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Notes towards a 'social aesthetic': Introduction to the special section

Cristiana Olcese and Mike Savage

Abstract

There is an emerging 'aesthetic turn' within sociology which currently lacks clear focus. This paper reviews the different issues feeding into this interest and contributes to its development. Previous renderings of this relationship have set the aesthetic up against sociology, as an emphasis which 'troubles' conventional understandings of sociality and offers no ready way of reconciling the aesthetic with the social. Reflecting on the contributions of recent social theorists, from figures including Bourdieu, Born, Rancière, Deleuze, and Martin, we argue instead for the value of a social aesthetic which critiques instrumentalist and reductive understandings of the social itself. In explicating what form this might take, the latter parts of the paper take issue with classical modernist conceptions of the aesthetic which continue to dominate popular and sociological understandings of the aesthetic, and uses the motif of 'walking' to show how the aesthetic can be rendered in terms of 'the mundane search' and how this search spans everyday experience and cultural re-production. We offer a provisional definition of social aesthetics as the embedded and embodied process of meaning making which, by acknowledging the physical/corporeal boundaries and qualities of the inhabited world, also allows imagination to travel across other spaces and times. It is hoped that this approach can be a useful platform for further inquiry.

Key words: social aesthetics, aesthetic turn, everyday experience, cultural production, Bourdieu, Rancière.

1: Introduction

Sociology has usually pitched itself against the aesthetic, and the ensuing encounter has always been a fraught one, in which the discipline of sociology does not – and cannot – come out on top. The terms of this encounter have been resilient and enduring. Weber's (1946) classic essay, 'Science as a vocation', was foundational in defining a vision for sociology as a 'tragic science' precisely through contrasting it with art. Here, science's inability to address questions of ultimate value spells out the fundamental limits of the remit of sociology which was nonetheless charged with analytical power through its ability to unravel unintended consequences. This fraught encounter has been one which classical sociological thinking has traversed throughout the last century with all major thinkers pitching stakes around the aesthetic. Weber's writing on music (e.g. Darmon 2015), Simmel's on fashion and beauty (Davis 1973), Luhmann's (1985) systems thinking and Bourdieu's (1984) excavations of lifestyle and consumption all emerge out of this tension. In all these cases sociology needs the encounter with the aesthetic to define its remit, but only ultimately to underwrite a more fundamental separation.

So it is that over the past decade or more, there has been a renewed call for engagement with the aesthetic (de Le Feunte 1996) in the context of now familiar arguments about the 'aesthecization of everyday life' (Featherstone 1992), or in Nigel Thrift's words that 'aesthetics (is) a fundamental element of human life and not just an additional luxury, a frivolous add-on when times are good' (Thrift 2008: 10). This call has recently risen to a new level with John Levi Martin's (2011) excavation of an aesthetic sociology drawing on pragmatist thinking and field analysis (see also Martin and Merriman 2015).

This special section of the BJS originated from debates about the role of the aesthetic within contemporary 'cultural capital' (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009; Hanquinet, Roose and Savage 2014), and about the remit for cultural sociology itself (Hanquinet and Savage 2015). First presented at a conference held at the LSE in December 2013, the three papers here offer challenging reflections on the role of the aesthetic in sociological analysis. Our introductory paper situates these papers with a broader perspective on the prospects for elaborating a sociological aesthetic. We argue that we need to move away from a modernist conception of the aesthetic which continues to dominate in this debate. Using an engagement with Bourdieu as our focus, and drawing eclectically on the thinking of Deleuze, Proust and Rancière, we champion an everyday aesthetic rooted not in distance from the world, but as immersed in the routine and mundane 'search' which sometimes informs, other times is informed by, aesthetics in cultural production. The final part of the paper uses motifs from the idea of walking as a means of elaborating an approach mapping out a 'social aesthetic' as a non-instrumental, existential logic or way of being in the world which can inform everyday experience and be captured by cultural production. Despite the conventional portrayal of walking as a quintessential instrumental and unremarkable activity, we show that it can be rendered aesthetically in a way which brings out – rather than challenges – its sociological significance. The example of walking permits us not only to elaborate the relationship between aesthetics in everyday experience and aesthetics in cultural representations, but to articulate a different kind of perspective on the social itself.

