takes a very different approach toward the aesthetic and political significance of Kantian enthusiasm. According to Lyotard, Arendt (and by extension, Zerilli) is simply wrong to interpret enthusiasm by way of the Analytic of the Beautiful. Enthusiasm properly belongs under the Analytic of the Sublime (Lyotard 1988, 161–171; 2009, 29–41). Kant indeed associates enthusiasm with the feeling of the sublime in *CJ*: “if the idea of the good is accompanied by an affect, this [affect] is called enthusiasm. This mental state seems to be sublime” (Kant 1987,

271–272). Revolutionary enthusiasm is a feeling of the sublime because the imagination is “unbridled” in its (vain) attempt to present an unrepresentable idea of reason (namely, the idea of a cosmopolitan society): “Enthusiasm is sublime aesthetically, because it is a straining of our forces by ideas that impart to the mind a momentum whose effects are mightier and more permanent than are those of an impulse produced by presentations of sense” (Kant 1987, 272, 275). Kant distinguishes enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*), which is sublime, from fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*), which is not. Enthusiasm is sublime because it originates in the imagination’s failure to present the unrepresentable ideas of reason. Fanaticism, meanwhile, constitutes an affect on behalf of some positive vision of the good presented by the imagination: it is “the *delusion of wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility*” (Kant 1987, 275). The fanatic thinks he *knows* moral truth while the enthusiast is affected by ideas he cannot entirely cognize. For Lyotard, the enthusiasm of the spectators of the French Revolution reflects “an extreme mode of the sublime” rather than a judgment of taste (Lyotard 2009, 30).

Lyotard also emphasizes, contra Arendt and Zerilli, that revolutionary enthusiasm presupposes a *sensus communis* of moral culture, not taste. Recall Kant’s argument that enthusiasm signals the existence of a moral disposition in humanity that allows us to predict continual progress (Kant 2009e, 182). If, like Lyotard, we treat enthusiasm as a modality of the sublime, this argument becomes significantly less obscure. According to Kant, unlike judgments of taste which are necessarily universal, we cannot “unhesitatingly” presuppose that everyone shares our feeling of the sublime (Kant 1987, 265–266). Because it involves a demand made by the subject’s rational powers, the ability to feel the sublime requires a high degree of cultural and moral refinement: “It is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through

culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas” (Kant 1987, 265). The enthusiasm of spectators of the French Revolution allows Kant to predict progress because this enthusiasm, as a feeling of the sublime, *already implies* moral progress: “Kant’s ‘There is progress’ does no more than reflect the peoples’ ‘There is progress,’ which is necessarily implied in their enthusiasm” (Lyotard 2009, 40). If moral progress was not already at least partially achieved, then the spectators could not experience enthusiasm. According to Lyotard, the *sensus communis* associated with enthusiasm is a shared sense of moral culture, not taste (Lyotard 2009, 37–40).

For Lyotard, the political significance of revolutionary enthusiasm does not consist in how it exemplifies a practice of making judgments of taste, but rather in how it embodies a feeling of the sublime. Lyotard describes how the subject experiences an irreconcilable conflict or *differend* between his cognitive powers in the sublime: “The object that is presented to reason in the phenomenon is never ‘big’ enough with respect to the object of its Idea, and for the imagination the latter is always too ‘big’ to be presentable. The differend cannot be resolved. But it can be felt as such, as differend. This is the sublime feeling” (Lyotard 1994, 233–234). The feeling of differend in the sublime consists of an ultimately unanswerable “call” made by reason for the imagination to go beyond its limits and present that which remains essentially unrepresentable. Lyotard writes: “the sublime feeling...is the subjective state critical thought must feel in its being carried to its limits...The absolute is never there, never given in a presentation, but it is always ‘present’ as a call to think beyond the ‘there’” (Lyotard 1994, 150). The sublime feeling of differend is a call to think and act beyond what one finds or can imagine in experience. For Lyotard, this sublime call is the call of politics: “this problem is the problem of politics...to

bear witness to the differend” (Lyotard 1988, xiii). Lyotard focuses on enthusiasm in *CF* because this enthusiasm reflects a historically specific and particularly intense feeling of the sublime/political call. Whereas Arendt and Zerilli find a model for judgment in Kantian enthusiasm, Lyotard identifies enthusiasm as a historical call to engage in critical political thought and action.

