

Two Habermases and a Rancière; or, Habermas's account of the aesthetic dimensions of politics

Paper Presented at the 2019 Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting  
San Diego, CA

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“There has never been any ‘aestheticization’ of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle.”

Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement*, p. 58

Contemporary political theorists love stories. Most often, at least professionally, we love using them as objects of study and important sources of theoretical reflection and insight. Whether this interest in stories amounts to yet one more “turn” in political thought, I cannot say. What is clear, however, is that there are two broad and overlapping versions of this interest in stories. First, political theorists examine stories as representations of political phenomena (mourning, kinship, race, sexuality, work, and so on). Through interrogations of these representations, political theorists often use stories to reveal unquestioned assumptions and theoretical biases in the story or in various theoretical positions. Often, these biases and assumptions can be seen in a theorist’s (mis-)reading of a story, which is why many theorists spend so much time sounding like ersatz literary theorists: The assumption seems to be that how one reads this or that scene in a television show also tells us a great deal about how we might think about and act in a democracy.

The second orientation toward stories, while not ignoring their representational aspects, focuses on how stories structure social life directly. Stories don’t just depict aspects of political life; they are already present in social life, affecting and effecting it directly. Here the theorist analyzes the ways in which people take up, identify with, or re-enact the characters and motifs that appear in stories. Honig’s (2001a) examination of foreign founder stories exemplifies this approach. At first, she reads these stories as representations. The foreign founder stories mark and work through the forms of unwilled power and authority she examines in the paradox of politics (in which the democratic people is supposed to will the law, but also must deal with the ways in which they are already shaped by laws,

institutions, and powers they cannot will). Yet she also explores how the stories shape subjects and the conflicts they have. Foreign founder stories “script” ongoing political conflicts, as can be seen in debates in the U.S. about immigration. In their simultaneous love and fear of the foreigner, participants in these debates re-enact the roles and ambivalences that we see in stories about foreign founders, such as the film “Shane.” This re-enactment of narratives occurs even in philosophical writing. Honig (2007, 2009) argues, for instance, that Habermas’s universal, rationalist, and procedural account of modern constitutions (unwittingly?) enacts the structure of a *bildungsroman*. It seems that both the philosopher and the political actor succumb to the poet.

For many political theorists, these sorts of findings illustrate the need for an “aesthetic turn” in the study of politics (cf. Kompridis 2014). Usually inspired by Arendt and/or Rancière, these theorists argue that the “rationalist” conceptions of politics associated with Rawls or Habermas are fundamentally misguided. Politics cannot be conceived as the adjudication of conflicts over interests and values. It is, rather, an *essentially* aesthetic conflict over what is sensed and how one senses. *Before* one determines whether an interest or value is legitimate or how one might respect it, the argument goes, there is an aesthetic disclosure of the world: a representation of the set of identities, spaces, objects, topics, and organizations, and a collection of practices by which actors identify with, re-enact, or alter these representations. The important dimensions of politics, the argument goes, occurs in those moments. Instead of spending their time examining how political actors adjudicate validity claims, political theorists should examine how actors enact, contest, invent, and disseminate aesthetic representations.

I do not disagree with the claim that theorists should be more focused on the aesthetic dimensions of politics. Rather, I disagree with the assumption that such an interest

is in opposition to the rationalist and proceduralist conception of politics that Habermas supposedly adopts. I disagree in part because I think such an assumption rests on a misreading of Habermas. Though he often describes himself this way, Habermas is not the arch-rationalist and proceduralist who aims to contain or purge aesthetics, so as to make politics safe for rational argument (see Markell 2000). Rather, as I show throughout section 2, Habermas presents an account of linguistic meaning in which the communicative practices of raising, accepting, and contesting validity claims are inherently and inextricably intertwined with *mimesis* (see Miller 2011: 33). More importantly, the misreading of Habermas as the arch-rationalist distorts accounts of the aesthetic dimensions of politics. Specifically, it is symptomatic of the tendency to place the aesthetic dimensions of politics into a binary opposition to “reason.” This tendency, in turn, makes it difficult to conceptualize the creative and critical interventions that theorists of the aesthetic dimensions of politics prize prize.

Consider Honig. She does not just examine how stories represent and constitute political life. Throughout her work, she frequently asks her readers to engage in critical and creative interventions into the stories she examines. For example, she argues that democratic actors are better off adopting Freud’s Moses story as their founding myth (2001a: 39-40); and in response to the formative power that public things<sup>1</sup> exert on us, Honig suggests that “we would do well to acknowledge [public things’] power and, when appropriate, to allow that power to work on us or work to lessen or augment it” (2017: 28). Her readers—the “we”—must somehow distance ourselves from the scripts and public things that have

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, public things are not *merely* stories. Part of Honig’s point is that their “thingness,” their durability, has a power to thwart or support human projects. Nevertheless, the fact that they are *public* things is essential, and their publicness is a product of patterns of interpretation and receptivity. The existence of public things is at least in part a product of a cultural script, and that this explains the need for Honig’s argument: she wants us to defend public things (as opposed to allowing the forces of neoliberalism to make everything private) on the grounds that they are necessary conditions for democratic life (see Honig 2017: 28).

shaped us, so that we can determine which ones to adopt, augment, or lessen, and then come up with creative strategies to effect these changes. Such suggestions may or may not be good advice, but either way they raise an essential question: how should we understand these critical interventions, and how are they compatible with the world-disclosing and world-shaping powers she identifies in stories? How should we understand the process by which actors adopt or enact a story? Is it a non-rational succumbing to a new image, or is there something more to it?