2: The aesthetic in sociological thinking

The aesthetic has always been a source of suspicion for sociology, even though numerous canonical sociologists have seen it as central to their concerns. But the dramatic growth of cultural sociology – with its interests in music, the visual arts, writing and performance – has posed the question of the aesthetic with new urgency. Cultural sociology now forms the largest section of the American Sociological Association and is also seen as a distinctive strength in British sociology (see the general discussion in Hanquinet and Savage 2015). Expert scholars in art history, musicology, and the visual media have long been attracted to sociological perspectives which inform much of the critical reflections in their disciplines.

Yet for all this long history of engagement, there has also been deep suspicion between sociology and the aesthetic. With a few exceptions (Wolff 1981, 1983; Willis 1998, 2014; Born 1995; 2010; 2011; Born, Lewis, and Straw 2016), calls for engagement between sociology and aesthetics are no sooner raised than submerged (e.g. Welsh 1996; de la Fuente 2000). The standard sociological repertoire involves reading ‘behind’ the aesthetic, seeking to use sociological analysis to reveal more about the hidden aspects of sociality than might be apparent from the play of the aesthetic alone. The aesthetic is, characteristically not to be taken at face value but is a social ruse which hides social powers. This ‘reductive’ move towards the aesthetic is embedded most famously – and in some eyes notoriously – in Bourdieu’s (1984) ‘social critique’. The standard reference point here is Kant’s conception of the aesthetic as ‘disinterested’ and as differentiated from the pragmatic. Debunking this presupposition is a central feature of the sociological agenda.

This approach is most clearly articulated by Bourdieu in *Distinction*, where the critique of the 'pure aesthetic' is rendered at great length and in numerous registers, though with one fundamental propelling force, of resisting the 'face value' of art itself. Bourdieu's move here is to see the aesthetic as dependent on prior social organization which makes aesthetic judgment possible and legitimate:

Thus the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, *Einfühlung*, which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code. (Bourdieu 1984: 3)

In fact, this sociological perspective has a wide provenance which extends well beyond Bourdieu. There are a number of reasons for arguing that it is too confining and that we need to extend our sociological repertoire to adequately grasp not only the cognition, decoding operation implying testing knowledge (belonging to existing cultures and identities) but also the affective/attachment component, the existential identifying attitude, the creativity and development of new meanings/associations that cultural production can activate and which can have as a consequence the practical dissociation from cultural background of origins, existing knowledge, pre-existing identities, etc. In other words, grasping the aesthetic sociologically means not only moving beyond the 'pure aesthetic', but identifying the other different aesthetic registers in social relations and life. This focus is particularly of interest for us in considering the role that aesthetics plays vis-a-vis social change. We begin by illustrating the five different angles identified in the literature thus far which, offer a sense of the different stakes which the aesthetic opens up for sociological analysis.

Firstly, aesthetics as lucrative engine/soul of contemporary capitalism. It has become a common argument that the aesthetic has escaped the confines of the 'beaux arts' which most (even if contentiously) fits Kant's conception of disinterestedness and is now much more widely diffused. The underpinnings of these arguments are numerous, many of them linked to the post-modernist currents from the 1980s which argued that culture was fully implicated, in a knowing way, in flows of pastiche, and no longer had critical distance from capitalism. This theme was taken up by Featherstone in his arguments about 'the aestheticisation of everyday life' (see de la Fuente 2000) and has been extensively pursued by those seeing the mobilization of the aesthetic as increasingly central to the routine organisation of capitalist production. Thus, Nigel Thrift has examined the role of 'glamour' and 'colour' as central to capitalist innovation:

Economies must be engaging: they must generate or scoop up interests and then aggregate and amplify them in order to produce value, and that must involve producing various mechanisms of fascination. In other words, the economy is not, and never has been, about a dismal science of simple profit and loss (although many of its effects are no doubt dismal). (Thrift 2008: 9)

This theme is also evident in Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of 'the new spirit of capitalism', who argue that the power of critique and creativity are now embedded within routine circuits of capitalism today. The aesthetic has become omnipresent and cannot be confined to art galleries, or the consecrated spaces of high culture. This current is also implicated in the remaking of artistic identity itself. Rather than artists seeking a 'pure' role, they embrace a social and engaged position, for instance as 'precarious' figures (Papastergiadis 2014).