IV. The Politics of Kantian Laughter

In Part II I argued that laughter participates in the logics of both the beautiful and the sublime: laughter reflects a feeling analogous to the sublime that arises in the realm of taste. The theoretical disagreement described above over whether the political stakes of enthusiasm reside in a relation to the beautiful or the sublime suggests that the concept of enthusiasm may illuminate the political significance of laughter in Kant. In what follows I contend that laughter reflects a modality of Kantian enthusiasm that incorporates aspects of both conceptions of politics described by Arendt/Zerilli and Lyotard. More specifically, laughter enacts a political disruption that imaginatively alters what counts as publicly communicable.

Kantian laughter constitutes a modality of Kantian enthusiasm. The dinner party guests who laugh at a clever joke experience a kind of enthusiasm for what they hear. Laughter is an affect publicly shared by spectators that obeys and intensifies the logic of the sublime.¹⁷

Laughter reflects a modality of enthusiasm and not fanaticism because laughter is determined only negatively: it stems from the transformation of the understanding’s expectations into nothing rather than from the production of new expectations (Part II; Kant 1987, 332–333).

There is, of course, a crucial way in which laughter departs from the logic of enthusiasm in Kant.

While enthusiasm is an affect felt in the imagination’s vain attempt to present the ideas of reason

¹⁷ Here I agree with Lyotard that enthusiasm reflects a feeling of the sublime. As I show below, however, this move does not entail a complete abandonment of the conception of Kantian politics Arendt and Zerilli pursue when they link enthusiasm with judgments of taste on the beautiful.

(Kant 1987, 271–272), laughter operates in the aesthetic realm of the beautiful. Laughter is an enthusiasm experienced in the understanding’s failure to make sense of the aesthetic ideas produced by the imagination. If enthusiasm constitutes the sign of historical-political progress for Kant (Kant 2009e, 182), what is the historical-political function of laughter?

Laughter, as a modality of enthusiasm, discloses the limits of the *sensus communis*. Recall Kant’s argument that judgments of taste presuppose a *sensus communis aestheticus*, or common sense about matters of taste (Part III; Kant 1987, 238–240, 292–296). The *sensus communis* denotes that which is publicly communicable between subjects without the mediation of a concept of interest, truth, or morality. In laughter, the imagination and understanding fail to achieve the harmonious, pleasurable accord found in a judgment of taste, and the experience of laughter consequently exceeds the bounds of the *sensus communis*, or what is publicly communicable. As in the sublime, the discord between the cognitive powers means that although the subject can *expect* everyone to laugh at a joke he finds funny, he can no longer demand this response “unhesitatingly” (Kant 1987, 266). While in the sublime the hesitation is due to differences in cultural refinement between subjects (Kant 1987, 265), in laughter it stems from differences in the behaviors and tendencies of the imagination and the understanding between subjects. When someone fails to “get” a joke that everyone else finds funny, his imagination may be less fecund in its production of aesthetic ideas (such that the understanding’s expectations are not frustrated), or his understanding may not cling to a certain set of expectations as strongly (such that the imagination’s aesthetic ideas do not strike him as out of the ordinary). Laughter discloses the outer limits of the *sensus communis*, the point at which the

imagination and the understanding no longer enjoy a harmonious accord and one can no longer expect the same aesthetic response from everyone.

The *sensus communis* both does and does not exist in the moment of laughter. On the one hand, the existence of the *sensus communis* is a necessary presupposition of laughter. Laughter derives its pleasurable force precisely from how it departs from the “ideal” free play of the cognitive powers that the subject demands from everyone in a judgment of taste. Laughter necessarily presupposes the presence of an unmediated, non-discordant “social communication” in matters of taste (Kant 1987, 306). On the other hand, it is no longer possible to speak of an aesthetic common sense in the moment of laughter. Laughter reflects a pleasure taken in the breakdown of the harmonious free play of the understanding and the imagination, or of what is publicly communicable between subjects prior to concepts. We are beyond the realm of the publicly communicable in laughter. Kantian laughter depends on both the presence and absence of the *sensus communis*. Laughter erupts at the threshold of the *sensus communis*’s (non-) existence.