Just as importantly, who is the “we” in Honig’s statement about how we should respond to the power of public things? One of Honig’s main themes, particularly in her accounts of the paradox of politics, is that subjects are always-already shaped by narratives, institutions, laws, or public things. How is it possible for us to become aware of these powers so that we can decide when and whether it is appropriate to allow those formative powers to work on us? Is this self-aware and deciding “we” some sort of “inevitable remainder” that can never be fully assimilated by the powers that shape it, as she suggests in her account of agonistic democracy (cf. 2008: 186)? Does this talk of inevitable remainders mark a peculiar invocation of a kind of transcendental subjectivity, as if there is some non-mimetic element that always remains “outside” of the formative powers that shape us? Or should we understand Honig’s hortatory call as one of those formative powers? Is it perhaps a moment of metalepsis in which she invents the image of a subject who can augment or resist formative powers, while simultaneously inviting the reader to act *as if* that subject were already there? And if so, how “critical and creative” can this character be?

This paper makes no claim about whether Honig and Rancière have the resources to address questions like these. Rather, I develop two main claims. The first is a claim about how to interpret Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Drawing on Gregg Miller’s

(2011) interpretation, I argue that there is a dual aspect to Habermas's conception of communicative rationality. It involves a collection of procedures *and* forms of aesthetic world-disclosure (see Miller 2011: 33). Along with an intersubjective account of communicative reason, in which reason appears not as the attribute of an isolated subject but is instead immanent in communicative action, *Habermas also presents an intersubjective account of mimesis*, that is, the aesthetic representations and role-playing that constitute the social world. This leads to my second claim, which is that Habermas has an important position within the "aesthetic turn" in political theory. Habermas agrees with the core idea, which Rancière and Zerilli develop, that rational argument depends upon an aesthetic disclosure of a world in which the argument can be received (see Rancière 1999: 56; Zerilli 2005: 167). Yet for Habermas the reverse is equally true: The aesthetic disclosure of the world occurs in and through linguistic form and practices, and these practices provide the perspective from which actors can critically evaluate performances and the stories they encounter. The philosopher and political actor might succumb to the poet, but the poet also takes the form of the philosopher. Thus, we do not need to search for a position "outside" of mimetic powers that subjects can use to critically evaluate their performances or invent new ones, and we do not need to worry about the fact that all subjectivities are mimetically formed. Critical evaluations and creative transformations can occur *within* mimetic practices and experiences.

## 1 The first Habermas

In her excellent introduction to a set of his essays on the philosophy of language, Maeve Cooke characterizes Habermas's position as a "proposed happy marriage of Austin and Searle with Frege and Dummett" (1998: 7). The Austin and Searle references (with an assist from the late Wittgenstein) mark Habermas's indebtedness to pragmatic approaches to

language. Pragmatic theories of linguistic meaning do not, as do the formal-semantic approaches of Frege and Dummett, treat the propositional content of sentences as the fundamental unit of analysis; instead, they study the speech act (or utterance). Pragmatic approaches to language, in other words, focus on how people use utterances not just to describe objectively ascertainable states of affairs but to *do* things within the social world: to greet people, ask questions, issue orders, make promises, and so on. On the other hand, Habermas also retains a key element of the formal-semantic approaches to language, namely, the idea that there is an internal connection between the meaning of a sentence and the conditions under which it is valid. In formal-semantic approaches, one treats the sentence as a proposition that describes a state of affairs in the world. Thus, the meaning of the sentence is purely a matter of knowing what would be the case if the proposition were true (see Habermas [1988], 1998a: 282).

The hallmark of Habermas's "official" theory of meaning, then, is his transposition of the idea of an internal connection between meaning and validity into a pragmatic analysis of speech acts. His indebtedness to pragmatic approaches, in other words, extends beyond the interest in speech acts to include a pragmatic analysis of the internal connection between meaning and validity. Habermas achieves two major effects with this transposition. First, he expands the range of validity claims so that they include not just propositional truth but also claims to moral rightness and sincerity. Second, he traces the conditions of validity not to some objectively ascertainable state of affairs in the world but rather to the social practices by which competent language users come to accept a claim.

The result is a theory of formal pragmatics. Speech acts do things in the social world, but they also raise claims to validity (to truth, rightness, and sincerity), and these validity claims are directly connected to an utterance's ability to "work" socially. Habermas's

intuition is that there are general (and not simply attaching to this or that group) and pre-theoretical social rules that actors presuppose and utilize as they make linguistic moves and accept/reject the validity claims implicit in those moves. Knowing what an utterance means requires that one know what “social move” is getting made through the speech act, and this knowledge is internally connected to knowing the conditions under which one might accept that claim. This is what Habermas is getting at in his assertion: “We understand a sentence if we know how to justify its truth, as well as the action-relevant consequences incurred in case of our accepting it as true” (Habermas 1999: 437; see also 1998a, 277ff, and 1998b, 307ff). We understand what an utterance means only insofar as we know how to engage in the communicative procedures by which the claim could get justified. We must know how to take a “yes” or “no” position vis-à-vis the claim, what sorts of reasons would be relevant, how to offer reasons for one’s position up with reasons if asked, and how to present those reasons to another.

This theory of meaning also underwrites one important motif in his social theory. If speech acts always raise validity claims, and if the meaning of these speech acts derives from the social practices conditions under which these claims can become accepted as true, morally right, and sincere, then we can understand a social order as (at least in part) a system of linguistically structured cooperation that is internally connected to “reason.” Speech acts require participants to adopt a performative attitude in which they endeavor to coordinate action through the mutual understanding of meaning. This is a cooperative orientation, one that presents the other not as an object but as a fellow speaker whose point of view one must understand and take into account. Yet if the meaning of a speech act is internally connected with the conditions of its validity, then the offer of a speech act ipso facto throws the speaker into an obligation to offer reasons for those validity claims if asked. Everyday



communicative practices raise validity claims that implicitly point to a set of procedures that participants might use to redeem those claims. Thus, the idea of reason (of providing reasons for a position and the ideal of accepting or rejecting a position purely on the basis of those reasons) is not an individual human faculty. It is immanent in the infrastructure of language use. Communicative actors can use linguistic practices to reflect on and transform existing and local social practices, and the critical theorist can reconstruct these processes to adopt a critical perspective on a social order (see Cooke 1998: 5).