Secondly, aesthetics as empowering subjectivities and identities. As the papers in this section indicate, the range of ideas here move from interests in 'affect' (from Dewey 1958[1934]; Hennion 2007; DeNora 2000; Deleuze and Guattari 1985) or in the thinking of Jacques Rancière (1991; 2004; 2007a; 2007b; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; see Papastergiadis 2014). The sociological purchase of this work arises from their innovative approach to questions of agency, in which the aesthetic is seen to be socially and politically productive rather than rendered as disinterested and hence passive or instrumental in terms of social positioning. Rather than agency being defined as the breaking free of structural determinants, aesthetics alerts us to the creativity involved in routine social practice. As Papastergiadis summarizes, 'Art is therefore not a distinct way of understanding our perceived reality, but a modality that is primarily attuned to the process of sensory awareness, and in certain forms Rancière claims that it is a means of breaking down pre-existing habits of association and categories of classification' (Papastergiadis 2014: 16). For Rancière (2009a), the aesthetic regime – which encompasses a broad selection of currents and art genres as diverse as Realism, Romanticism, abstraction in painting, etc. – has the merit of eliminating the dominant hierarchies of value/worth of the representative regime and establishing the idea that anything sensible, when illustrated in a particular way could become intelligible and captivating, and could open up to a new way of being/seeing. Aesthetic regimes thus creatively allow innovations and the prospect of change, where change is not seen in epochal terms as an external condition of social life, but as imbricated in the everyday and routine.

Thirdly, the aesthetics of materiality. The material turn in sociology also brings with it the question of aesthetics. Amin (2014) articulates this through discussing the relationship

between infrastructure and sociality, drawing on Larkin's (2013) concept of 'aesthesis', that is:

a sensory landscape that both extends and works on human being and sociality in its dwelling. Here, the circulation of sights, smells, sounds and signs, or the assemblage of buildings, technologies, objects and goods, are seen to shape social behaviour as well as affective and ethical dispositions. (Amin 2014: 139)

For Larkin (2013),

Infrastructures operate on multiple levels concurrently. They execute technical functions (they move traffic, water, or electricity) by mediating exchange over distance and binding people and things into complex heterogeneous systems and by operating as contextualized forms that have relative autonomy from their technical function. To conceive of this operation as a form of poetics in the Jakobsonian sense is to rearrange the hierarchy of functions so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant. (Larkin 2013: 235–6)

Materiality involves patterning and arranging which raise fundamental aesthetic questions.

Fourthly, aesthetics as pragmatic *modus operandi*. The material move described above has articulated with arguments that astute description is crucial for social analysis, and can be associated with a relational perspective (see in general terms Savage 2009). Martin (2011) has pursued this argument through stressing the judgments which people make in their daily lives, which necessarily involve aesthetic judgments linking social with aesthetic qualities, likes and dislikes. Building on the recognition of change as incremental and routine, recent decades have seen a turn away from conventional sociological 'depth

models' which attribute agency to underlying factors or causes. This pervasive perspective is associated with a 'representational' paradigm, in which the aesthetic is confined to the image which overlays 'true' social processes. Martin argues that this characteristic separation between image/icon and reality, signifier and signified disables sociological analysis. John Levi Martin (2011) has pursued this line of logic most thoroughly through insisting, in the lineage of Chicago school pragmatism, that agents deploy relational judgments which are thereby aesthetic in their daily lives.

Fifthly, aesthetics as revealing patterns. The aesthetic increasingly figures methodologically as a means of understanding and interpreting patterns in data. Conventionally, sociological methodology was suspicious of visualizations and has preferred to deal with numerical or textual assemblages. The rising interest in big data allied with descriptive methods such as social network analysis and multiple correspondence analysis has, however enhanced the role of visualisations, in which aesthetic judgements become significant in allowing skilful rendering of pattern (see e.g. MacKenzie et al. 2015). This interest in visualization extends to the increasing prominence of infographics and visual devices to articulate the messages of research.