This liminal status of the *sensus communis* suggests that laughter carries great political importance in Kant. Jacques Rancière’s arguments on the relation between aesthetics and politics prove helpful here. According to Rancière, aesthetics concerns “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” – that is, aesthetics concerns the self-evident patterns and rules that regulate which bodies appear as visible rather than invisible, which sounds qualify as intelligible speech rather than noise, etc. (Rancière 2004, 13). Aesthetic *a priori*s constitute a public stage of intelligibility, and they closely resemble Kant’s *sensus communis* in that they determine what counts as communicable between subjects prior to

concepts of interest, truth, or morality. Rancière argues that “politics is aesthetic in principle” because politics proceeds through the polemical construction of mutually incompatible aesthetic stages of intelligibility within a single social order such that the social order alters its aesthetic *a priori* (i.e., alters how it counts bodies and hears utterances) (Rancière 1999, 58). Rancière writes: “The principal function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one” (Rancière 2001, Thesis 8; cf. Rancière 2009, 11). As an example, Rancière recounts Herodotus’s story of the Scythian slave revolt. The Scythian slaves waged an effective rebellion when they unexpectedly took up arms in the image of their warrior masters. But when the warriors responded with whips that reminded the rebels of their status as slaves, the rebels were “struck by the spectacle” and “took to their heels without a fight” (Rancière 1999, 12). Politics for Rancière proceeds by posing aesthetic incongruities (like the re-coding of a slave’s body into that of a warrior) that force changes in the public stage of intelligibility (Rancière 1999, 39–40).

Laughter in Kant enacts the political logic described by Rancière by making manifest “the presence of two worlds in one” (Rancière 2001). Laughter stages a dissensus between a world where the *sensus communis* exists and one where the *sensus communis* has broken down. The juxtaposition of the publicly communicable and the publicly incommunicable in the moment of laughter exposes the previously transparent and unquestionable *sensus communis* in a new light. Just as the Scythian rebels no longer appear as slaves when they take up arms, the *sensus communis* no longer constitutes an unproblematic “given” of experience when subjects laugh. The political significance of Kantian laughter consists in how it makes the *sensus communis*

foreign to itself and discloses the *sensus communis* as lacking the immediately transparent, transcendental status Kant attributes to it.

This disclosure also constitutes a disruption. If laughter results when the imagination goes into overdrive to the frustration of the understanding, what happens if the understanding responds by relaxing or altering its expectations? Could subjects then judge something as publicly communicable that they previously could not? To a certain extent, the mind does not have a choice as laughter possesses its own power to modify the bounds of the *sensus communis*. The difficulty of laughing at the same joke in the same way over and over demonstrates laughter's ability to subtly but effectively alter the understanding's expectations in light of the ideas produced by the imagination. What at first seems absurd or ridiculous becomes less so over time. In short, laughter produced by jest alters the contents and contours of the aesthetic common sense. Laughter imaginatively disrupts and transforms what counts as publicly communicable, and the domain of the publicly communicable emerges historically in part through such polemical scenes of laughter. Put in Kantian terminology: if the *sensus communis* is the transcendental condition of possibility for a judgment of taste (Kant 1987, 239–240), then historical moments of laughter reflect the historical condition of possibility for the *sensus communis*.¹⁸

If, as Arendt, Zerilli, and Lyotard all agree, the political dimensions of Kant's aesthetic philosophy emerge most clearly in his comments on enthusiasm, then we should look for these