Taken together, this theory of linguistic meaning form the core of what we might call the “first Habermas.” This is the Habermas that theorists of the aesthetic dimensions of politics feel obligated to reject, usually in a summary reference near the beginning of a paper. It is the Habermas as rationalist and proceduralist, who believes that language use is *essentially* oriented toward coordinating action on the basis of validity claims, and who therefore casts the story-telling and world-disclosing aspects of language as derivative. It is also the Habermas who argues that processes of modernization ultimately institutionalize the aesthetic aspects of language use into the separate sphere of “art.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is also a moment in Cooke’s reconstruction that points to a second Habermas, one who acknowledges aspects of linguistic meaning that go beyond this official position. I noted above that for Habermas the use of language has a rational dimension in that “the communicative actor undertakes an obligation to provide reasons for the validity of the claims he raises with his utterances, while his counterpart in action may either accept the proffered reasons or challenge them on the basis of better reasons” (Cooke 1998: 4). I shall

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<sup>2</sup> For Habermas, speech acts raise claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity. In his account of modernization, these different validity claims end up getting separated and institutionalized into different domains. Increasingly modern lifeworlds differentiate between truth, morally right, and beautiful, and these different kinds of assessment become more or less formalized: Institutions of science devote themselves to assessing the truth of a validity claim; institutions of modern law/morality assess the rightness of a claim, and institutions of art assess a claim’s sincerity.

postpone a discussion of idea that forming a speech act necessarily throws one into an obligation to provide reasons until section three. Here I wish to pause on the claim that one's counterpart in communicative action can accept or reject the reasons offered. Habermas frequently describes this as a "yes" or a "no" position vis-à-vis validity claims. This language ("yes" or "no") and the frequency of its use produces, as Miller notes, a banalizing effect (cf. Miller 2011: 63). Coordinating action through speech, and thus taking a yes or no position on a validity claim, is an ordinary and everyday activity with no affective elements worth discussing. The worker with more seniority asks the worker with less seniority to carry the heavier box of tools, and perhaps the junior worker accepts the request without question. Or perhaps the junior worker might ask why and the senior worker might offer a reason: "it's always been our rule that less senior workers have to carry the heavier equipment." This might be a good enough; the less senior worker might simply accept this rule as part of the background consensus by which social life gets coordinated.

Yet at times, Cooke argues, this background consensus gets "shaken." When that happens, "naïve communicative action"—the sort that takes place against this sort of background consensus—must give way to the more conscious and reflexive form of reason-giving that Habermas calls "discourse" (see Cooke 1998: 4). For example, the junior workers might question whether it is fair for less senior workers to have to do the harder tasks, or whether the fact that this is how it has always been done is a good enough reason for the practice. Such questions might initiate a more reflexive search for acceptable validity claims, either for better reasons to justify the existing rule, or for modifications of the rule so as to make social practices fairer.

I am less interested how or why one might object to a background consensus than I am in the experience of it "shaking." It is a curious metaphor, for it seems incongruent with

the banality of taking a “yes” or “no” position vis-à-vis a validity claim. To be sure, the junior worker’s rejection the senior worker’s request might entail a “no” to particular validity claim (“I don’t think it’s fair to distribute tasks purely on the basis of seniority”). Yet the metaphor of shaking suggests that there has to be something more to it than that. “Shaking” suggests that there is something more profound going on than the initiation of a negotiation process or a cooperative search for acceptable validity claims using procedures everyone already implicitly understands. The language suggests a kind of disorientation, where the certitudes of the world—the spaces, topics, and identities that one accepts as given—start to dissolve. As White and Farr (2012) argue, taking a “yes” or “no” position is not the same as accepting or rejecting a validity claim; sometimes what is getting affirmed or negated is a way of life (37-38). The junior worker’s “no” might negate the senior worker’s implicit validity claim (“it is right for senior workers to make requests of junior ones”) but also the lifeworld in which that validity claim operates—a world in which one distinguishes between senior and junior workers, or between workers and bosses, or even the very identity category of “being a worker” in the first place.

If this is correct, then there is more to Habermas’s theory of meaning than reconstruction briefly offered in this section. He relies on, though he tends not to discuss it explicitly, a conception of understanding meaning that goes beyond the idea that there is an internal connection between meaning and validity. Specifically, there seems to an experience of understanding meaning that has an affective dimension and that at least potentially throws participants into a kind of indistinction and disorientation. There is an aspect of Habermas’s theory of meaning, in other words, in which he acknowledges an uncontrollable and anarchic dimension of understanding. When one’s “yes” or “no” shakes a background consensus, this might not eliminate the core principles guiding communicative action—for example, that a

norm is valid insofar as it could gain the free acceptance of all affected as participants in a rational discourse. Yet the fact that the affirmation or negation generates world-altering experiences suggests that such rules and principles cannot regulate what happens *within* those procedures (see Miller 2011: 65). The “yes” or “no” that happens within communicative action can call the very identity of the participants (including who counts as “all affected”) into question.

As a result, we must reject Habermas’s tendency to cast aesthetic world disclosure to one *type* of language use that is derivative from the use of language to coordinate action and that is (at least in modernity) formally institutionalized into the domain of art (see Habermas [1985], 1998c: 383-482). Rather, we must insist with Bohman that linguistic world disclosure is a “level of reflective communicative practice” (1997: 208; see also Miller 2011: 147-148 n. 26). That is, speech acts can be understood both in terms of formal pragmatics (as an effort to coordinate action on the basis of mutually recognized validity claims) *and* in terms of aesthetic world disclosure. Aesthetic world disclosure is always present, always intertwined with the procedures of communicative action. Perhaps, as Rancière argues, political life involves disputes over the aesthetic worlds that actors disclose or negate, and perhaps it involves a disagreement/misunderstanding (*mésentente*) over whether an utterance should be received as a validity claim or as the disclosure of a (counter-)world. In the next section, I aim to follow these threads in reconstructing Habermas’s thought, and I will do so through an exploration of his often-implicit conception of mimesis in communicative action.