What these five points indicate is that the aesthetic saturates the social in a form which problematizes conventional understandings of it as lying outside the fabric of routine or ordinary life. Rather than the aesthetic permitting an external, 'disinterested' critique of convention, it in fact is fully implicated in the social itself; aesthetic judgments are part of everyday routine and are affected by one's location and embeddedness in a particular culture and social milieu, and play a key role in orienting action. This recognition demands that we move beyond a standard 'modernist' aesthetic in which the 'pure' artist is

positioned as a detached force standing at the cultural vanguard and leads us to recognize that the aesthetic is fully social.

However, this argument poses the challenge of what then, is distinctive about the aesthetic? Does it become coterminous with the social itself? To explore this issue further we turn to critique the modernist conception of the aesthetic through reflecting on the potential of Martin's pragmatist conception of field analysis.

3: Beyond the modernist aesthetic

These five currents we have identified challenge the standard sociological move of critiquing the Kantian perspective of disinterestedness. Yet we need to recognize the power and appeal of this modernist aesthetic in order to more effectively understand the issues at stake. The dominant approach to the aesthetic in sociology draws on the modernist motif of the aesthetic as compensation for the loss of the 'will to power'. This is the standard rendering of the aesthetic in modernist literature, for instance as explored in the novels of Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust. In these accounts, the aesthetic sensibility is a compensation for the lack of worldly power, and can in certain respects be seen as redemptive in permitting insight which is denied to those busied by the pursuit of daily life. It is hence rendered as predominantly individualised and represented in the figure of the 'artist'. Here the aesthetic is rendered as anti-instrumental, and hence plays into standard intellectual divisions between the 'two cultures', science and the humanities, and so forth. Through this conception of the aesthetic, the possibility for sociology to define itself in

contrary ways as the analysis of the worldly everyday is also opened up but at the cost of developing a fully aesthetic orientation towards the social itself.

This perspective registers the aesthetic in passing, and not fundamentally as the stuff of social life. Even those sociologists who seek a more elaborated framework nonetheless draw on this perspective. The most important example of this is Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital which emphasises its separation from economic capital with which it is held to be in tension. As Hanquinet et al. (2014) discuss, several aspects of Bourdieu's approach assume a modernist framing of the aesthetic. His emphasis on the Kantian aesthetic, which underpins cultural capital, as exemplifying a form of distance and abstraction from daily life, and thereby implicated in modes of artistic abstraction is indicative of this. He further pursues this approach through emphasizing the difference between those pursuing strategies within the field – artists and intellectuals in the case of those within the cultural field – and those seeking to bring in heteronomous, often market, principles from the outside. There is a sense, therefore, in which Bourdieu's analysis remains premised on the avant-garde as intellectual cadre and as bearers of a pure, other worldly aesthetic. One result of this position was the way that Bourdieu did not easily recognize the aesthetic orientations of the working and popular classes who were held to be defined by the 'culture of necessity' (see the discussion in Bennett et al. 2008).

Bourdieu's analysis of the aesthetic, for all its power has been criticized as reductive and as inattentive to the powers of aesthetic judgments in social life (e.g. Born 2010). Recently, John Levi Martin (2011) has sketched out a more elaborated aesthetic through taking up Bourdieu's concept of the field and giving it a more pragmatist inflection. In rebutting the standard social scientific motif of reading behind people's words in search of what they

'really' mean, he insists on the value of sociology focusing around a concern with fields of 'organized striving'. In developing this point he recovers a pragmatist mode of sociology – which he places in contrast to standard instrumentalist framings which dominate sociology:

When 'we get it' – when we experience the artistic beauty of a painting, say – we focus on the 'it', the object in question, and the beauty as the quality of this object. But when we get the 'it' we get the 'we' as well, in the sense of establishing a presumption of like-mindedness from those of similar taste. The aesthetic experience is inseparable from perceived entry into some group. (Martin 2011: 203)

In Martin's thinking, partly influenced by gestalt, the social is fully laden with the saturation of social and natural judgments, so that the aesthetic is fully evident in all kinds of social judgments. Or to put this another way, the aesthetic is fully immanent in social life, rather than a transcendental as in the Kantian tradition (and as critically reworked by Bourdieu).

Here, we would like to build on the motif of walking (but it could equally be running as in 'walking faster', or travelling as in 'walking in an unusual context') introduced above and place this and the aesthetic as an extension of Back's (2007) call for sociology as 'the art of listening'. For walking challenges the Kantian aesthetic given its embodied character, and we therefore want to make the claim that it offers a striking and unusual way of showing how a sociological aesthetic can be invoked. Also, the multiple representations of walking (or running or travelling) in literature allow us to discuss aesthetics as a continuum between everyday experience and cultural production.