¹⁸ My account might leave the impression that there exists only a single, hegemonic *sensus communis* that laughter discloses and imaginatively disrupts. This objection is fair, though the blame falls primarily on Kant, who never entertains the notion of multiple aesthetic common senses. There is no reason we cannot imagine laughter as performing the same political enactment in a world featuring multiple, overlapping aesthetic common senses. Here, laughter would disclose and disrupt that which is publicly communicable among more local communities. Because these communities are not hermetically sealed off from one another, laughter would exert unpredictable political effects beyond its original context. Consequently, modifying Kant's account to allow for a multiplicity of aesthetic common senses serves only to intensify the political significance of his theory of laughter.

political stakes not in the *CJ*'s Analytic of the Beautiful or the Sublime alone, but instead in their intersection in §54's theory of laughter. We find a politics of aesthetic disruption in the enthusiasm of laughter. Because laughter partakes in the logics of both the beautiful and the sublime, this politics features elements found both in Arendt/Zerilli's and Lyotard's accounts. On the side of Arendt (via Zerilli), the enthusiasm of laughter discloses the contingency and contestability of an aesthetic *sensus communis* (and not, as Lyotard emphasizes, a *sensus communis* of moral culture). Laughter "creates political space" by making the *sensus communis* foreign to itself and reconfiguring what is publicly communicable between subjects (Zerilli 2005, 178). On the side of Lyotard, laughter in Kant obeys the critical logic of rupture that characterizes the sublime. Rather than relying on a harmony of the cognitive powers and an "anticipated agreement" between subjects (*pace* Zerilli 2005, 172), laughter reflects a cognitive discordance that disrupts and reconfigures the aesthetic stage of intelligibility by imaginatively gesturing toward something beyond that stage. Kant shows how laughter enacts a political disruption by disclosing the historical contingency and malleability of the *sensus communis*, and his theory of laughter consequently contributes the most pointed political insight of the Third *Critique*.

V. The Politics of Kantian Laughter: A Recent Example

Kant's theory of laughter still may not appear to carry much political importance. If a vision of politics emerges from a theory dealing only with joking at dinner parties, does it really do the theoretical work we require of a vision of politics? Perhaps we can borrow Kant's suggestion from *The Contest of Faculties* and search for a recent historical event that can illustrate the political purchase of his theory of laughter. We do not need to look far. In

November 2014 the Chinese State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television announced a prohibition on “non-standard” uses of Mandarin (Silbert 2014).

Mandarin is rich in homophones that offer speakers many opportunities to construct unexpected, clever usages for similar sounding words. The government argued that widespread internet and advertising “misuses” of words and idioms threaten to undermine traditional Chinese culture and “mislead minors,” and it warned that violations of this policy would be punished severely (Mair 2014a). This policy was widely derided in the Western press as a “ban on puns” (Branigan 2014; Mair 2014a, 2014b; Silbert 2014; Sonnad 2014). One report suggested that the immediate impetus for the ban was a popular internet pun taking advantage of how a term of affection for Chinese president Xi Jinping is a homophone for “marijuana,” which led many Chinese to say that “we live in the Marijuana Era” (Sonnad 2014). Another pun capitalized on the close relation between “serve” and “smog” and revised Mao’s slogan “Serve the People” to “Smog the People” (Sonnad 2014). In addition to the obvious free speech issues raised by the Chinese “ban on puns,” the policy has also disrupted advertising strategies that take advantage of the language’s susceptibility to wordplay (Coonan 2015).

What can Kant’s account of laughter tell us about the Chinese prohibition on punning?

While certainly not identical, the puns targeted by the Chinese government closely resemble Kant’s dinnertime jesting as a mode of producing laughter. Both jesting and punning generate laughter by quickly reversing listeners’ expectations. (For Kant, the quick reversal occurs in the subject’s expectation of a joke’s storyline; for the Chinese punsters, the reversal occurs in the subject’s expectation of an utterance’s signification). There is also nothing cognitively demanding in jesting and punning; in both cases laughter is produced by a surface-level change

in expectations. With these similarities in mind, we could interpret the Chinese government's policy in several ways. The policy might reflect an attempt to establish a standardized set of meanings in order to protect elite interests, prevent cognitive confusion, or secure a code of morality. Eliminating puns would (theoretically) help insulate the governing elite from disrespectful jokes as well as provide a firm, unambiguous foundation of concepts and moral rules upon which to secure a political order. Kant's focus on laughter as an aesthetic issue, however, points us away from these prudential, cognitive, and moral explanations.