## 2 The second Habermas

Describing the role of mimesis in a political theory is a difficult task. Partly this is because, as Potolsky (2006) notes, mimesis is an extraordinary mime, “changing its name and interpretive scope to suit each new environment” (6). It is nearly always present in

theoretical analyses of politics, but it is not always named as such. Broadly speaking, the concept is at work in nearly all arguments about representation and in discussions about the powers that form critical or rational subjects (see Miller 2011: 14; Potolsky 2006; Halliwell 2002). Although it's not clear how this happens (hence the reason for studying it!), it seems obvious that art often looks like something "real."<sup>3</sup> The painting of the bowl of fruit looks like a real bowl of fruit; the music sounds like an emotion, and the theatrical performer speaks in the voice of another. Even our apparently non-theatrical social performances contain these sorts of representations: we "dress up" for professional activities, which is to say that our actions mime the social model of the "dressed up professional," and our hand gestures often mimic our speech, as when we press our forefingers to our thumbs to convey the delicacy or technicality of the idea that our speech conveys. These phenomena give rise to questions not only of how this imitation is possible and/or the status of "originals", but also to the politico-ethical questions of representation, that is, to questions about the fairness, or the harms and marginalizations, of a representation.

These questions about representation take on added urgency once we also recognize that mimesis also refers to the *practice* of imitation, and that these imitative practices are a central component of identity formation. One does more than "play" when one imitates the model of the dressed up professional; one also shapes and forms the self. Through the role-playing, one starts to identify with the speech, dress, posture, gestures, and habits of thought that one might have started out simply imitating. Imitation, in short, transforms the self and the world we inhabit. It might even "re-enchant" the world, at least insofar as imitation is a central component of meaning: through the imitation of models, one might identify with the forms of speech and ethical obligations of the profession, so that one accepts its values; and

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<sup>3</sup> One important debate here has to do with whether the imitation seems convincing because it resembles nature, or whether it works because it operates in accordance with existing cultural assumptions about nature.

the objects and accoutrements associated with it (the clothing, the rituals, the pieces of chalk) become integrated into a meaningful world.

Both of these aspects of mimesis saturate contemporary political theory. When, for instance, Zerilli accepts Wittgenstein's claim that the sense of logical necessity arises only insofar as we are captured by a picture, she draws on both meanings of mimesis. There is a picture (representation) of the world that someone implicitly adopts, and the adoption of the picture shapes the person's thought and action, enabling and foreclosing certain modes of action (see Zerilli 2005: 167-168; see also Zerilli 2012, 2017; and Wittgenstein 1958, section 115). The same motif occurs in Honig's paradox of politics. Honig argues that the paradox of politics—in which there must be “good people” to will good laws and institutions, but good laws and institutions are necessary to produce good people—draws attention to “the law's formative powers, its never fully-willed role in processes of subject-formation” (2007: 8). The never-fully-formed people's actions, desires, and identities emerge in and through a law that imposes itself on them irresistibly, prior to (and enabling of) their willing it. There is a similar logic in Honig's analysis of public things. Using Winnicott's analysis of transitional objects as an inspiration, Honig argues public things have the power to impress their unitariness, stability, and (relative) permanence on a people: public things “help collect diverse citizens into self-governing publics divested of fantasies of omnipotence and invested with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency, and concern” (2017: 17).

It is in this context that we can understand Miller's striking assertion that the history of political philosophy can be read as a history of different efforts to locate the point of *irresistible* mimetic power (2011: 39). All political philosophy implicitly or explicitly develops an account of how various things, models, cultural roles, or divine beings impress themselves

onto subjects. Think of Plato's divinely harmonious cosmos that imprints itself on the philosopher's soul, or the philosophical rule that imprints this harmony on the city as a whole (cf. Miller 2011: 41ff); or Descartes' God who stamps the cogito, allowing it to perceive the world as it is (Miller 2011: 39); or Freud's child who develops a self by identifying with (and fearing) the father (Potolsky 2006: 118ff); or Marx's subject whose consciousness formed (though also distorted) in and through class relations (cf. Potolsky 2006: 137-138); or Althusser's account of interpellation; or Rancière's re-telling of Bellanthe's re-telling of Livy's re-telling of the story of the secession of the plebeians, in which the plebeians insert themselves into the world of political discourse by mimicking the Senate's institutions, and in which 19<sup>th</sup> century workers re-enact "the same" fable (see Rancière 1999: 24; see also 1991: 96ff).

As he sometimes acknowledges, the same is true for Habermas. For instance, he tells us, "there is already a mimetic moment in everyday practices of communication, not merely in art" (1985a: 81). He also states that "modern art harbors a utopia that becomes a reality to the degree that the mimetic powers sublimated in the work of art can find resonance in the mimetic relations of a balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity of everyday life" ([1985] 1998d: 415). This second passage is particularly noteworthy. Habermas does not just state, as Ingram (1987) argues in his citation of the passage, that modern art presents a "utopian image" of an undistorted intersubjectivity operating in everyday life (see Ingram 1987: 181). The passage also explains how the utopian image becomes real—that is, have a transformative effect—by "resonating" with its viewers. This resonance occurs, Habermas insists, insofar as modern art mimes the already utopian mimetic relations that operate in

ordinary life. Thus, everyday life involves mimetic relations, and mimetic relations already involve the experience of a balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

This core motif also finds its way into the theory of communicative action. Note, for instance, that the “rational procedure” Habermas identifies with discourse is also a procedure of mimetic role-taking. Habermas’s communicative actors must learn to switch roles and speak in each other’s voices, ideally in every other’s voice, as can be seen in his universalization principle (U): “For a norm to be valid the consequences and side effects that its general observance can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the particular interests of each person affected must be such that all affected can accept them freely” (1990: 120). In the current context, the important bit is not the way in which (U) defines the general interest, but the fact that this principle is “intended to compel a universal exchange of roles” (1990: 65). Unlike Kant’s “monological” categorical imperative, (U) requires actors to “exchange roles with each and every other” (1982: 257)—in short, a universal pantomimesis (Miller 2011: 63). The very practices of offering, understanding, and responding to speech acts must be understood as a complex procedure of role-taking.