4: An aesthetic sociology of walking

Walking offers an intriguing opportunity for reflecting on what a more fully social aesthetic might look like. From a conventional Cartesian perspective, walking is a bodily movement separated from the intellect centred in the head. Walking's fundamentally instrumental properties meshes with its lack of overt aesthetic display. Of course Tim Ingold (2011) reminds us that humans are distinctive animals not only because of our distinctive mental capacities (as Cartesians emphasize) but also because of the bodily differentiation between our hands and feet. All other four limbed animals have relatively similar hands and feet, compared to humans who see a marked differentiation, with hands becoming the limbs of choice for touch, feeling and manipulation, and feet becoming the limbs which we move around on. The rite of passage when a toddler starts to walk is one of the early – though compared to the act of talking, little commented on – entry points into the social. And so, just as in much modern thinking, Cartesian mental capacities are elevated over the human body, so also the tool bearing hands are prioritized over feet. Those who cannot, for whatever reason, walk, are deemed 'disabled', so emphasizing the routine expectation that to be able to walk is a marker of humanity.

Walking itself is a common reference point within modernist thinking, yet one which is typically hidden, a kind of 'absent presence' within the social. For Simmel and Benjamin the 'flaneur' occupies a distinctive vantage point from which to view the promise, spleen, and tragedy of the modern city (see famously Frisby 1988). The gendered walker offers a powerful motif for unravelling the dynamics of sexual relations (notably through the association of prostitution with the 'street walker') and see more generally Wolff's (1985) famous essay on the 'flaneuse'. The theme of walking has been taken as a device to unsettle

linear modes of thinking by writers as diverse as Nietzsche (whose quote that ‘a sedentary life is the real sin against the Holy Spirit. Only those thoughts that come by walking have any value’ has a certain fame) and de Certeau (2011).

It is in Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* that we can lay a platform for the social scientific arguments of this paper. His argument is that the aesthetic is not about withdrawal from the flow of social time, allowing the detached artist to observe from the side of the stage, but instead is fundamentally engaged with practice, or what Deleuze (2008) identifies as ‘the search’. Here, we see an affiliation to Martin’s account of the aesthetic as bound up with ‘organized striving’. This therefore leads Proust to dispute the idea of time when understood as the simple passage of events, but rather directs him to emphasize it as a flow. Within this flow, it is the contingent switches between alternative possibilities that inheres to the ‘search’ – i.e. becoming – itself. Revealingly for our purposes, he pursues this motif through contrasting two walks, first apparent to the narrator early in the book, and to which he returns frequently at later points to provide the bearings for the narrator’s ‘search’ and ‘apprenticeship’.

For there were, in the environs of Combray, two ‘ways’ which we used to take for our walks, and they were so diametrically opposed that we would actually leave the house by a different door according to the way we had chosen.... But above all I set between them, far more than the mere distance in miles that separated one from the other, the distance that there was between the two parts of my brain in which I used to think of them.... And this distinction was rendered still more absolute because of the habit we had of never going both ways on the same day, or in the course of the same walk, but the ‘Meseglise way’ one time and the ‘Guermantes

way' another, shut them off, so to speak, far apart from one another and unaware of each other's existence, in the airtight compartments of separate afternoons. (Proust 1981: 146–7)

In this celebrated passage ruminating on his childhood pastimes, Marcel Proust lays out his account of how these two walks simultaneously encapsulate a unique temporality and distinctive aesthetic natural components (the scent of lilac trees and the hawthorns on the plains which comprised the Meseglise way, compared to the river scenery of the Guermites way), but also each bore an unmistakable social tone: the bourgeois associations of the Meseglise way, competing with the aristocratic connotations of the Guermites way. Here we see how Martin's analysis of the aesthetic as linking a taste for 'natural' phenomenon with a simultaneous claim on social identification. Proust emphasizes that these social meanings are however, opaque, and bear different temporal registers. The Meseglise way is more immediately accessible. It is shorter, and traversed by known bourgeois figures in the narrator's childhood such as Swann and M. Vinteuil. By contrast,