The above reading of the politics of Kant's theory of laughter suggests that the Chinese "ban on puns" reflects an attempt to secure a particular mode of organizing the aesthetic stage of public intelligibility. For Kant, jesting produces laughter when the understanding relents in its attempt to make sense of the imagination's aesthetic ideas. By disclosing the limits of the *sensus communis*, laughter disrupts and alters what counts as publicly communicable. When internet punsters refer to the Chinese leader as "marijuana," they imaginatively modify the concepts at their disposal in ways that the understanding does not expect. They stage a scene of dissensus between a world where the *sensus communis* exists and is uncontested and a world where the aesthetic common sense has broken down. Those who laugh begin to hear certain sounds in new ways and see the world in a new light. The government's prohibition on punning reacts to this rupture in the *sensus communis*: the authorities seek to legally bind the imagination to the existing concepts and rules of the understanding in order to secure an immediately transparent and stable sense of what constitutes publicly communicable modes of hearing and seeing. As the government noted, securing common meanings is "a basic requirement for proper listening and viewing" of mass media (Mair 2014a). Kant's theory of laughter illustrates the aesthetic stakes

of the Chinese “ban on puns,” and the latter in turn demonstrates the political significance of Kant’s account of laughter. While both jesting and punning at first appear to amount to trivial, harmless forms of wordplay, the Chinese policy shows how these laughable reversals in expectations constitute moments of heightened political opportunity and danger.

VI. Conclusion – “Laughing Best”

The bulk of Kant’s engagement with laughter comes in the passages from the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Anthropology* examined in this paper. These passages illustrate how laughter enacts a political disruption that alters how subjects see and hear the world in common. But laughter also makes a rather unexpected appearance in Kant’s preface to *The Metaphysics of Morals (MM)* (Kant 2008, 365–368; Kant 1974, 261–265). Kant uses the preface to *MM* to air his grievances with various readers and critics of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and his tone in this piece can only be described as defensive, bordering on petulant. Kant expresses irritation with those who have employed the technical terms and concepts introduced by the First *Critique* in more popular forms of discourse. Kant writes: “As far as the spirit of the critical philosophy is concerned, the *least* important consideration is the mischief that certain imitators of it have made by using some of its terms, which in the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself cannot well be replaced by more customary words, outside the *Critique* in public exchange of thoughts (Kant 2008, 368). Kant insists that critical philosophy, while open to robust scholarly contestation, is not suited for public consumption (cf. Kant 2009b, Axviii; Bxxxii–xxxv). The public misuse of Kant’s conceptual vocabulary has apparently generated ridicule directed at his philosophical system, and Kant seeks to insulate himself from such derisive laughter: “But if *pedants* presume to address the public...in expressions that are only fitted for the Schools, the fault of this must not be laid as

a burden upon the critical philosophers, any more than the folly of the mere wordmonger is to be imputed to the grammarian. The laugh should here only turn against the man and not against the science” (Kant 1974, 262).¹⁹

Kant’s final response to the “imitators” and “pedants” who invite ridicule of his work is remarkable. Kant confidently declares, “the critical philosophy’s turn must finally come to laugh *last* and so laugh *best* when it sees the systems of those who have talked big for such a long time collapse like houses of cards one after another and their adherents scatter, a fate they cannot avoid” (Kant 2008, 368). What a decidedly un-Kantian conception of laughter! With his claim that critical philosophy will “laugh *last* and so laugh *best*,” Kant adopts a suspiciously dogmatic attitude toward his philosophy and even appears to advance a (crude) Hobbesian understanding of laughter as superiority. By taking a hard line against the laughable “misuse” of his concepts that belong to a proper philosophical discourse, Kant in a way resembles the Chinese authorities who attempt to secure the “proper” meaning of words by prohibiting subversive wordplay. In a striking twist, Kant’s aspiration to have the last laugh over his opponents serves to sharply illustrate the political dangers and opportunities pointed to by his own theory of laughter.