Yet the mimetic role-switching that operates in communicative action is not merely procedural. It also is the means by which the self gets formed. Habermas insists that mimetic role-taking, if it is to coordinate action on the basis of understanding meaning, must also produce important affects on those who engage in it. Recall why Socrates banned mimetic poetry from his ideal city. He banned it because it will harm the actors’ (and audience’s) souls. Partly, Socrates expresses the familiar worry that good theater frequently depicts

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<sup>4</sup> Miller highlights another curiosity of this statement (see 2011: 32). Part of its strangeness is that, at least since Plato, mimesis is usually figured as the opposite of “undistorted.” It refers to the image or representation that necessarily misrepresents reality or transforms the subject prior to (or at least in a way different from) rational understanding. In this passage, however, Habermas converts an irrational mimesis into its apparent opposite, an undistorted and balanced dimension of social relations. I will explore the idea of a “rational mimesis” further in section 3.



beings behaving badly, which generates the worry that actors and audience members will imitate bad models. Yet his concern is also that people who imitate multiple models are likely to have thin and chaotic souls; they lose their integrity in a multiplicity of roles, becoming susceptible to any desire they might have, to any poet's illusion, or to any politician's beautiful speech. Habermas does not think that his universal pantomimesis creates the soul chaos that Plato worries about. He does agree, however, that the practice produces the individual's sense of self, her orientations, and her competencies.

In fact, Habermas's whole conception of communicative action depends on "soul-effects" that practices of role-taking can produce. He distinguishes communicative action from strategic action primarily in terms of the orientation and disposition of the actors. Actors who engage in "success-oriented action" adopt an "objectivating attitude." They treat the other and the speech situation as objects that they can manipulate to achieve their goals, as advertisers do when they determine that X phrasing is most likely to cause the consumer to buy a product. By contrast, in communicative action—that is, in action oriented toward and coordinated on the basis of mutual understanding—one must adopt a "performative attitude," which is another way of stating that communicative action is a necessarily cooperative enterprise. One must be oriented toward the other as a fellow speaker that one is seeking to *understand*. This orientation, Habermas insists, is necessary to produce language's illocutionary force, the binding effect (*Bindungseffekt*) that allows actors to coordinate with one another on the basis of *meaning*. It is the *Bindungseffekt* that occurs in communicative action that permits one to understand a noise as a speech act—a question, an order, an invitation, an offer of a reason, and so on—and to respond on the basis of that understanding. How does this *Bindungseffekt* come about? Habermas is quite explicit: the "performative attitude" that produces illocutionary force "is rooted in the mimetic act of role-

*taking*—that is, in ego’s making his own the expectation that alter directs to him” (1984: 390, emphasis mine). If one’s utterances are to become meaningful, if they are to produce mutual understanding and not just perlocutionary success, actors must do more than simply fulfill the formal procedures of the speech situation. They must be affected (perhaps even effected) by the other. The experience of understanding—that unforced force that arises in experiencing meaning—*becomes the moment of irresistible mimesis*, in which the other’s position, perspective, and expectations stamp themselves on the subject.

Thus, if communicative action is to occur, it must involve procedures of mimetic role-taking *and* the kind of creative orientations and affective experiences that Arendtians and post-structuralists say do not exist in Habermas’s “dry” proceduralism (cf. Honig 2007: 8ff). It is no doubt true that Habermas devotes most of his theoretical attention to the procedural aspects of language use. When, say, feminists argue that a patriarchy exists and that it is manifest in the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment, the “first Habermas” invites us to examine the formal properties of this speech act. We would see, for instance, the validity claims that the assertion raises, along with the formal grammar those claims establish. The process of arguing for these claims, for example, installs the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. The feminist “I” addresses a “you,” but in order to present reasons that could be convincing to the second-person, the I must be aware of the interchangeability between positions (see Habermas 1990: 154). This awareness, in turn, implicitly refers to a third-person perspective, and it is from this implicit third-person perspective that one can assess the extent to which the reasons offered could in fact be convincing to both positions (see Miller 2011: 106).

Such a formal analysis of the speech situation might be useful in explaining how it is possible for actors to generate legitimate truths and norms about the claims that feminists

raise. Yet *within* these procedures there is also the affective experience of understanding. The adoption of the third-person perspective might alter an arguer's sense of herself; it might lead to an experience of the connection of her life story to broader structures of power. By the same token, hearing and understanding her claim might challenge one's existing sense of the world as unproblematic and more or less just. Or it might challenge what Rancière calls the "partition of the sensible," including the organizations of topics, identities, and spaces that cast such issues as trivial or private concerns. *Understanding* the claim, the practice of taking another person's role, might be precisely the moment that "shakes" the background consensus, leading to Ego's transformation, as the other's perspective becomes part of the self. This might involve affective experience, a painful, exuberant, or uncanny loss of the self and/or the world in which one operates. Thus, if it is to generate illocutionary force, the taking of a "yes" or "no" position vis-à-vis another's validity claims cannot be as banal as Habermas's language suggests. It must be connected to the production and reproduction of a meaningful world of roles, topics, practices, and spaces.