As for the Guermites, I was to know it well enough one day, but that day had yet to come; and during the whole of my boyhood, if Meseglise was to me something as inaccessible as the horizon, which remained hidden from sight, however far one went, by the folds of a landscape which no longer bore the least resemblance to the country round Combray, Guermites, on the other hand, meant no more than the ultimate goal, ideal rather than real of the 'Guermites way'. (Proust 1981: 146)

It was only in his maturing years that the narrator becomes transfixed by the aristocratic salons of the Guermites. What is at stake here is the 'search' as a unique subjective journey in both time and space (Deleuze 2008). This is both necessarily abstracted from the

landscape, yet also inextricably tied to it and as a fundamentally and simultaneously aesthetic and social process, which involves judgments between possible avenues. It is a social, aesthetic and subjective process at the same time because the inputs for imagination are based and limited by the physical landscape available to, and covered by, the 'walker'. Proust's house is in fact located in a wealthy well-kept countryside which gives access to both a bourgeois and to an aristocratic area, both characterized by different natural, architectural, environmental, qualities. These visible elements are interpreted/judged in relation to the social context (bourgeoisie versus aristocratic) and in relation to the personal search of the walker, which is affected by his memory, affects, aspirations, etc.

As between the Meseglise Way and the Guermantes Way, the entire work consists in establishing *transversals* that cause us to leap from one of Albertine's profiles to the other, from one Albertine to another, from one word to another, without ever reducing the many to the One, without ever gathering up the multiple into a whole, but affirming the original unity of precisely that multiplicity, affirming without uniting *all* these irreducible fragments. (Deleuze 2008: 82)

The walk is here registered as a particular way of rendering time as non-linear, a form of 'becoming', of defining a complex social which is not easily chopped up into discrete pieces of time, or particular locations. The walk is both concrete, physical, practical and 'actual', yet it can also be rendered through representations (meanings which emerge from this embodied immersion in the landscape, and the travelling of the mind through other times and spaces belonging to memory, thanks to the inputs received by the physical landscape) which involve an aesthetic (a way of coherently organizing/associating some physical forms to specific meanings/representations) which provides meaning to this activity. Walking is

both repetitive and yet also marks passages. Within this frame, walking might be used to develop a way into a form of analysis where the aesthetic is fundamentally intertwined with the social registers, and which challenges the priority given to instrumental conceptions of the social.

Walking is multivalent in its social significance. It can be both intense as well as utterly routine. It can be done in utter concentration as well as in a state of distraction. But more than this, we argue that it offers an aesthetic rendering of sociality itself, through offering a critical response to three dominant spatial metaphors which underpin conventional sociological models: (a) structure (b) stage; and (c) tournament. Dominant forms of sociological theorizing draw on one or other of these, all of which reduce sociality to a particular format. The aesthetic, however, allows walking to be rendered in ways which allow distinctive linkages and extensions, through defining them as implicated in 'the search'.

Structural approaches are most familiar in classical sociological theory. They conceive of the social as akin to some kind of a building. This perspective is manifest in Marx's 'base and superstructure' metaphor, and in a different register in linguistic structuralist theory which was highly influential during the 1960s and 1970s. Even though unpopular now, in a weaker form structural forms proliferate in 'depth models' which seek to establish the 'foundations', 'underpinnings' or 'causes' of social relations. It can be argued that forms of 'social constructionism' retain the sense that social is put in place ('constructed') and hence comes to act as some kind of 'building-like entity' (even if it is allowed that the forces which put this building in place were contingent, that the building will not last for all time, etc.). The same building metaphor is also at work in the 'deconstruction' of post-structuralist and

postmodern approaches such as the one developed by Derrida which still direct their attention and efforts to metaphorical depth models though to denounce how they acritically govern Western languages and consciousness.

Over the past three decades, critics of structuralist models have seized on the 'dramaturgical' as offering an alternative way of understanding the social. Here, social life is seen as akin to performing a play or acting. The wellspring here was in interactionist sociology, notably Goffman's work, in which the social world was seen as defined by the 'presentation of self' and the acting out of social roles and relationships in specific contexts to audiences. This idea of the social as stage, has, however proliferated as a means of recognizing the fluidity of social relationships: it is evident in Judith Butler's emphasis on performativity, or in the emphasis on enactment within actor network theory. Indeed, dramaturgical references in sociology are ubiquitous, as illustrated by the widespread reference to people as 'actors'.