The preface to *MM* clearly does not present Kant at his finest or most generous hour. But these pages nevertheless serve to highlight the political significance of the theory of laughter he offers in *CJ* §54. In *MM* Kant argues that the *best* laugh is the laugh that comes *last*. Kant enjoys a laugh superior to that of his philosophical opponents because in the end, critical philosophy is the true philosophy: “anyone who announces a system of philosophy as his own work says in effect that before this philosophy there was none at all” (Kant 2008, 367). *CJ* §54

¹⁹ I prefer the Hastie translation for this passage because it renders *Das Belachen* more literally as “the laugh [at]” rather than Gregor’s choice of “ridicule” (Kant 2008, 366).

suggests an alternative to Kant’s formulation of “laugh last *and so* laugh best” (Kant 2008, 368; italics mine). While “laughing last” reflects what Kant desires to do in *MM* (that is, laugh in such a way that all other unauthorized, derisive laughter stops), perhaps “laughing best” reflects the critical, political laughter Kant describes in *CJ* §54. “Laughing best” expresses a capacity to disrupt and imaginatively reorganize the aesthetic stage of possibility while leaving this stage open to future change. The sights and sounds that count as publicly communicable emerge historically through such polemical scenes of laughter. *CJ* §54 thus suggests that we revise Kant’s formula to read: “laugh best *by not* laughing last”. Kant’s theory of laughter offers a conception of politics oriented around “laughing best” – that is, a politics of aesthetic disruptions in how subjects see and hear the world in common.

I opened this paper by noting how the Analytics of the Beautiful and the Sublime have come to construct a grid of intelligibility for assessing the political stakes of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. While the beautiful gestures toward a politics of persuasion, “anticipated agreement,” and world-building (Arendt 1968, 222–223; 1992, 72; Zerilli 2005, 172), the sublime points to a politics of rupture, dissensus, and critique (Lyotard 1994). Rancière and his followers attempt something of a synthesis between these two readings by emphasizing how judgments of taste on the beautiful enact a moment of political dissensus. Rather than being oriented toward agreement, Rancière notes that the experience of the beautiful “neutralizes the circular relationship between knowledge as know-how and knowledge as the distribution of roles. Aesthetic experience eludes the sensible distribution of roles and competences which structures the hierarchical order” (Rancière 2006, 4). Expanding on this reading, Davide Panagia contends that Kant’s account of judgments of taste demonstrates how Kant pursues a “radical

democratic project” in the Third *Critique* (Panagia 2009, 30–31, 44). According to Panagia, the feeling of the beautiful constitutes an aesthetic experience that interrupts the regimes of truth and interest that normally govern how the subject perceives the world (Panagia 2009, 24–31).

Panagia admires Kant for attending to this “anti-normative” experience, and he argues that Rancière’s notion of dissensus finds its roots in “that aesthetico-political moment of heterogeneity Kant described in his *Critique of Judgment*” (Panagia 2009, 31, 43).

While Rancière and Panagia brilliantly call our attention to how Kant illustrates the disruptive potential of aesthetic judgments of taste, in this paper I have experimented with identifying an aesthetic experience in Kant that enacts this dissensus directly without the theoretical baggage associated with the beautiful (e.g., the beautiful’s insistence on universal communicability, its relation to a politics of persuasion and agreement, and its status as a symbol of morality) (Panagia 2009, 33–36). Perhaps the aesthetic experience that enacts the most pointed political dissensus in the *Critique of Judgment* is not the pleasure taken in the beautiful (or the sublime, as Lyotard insists), but the discordant pleasure experienced in laughter. Laughter in Kant reflects an experience that discloses and imaginatively disrupts the ways in which subjects see and hear the world in common. It is my contention that Kant’s theory of “laughing best” points us beyond the beautiful and the sublime and in doing so illustrates the political stakes and democratic possibilities of the *Critique of Judgment* most vividly.

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