In sum, we can say that Habermasian communicative action has a dual character. There is a set of formal and abstract procedures and norms, but there is also the experience of understanding, produced by mimetic achievements, that occurs within those procedures. If so, Habermas does not work to keep political life safe from aesthetic transformations and affects; rather, he builds these elements into the heart of his account of reason. This generates an essential question. How do these mimetic and aesthetic and affective dimensions of the experience of linguistic meaning interact with the procedural norms that Habermas reconstructs? As I suggested in the introduction, this question is directly relevant for the Arendt- and Rancière-inspired investigations of aesthetic dimensions of politics. Do the communicative principles and procedures that regulate the production of valid norms

also structure, govern, or regulate the mimetic powers by which “worlds” and identities get formed and transformed? Or is it the other way around? That is, are Zerilli and Rancière correct that the mimetic powers at work in understanding *prior* to the procedures by which clashes of interests and values get processed? If so, should we see the persuasion with reasons as a form of enchantment, a succumbing to the most affective and seductive speech? My suggestion is that Habermas provides a useful approach to these questions in that he refuses to prioritize one aspect of communication over the other. On his account, communicative reason and the aesthetic dimensions of language do not contradict each other but are wholly intertwined.

### 3 Mimetic reason and rational mimesis

So we have two hypotheses. The first is that the speech norms and procedures that Habermas reconstructs govern, fence in, or regulate mimetic powers. The second inverts this idea: mimetic powers are prior to “reason,” in the sense that reason depends upon a prior picture of the world. We may dispense with the first hypothesis immediately. For Habermas, the procedures of communicative action cannot regulate, control, or govern the experience of understanding. Habermas acknowledges this explicitly when he observes that “the potential of unleashed communicative freedoms does contain an anarchistic core” (1996: xl). The generation of meaning, the experience of understanding on which communicative action depends, is potentially exuberant, transformative, even ecstatic. The experience of understanding can involve a mesmerizing “flash of insight” that can transform oneself and one’s world. Communicative procedures feed off of this core, but they cannot govern, generate, or regulate it. Habermas’s formal reconstruction of grammar positions, and his insistence that there are principles that communicative actors presuppose as they work to achieve mutual understanding, operate at a different register of experience than the

experience of understanding (cf. Miller 2011: 65). The formal existence of the first-person grammar position does not necessarily matter for participants who might be experiencing a significant transformation of their sense of self and their relations to others (cf. Miller 2011: 62). Similarly, (U) requires communicative actors to adopt the perspectives of others as they test validity claims, but it by no means can govern how (or whether) this process might change the very context or the identities of the “all” whose perspectives one must take into account.

There is another reason why the formal procedures and principles cannot be understood simply as a fence around the mimetic powers of subject-formation. The procedures of communicative action cannot work if actors experience its principles and structure as constraints that they must prudentially take into account as they act; they must also be able to experience these principles and structures as *theirs*. The rules, roles, and structures must become meaningful to the participants. Thus, communicative structures and norms cannot be experienced as already “present” guiding participants’ performances in advance; they must instead (or in addition) become the *products* of communicative actors’ practices of role-switching and the soul-effects those practices produce. Communicative actors must produce them anew in each encounter (cf. Miller 2011: 65).

This points to an important reinterpretation of Habermas’s discourse ethics and the analyses of politics and law he builds out of it. One of my dissertation advisors once jokingly summarized Habermas’s position as: “because we communicate with one another, we are morally obligated to support a European-style social democracy.” The joke trades on the core positions of the “first Habermas”—that norms of equality and mutual respect are built into the infrastructure of communicative action. As Rancière puts it in his critical description of the idea, the activity of coordinating action on the basis of speech becomes the way in

which “justice forces its way into social relationships” (Rancière 1999: 44). We can think here of Fredrick Douglass’s famous refusal to “argue” that slavery is wrong. He grounds this refusal by arguing that there is nothing to argue. Everyone already acknowledges that slaves are human beings and that enslaving a human being is wrong. He deduces this acknowledgment from an analysis of the laws that govern slaves’ conduct. For example, it was illegal to teach a slave how to read, and the law prescribed different and more severe punishment for crimes if those crimes were committed by slaves. These legal regulations, Douglass suggests, necessarily presuppose that slaves were human beings who could be held responsible for their actions. The mere fact that the law prohibited teaching slaves how to read means that the law also acknowledged that slaves possessed human intelligence; after all, there were no similar laws banning the teaching of cows to read. The first Habermas appears to adopt a similar logic in his analyses of discourse ethics. No matter how inegalitarian the relationship might seem, the mere fact that a superior coordinates action with a subordinate on the basis of meaning (by, for example, issuing the subordinate an order) reveals that egalitarian speech norms are operative. Superiors necessarily presuppose that subordinates can understand speech, and that this understanding inserts egalitarian principles (even if only counter-factual ones) into the relationship.

We can now say, however, that this interpretation of Habermas’s discourse ethics forgets the key features of Habermasian mimesis. Habermasian speech norms cannot *regulate* the experience of meaning; they are instead a post hoc articulation of the affective experiences of understanding through which actors are formed and transformed (see Miller 2011: 107). The norms that Habermas reconstructs must be understood as a collection of images that he is trying to insert into communicative situations. As Zerilli and Frank have argued, the same is true of Douglass. From the fact that the law calls for capital punishment

when a slave commits a crime, Douglass deduces an egalitarian presupposition—that the slave is a moral and responsible being who deserves equal treatment. But is this deduction “logical”? It depends on what organization of the world one is assuming (see Rancière 1999: 48-49; Zerilli 2012: 15ff). It is always possible to create a division between different ideas of “understanding.” The slave can understand language well enough to understand an order and obey it, but they lack the ability to formulate orders, or to act independently of them (for a good discussion of this point in Rancière, see Nichanian 2012). Given that perceptual organization of the world, Douglass’s deduction is not logical at all. So one way to interpret Douglass’s analysis is that he is presenting an argument that also invents an aesthetic image of a world in which his deduction is logical. He is using the resources available (the fact that slaves are recognized in law) to invent a new image of equality (the image of a slave who is an equal human being) and insert it into his audience’s experience (see also Frank 2010: 209ff; for a more critical reading of Douglass’s speech, see Mills 1998: 167ff).