The dramaturgical approach is complemented by the tournament model of the social which can be traced to Max Weber's emphasis on the pervasiveness of striving and competitiveness in social life. The contemporary repercussions of this model are many, notably in the dominance of game theory and rational choice theory, which are premised on the strategic and rational agent striving within a defined game to maximize their advantage. Here the social arises out of a struggle for advancement. The popular field theory variant elaborated by Bourdieu offers a popular version of this.

We have undoubtedly caricatured these three models, but our analytical point is that none of them can adequately grasp the sociological significance of walking. The mobility of walking – but it could also be running or travelling depending on the speed or reason of

walking – challenges a structural perspective. One can walk different ways around a fixed building (even allowing for the scope of architectural form to construct preferred ‘routes’). Walking challenges dominant models of the social derived from the stage and the tournament: it is not fully social in so far as this focuses on direct communicative interaction (face to face or otherwise), nor does it involve performances to an audience, nor is it obviously competitive. Walking opens up a different kind of understanding of the social to that which is permitted through these metaphors: it registers switching points between social circuits in which the contingent is rendered as aesthetic, and hence meaningful in identifying choices within a search. It thus opens the possibility of a non-instrumentalized, existential conception of social relations along the lines consistent with forms of network analysis and field theory.

Let us return to Proust’s writing to bring out the fundamental difference between a walking model of the social and the dramaturgical and tournament models. Both these latter rely on metaphors which deploy a linear idea of time: there is a clear start and stop to the play and the sporting contest, and both rely on a distinctive spatial arena in which the dramatic act or the contest takes place. Walking, in Proust’s terms, problematizes these assumptions and leads to a looser, yet more meaningful and felt experience of life. Walking is bound up with ‘the search’, as a form of jostling with, reflecting on, and dealing with contingent choices which link natural and social phenomena and which pose questions of aesthetic judgment at their very heart.

5. Social aesthetics as in tension between everyday experience and cultural production

The last intellectual step is to recognize that the social aesthetics defined as above does not only operate in everyday practices. We also need to recognize the play of representation, in which cultural objects and devices render the pragmatic and everyday 'at a distance'. We have already shown this indirectly in the previous session by drawing on Proust's account of walking, and it is this rendering of walking as a form of 'search' which we see as a further essential aspect of the social aesthetic. The process of engagement with the landscape described by Proust in his two walks, which arrives to us in a mediated form, allows the everyday experience to become intelligible to us because we can identify with the process; not with the specific walks, but with other walks of ours, in other landscapes, perhaps at a different rhythm, motivated by other reasons. Through this play of representation, the social world is rendered.

This double way of reading Proust from a social aesthetic perspective – his aesthetic experience of 'reading' the material world he encounters during the two walks as well as the aesthetic used in the novel in order to 'elevate' the walks to evocative journeys through times and social spaces/classes, capable in turn to mobilise readers' experiences – could be extended to others such as Sillitoe (1959), Murakami (2009) and Szymborska (A thank-you note in 2000 poem collection), just to mention a few examples of authors who have used the physical corporeal dimension of walking, running, in concrete landscapes, to move through different times and spaces with the mind and develop ideas and identities. These examples provide us with the opportunity to link the social aesthetics in everyday action described by Martin, with the potential for social innovation articulated by Rancière. Through this way, a powerful aesthetics in art/cultural production recognizes the potential

to inspire associations/new meanings in the audience, making imaginations travel through times and spaces, and feed subjective searches allowing innovation and improvisation. The grounding in concrete embodied experiences seems key to achieve innovative meanings.

In pursuing these themes, we see the intellectual encounter between Bourdieu and Rancière as a highly fertile one. Rancière (2004) calls a 'sensorium' the idea that anything sensible, when addressed from the right angle, could captivate the mind, create attachment, and inspire a new way of being. The sensorium of Rancière's aesthetic regime negates any necessary relationship between form and content, and treats the infinite arrangements of this relation as the proof of the equality of all subjects. But while Rancière interprets the 'sensorium' as a break from everyday experience (see also Tanke 2010), generally needing a powerful cultural production/innovation by artists/intellectuals able to inspire different ways of seeing a subject, we resist this modernist framing which is premised on a distinctive artistic subject position. We think it is more fertile to place it on a continuum that goes from everyday life to (high) cultural production, and vice-versa, and assume that the possibility of emancipatory change as well as conservative responses depending on the assumptions about the cultural object, attachment to it, values, goals, which in turn depend on social embeddedness and quality of new inputs.