So too with Habermas’s universalization principle (U) or his accounts of discourse ethics. These are not quasi-transcendental deductions of the obligations that actors necessarily take on as they try understand one another. They represent political efforts to use various resources (for example, the fact that one has to switch roles in order to issue orders at all) to construct an image of equality and insert it into hierarchical social relations. In this regard, his moral and legal theories have more in common with practices like witnessing than most interpreters realize. Communicative understanding always involves mimetic practices (role-taking) and experiences (transformations of the self and world). The speech norms Habermas identifies might therefore be understood as a kind of witnessing. The theorist bears witness to the egalitarian experiences of communicative life, so as to inspire actors to invent and act on a more egalitarian set of norms. Indeed, Habermas explicitly calls his

communicative conception of practical reason a “heuristic” device (1996: 5). His account of practical reason does not directly prescribe the norms and principles communicative actors must adopt; instead, it provides a “a guide for reconstructing the network of discourses that, aimed at forming opinions and preparing decisions, provides the matrix from which democratic authority emerges” (ibid.). His reinterpretation of practical reason as communicative reason operates is an immediately political image, a lens meant to articulate the injustices of the present. That is how justice forces its way into social relationships: Not automatically through speech norms that are already “there,” but through creative invention, as theorists use heuristic devices to identify the emancipatory elements of communicative events, and participants act as if egalitarian norms were already present and binding.

This is not to say that the theorists of the aesthetic turn are right after all, that the aesthetic presentation of images is prior to rational argument. We may dispense with that hypothesis too. The idea that Habermas’s speech norms are representations does not mean that his theory must be understood “merely” as an effort to seduce actors with affective images. This is because mimetic powers arrive in linguistic form. They occur within and through coherent procedures, identities, and practices. This is the intuition that Habermas is getting at when he says that one his goals is to reveal “the rational core of mimetic achievements” (1984: 390; see also Miller 2011: 32). It may be true that communicative reason depends on mimetic practices and experiences, but it is also true that mimesis is *articulate* (cf. Miller 2011: 31). Mimesis occurs in and through a historically situated “language game,” and the implicit rules, roles, and practices of this game provide the perspectives from which the participants can critically evaluate their own (and others’) performances and invent new images.



Think of the game of chess. Mastering the rules of this game requires not just the ability to understand what moves are allowed, but also the ability to understand one's moves *in relation to* one's opponent ("if I do X, then my opponent can do Y"); this capacity entails the ability to identify with an "objective" point of view that is already built into the rules of the game. One must be able to pursue one's own cause while simultaneously evaluating that cause from the observer's point of view. Something similar is true of the capacity for critical reflection and creative intervention in the context of communicative action. One must be able to understand one's speech acts in relation to one's interlocutor. This requires role-switching, which in turn implicitly refers to a third-person perspective, that is, the perspective of the observer who can evaluate one's own speech acts.

This invites us to re-think the implications of accepting that the subject is formed mimetically. We can accept that stories have the power to shape subjects without viewing this power as a (welcome or unwelcome) threat to the subject's autonomy and capacities for critical and creative engagement. In fact, these powers become perceived as threats to autonomy only insofar as we assume that autonomy is the capacity of an isolated subjectivity who stands "outside" of various powers and chooses which ones to create, augment, or resist. Habermas's intersubjective accounts of reason and mimesis decisively reject such a notion. Role-switching—and the transformations that occur therein—is what we are, or as Miller more precisely puts it, it is *how* we are (2011: 106). The observer's perspective one uses to evaluate one's performances is already part of us; it is how we are. Moreover, role-switching also involves a coherent and historically saturated set of identities, perspectives, and practices, including the third-person perspective of the spectator.

Thus the fact that the subject is formed mimetically does not undermine the practices of critical reflection or creative intervention. Indeed, the whole conceptual

opposition between rational-critical reflection and mimetic transformation collapses. Communicative actors might experience profound aesthetic transformations (in their identities, in their experiences of the world), but those experiences occur through a collection of coherent rules and roles that one can interpret and articulate in retrospect and/or from the perspective of the observer. There is no autonomous subjectivity or collection of “mere procedures” that govern mimetic powers, nor are there any “purely aesthetic” experiences or practices that interrupt such phenomena. Autonomous subjectivity and communicative procedures are already mimetically formed, and the mimetic (formative) powers are already coherent, already structured through (historically saturated) roles and procedures. There is no opposition between rational form and mimesis; there is only the ongoing flow of intersubjectivity, of the transformative experiences of meaning and of the critical appropriations and rearticulations of that experience.

#### 4 Coda: The aesthetic power of intersubjectivity

In her classic book documenting jazz music and black culture of the 1960s and 70s, Val Willmer quotes a curious statement from trumpet player Earl Cross: “When I become my instrument and my instrument becomes me, I’m not a person any more. I would like to walk around the street looking like a trumpet if possible, because that’s what I am” (Willmer 1977: chapter 8).<sup>5</sup> No doubt this notion of walking around the street looking like a trumpet seems like a strange fantasy. It is, however, worth thinking about why it seems so strange. We all have fantasies like this. I may not imagine walking down the street looking like a trumpet, but I have heard similar notions from my students and colleagues at the music school where I work. More to the point, I also have strange fantasies that for some reason

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Gregg Miller for drawing my attention to this Cross’s statement, and for noting its relation to the idea of “everyday mimesis.” Much of the discussion in this section is inspired by personal and online conversations we have had.

others do not find so strange: I often imagine myself walking down the street looking like a college professor, because that's what I am.

We need not indulge in such reveries any further. It ultimately does not matter whether it is stranger to imagine oneself as looking like a musical instrument than it is to imagine oneself looking like an approved social role. Cross's statement has another and more important insight. Cross does not imagine that he is an artist only when he is playing his trumpet. Rather, he imagines himself resembling his instrument in everyday life. He imagines his "art," his performance, bleeding into everyday life. Many musicians will speak about a fantasy of becoming one's instrument in the activity of playing, of getting caught up in "the groove" and losing oneself in the extraordinary and fleeting experience of the performance. Cross's statement, however, suggests that art is much more powerful than that; the mimetic power does not just mesmerize the performer and audience in the moment; it also has the power to infuse his daily experience and reality itself. Aesthetic practice and experience can result in a "changed constellation of art and the lifeworld" (Habermas [1985] 1998d: 415).

We might imagine this as the kernel of a new approach to the aesthetic dimensions of politics. Many of the writings about the aesthetic dimensions of politics adopt a neo-romantic orientation. One treats "ordinary" experience as drab or dominating, in need of enrichment or interruption from something outside of that experience. In one common version of this argument, reason is the thing that must be interrupted by the liberating power of aesthetic experience. Here reason is identified with a kind of routine (and often dominating) practice of instrumental calculation and determinate judgment. Aesthetic experience then becomes associated with the liberating possibility of the new: of invention of new topics, spaces, identities. One must introduce, as Rancière puts it, topics, identities, and spaces "not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose

identification is thus a part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (Rancière 1999, 35). Panagia’s (2009) investigations of the “poetics” of political thought and of “pure and immediate sensation” exemplify this approach. Ordinary politics and ordinary experience, he tells us, is made up of Kantian determinate judgments. One subsumes a particular under an already-given universal concept. Transformative politics occurs with the emergence of a dissonant and nonsensical experience that does not “fit” into existing concepts. Such experiences inspire, by way of a Kantian reflective judgment, a reconfiguration of our concepts and potentially opening up a different organization of our associational lives. Aesthetic experience becomes the way out of a drab and dreary practice of everyday determinate judgment (for an extended critique of this view, see Mackin 2017).

The second approach simply reverses this motif. One identifies the drab and dominating everyday life with unthinking mimesis. One is socialized into a variety of roles that one adopts and performs without much awareness. Emancipation comes not from the aesthetic experience that interrupts these roles, but from a process of rational reflection. It is not mesmerizing aesthetic experience (role-taking), but rather the critical-rational “I” that can reflect on and interrupt the ongoing flow of unthinking role-play. This motif appears, for example, in Zerilli’s reading of Arendt’s idea that the enlarged mentality is achieved when one imaginatively adopts the perspectives of others. Zerilli argues, correctly in my view, that for Arendt, the imagination is not a means to understand another person, but rather is a way understand the common world by adopting a perspective of the spectator who can evaluate (judge) the world in a disinterested manner (cf. 2005: 177ff). Note, however, the ways in which this account remains trapped in the premises of the philosophy of the subject. For Zerilli and Arendt, the capacity for disinterested judgment arises from a particular cognitive faculty (imagination), which is then not analyzed further. They ultimately retain a more or

less Kantian account of subjectivity as a way to explain how a critical perspective of the world is possible.

Cross's fantasy articulates a position that lies off of this grid, and the re-reading of Habermas I have offered here helps to spell out why this alternative might be useful. In the realm of aesthetics, Cross sidesteps the whole question of "interruption." He is not searching for an experience (however we conceive of it) that interrupts everyday life; rather, he imagines the enchanting power of mimesis as incorporated into the everyday. A great concert can no doubt be a meaningful experience, but Cross's statement also draws attention to the fact that the "great performance" is only the tiniest part of the activity of trumpet-playing. There are also the countless hours of tedious practice, of thinking about and studying music, and of reacting to one's world. It is not just that this tedium makes the extraordinary moments possible. The point is that the tedium is valuable in itself, and perhaps, need not be experienced as tedious. Through such practice one transforms oneself. One starts to look like one's trumpet, or one can look like a college professor, not when playing a piece of music or scribbling on a chalk board, but also in moving throughout one's world. Cross's invocation of an everyday mimesis draws attention to the ways in which the language of "interruption" remains conservative in its orientation. No matter how radically transcendent an interruptive experience is, it must also come to an *end*, thus allowing the ordinary flow of experience to re-emerge after the interruption is over; that's part of what it means to be an interruption. The preoccupation with interrupting the drab or dominating aspects of ordinary life, in other words, restricts art-making and aesthetic experience only to particular domains and peculiar times; it only happens "over there" (in the concert hall or museum) or only during certain times (while momentarily noting the beauty of an object

instead of its ordinary categorizations). Such an image underestimates the power art and art-making has on artists and their audiences.

On the reading I have presented, Habermas's theory of communicative action develops this core insight. He understands that ordinary social life—practices of reasoning, role playing and the transformations of the self that attend that role-playing—is inherently bound up mimetic practices and transformations, and the (aesthetic) experiences that attend them. His core contribution is that he presents a post-metaphysical and intersubjective account of these phenomena. He does not need to figure out how the ordinary flow of experience can get interrupted. Conceived in intersubjective terms, reason and mimesis are built into the flow of ongoing communication. They are not events that explode ordinary experience, nor are they faculties that the subject inevitably retains. They are the possibilities built into the infrastructure of communication, which the theorist can imagine, bear witness to, and use as a way to articulate and promote a freer and more egalitarian social existence.

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