6. Engaging with social aesthetics

This special section comprises three papers, each illustrating one or more aspects (or related aspects) of the social aesthetics we have outlined above. Robbins' intellectual history of the debates between, and changing milieux of, Bourdieu and Rancière, in the

period from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s, conveys the productive tension between their social theories vis-à-vis aesthetics. It also provides an illustration of factors such as assumptions, experiences, etc. that influence outcomes of engagement with any cultural practice or object. In particular, the paper provides insights of why and how the two scholars, despite being motivated by similar aims and values (i.e. both Bourdieu and Rancière are concerned with inequalities and both share a love for art) and sharing a similar engagement with their cultural practice (sociology/philosophy), ended up with two opposite social readings of cultural production vis-à-vis class positioning and social change. Bourdieu sees equality as the final goal, something which is yet to be achieved due to dominant groups controlling material and symbolic resources, and his empirical research depict dominated classes as impoverished culturally as well as materially. He interprets his role as sociologist as that of unveiling the underlying mechanisms maintaining the status quo. Rancière on the other hand sees equality as the starting point (everyone is equally intelligent, and has the same potential to strive in terms of intelligence when put in the situation to do so) and searches for empirical cases in which people were treated as equal (i.e. his 1991 publication *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*). He opposes the separation between apparent form and underlying substance/content. In other words, if someone is able to produce an emancipatory cultural object or practice (i.e. fell running), this is equivalent to the emancipation of the subjects involved, and it is the proof of their equality and intelligence. Rancière's approach is a powerful illustration of how and why aesthetics is profoundly a sociological subject, and he is much less ambivalent than Bourdieu regarding the potential value of working-class aesthetics. However, as pointed out by Robbins, while Rancière criticizes the key role attributed by Bourdieu to sociologists, he seems to attribute the same exclusive power to great artists. In the previous section, by putting aesthetics in as

part of a tension between everyday and art, we allow different types of cultural objects to perform the same emancipatory function, not just 'art'. We lean on Bourdieu also when we specify that, depending on the social background, values, aspirations, etc. of the person engaging with a cultural object – no matter how great the aesthetic value of the cultural object – a conservative attitude (in the sense of defending the status quo) could still emerge, no matter how imaginative the trip across time and space afforded by the encounter with the cultural object.

Nettleton's paper on fell running in the Lake District powerfully illustrates the embodied and pre-reflective nature of the aesthetic experience of fell running, where the sensory and, above all, movement is the key element producing the aesthetic experience. This case study on fell running is also relevant for understanding other cultural practices which involve movement, and full engagement with the landscape, or *landscappen* – to use Ingold's term to define the making of the landscape with movement, becoming part of it. It could be walking in more man-made landscapes as in the case of Proust, or practising yoga in a gym. In both cases the (imaginative) making of the landscape is afforded by the support of the place, and engagement of the body. However, Nettleton's focus on fell running presents powerful ideas about the productivity and effectiveness that this practice seems to have. Nettleton's case study not only illustrates an alternative narrative to the heritage industry's, started by the Romantic poets' and perpetrated by urban elite's infatuations with the Lake District, it also describes the appropriation by fell runners of their land, generating varied senses rooted in movement, compared to the distant, contemplative enjoyment of the picturesque by poets, artists, etc. It is an example of social emancipation of a group being able to give an expression to their way of engaging with their land, producing existential

capital. Nettleton's account provides an excellent illustration of Dewey's theory that meanings emerge through an interaction between organism and environment, to which she adds the pragmatic somaesthetic: through movement fell runners can reach an overwhelming sense of unity with the landscape so that the separation between organism and environment can dissolve.

Benzecry's comparison of two different cases of object attachment, one to a 'highbrow' cultural object (opera) and the other one to an object of everyday culture (football jerseys) which both undergo change, illustrates that similar dynamics encompass everyday practices as well as high culture. The paper illustrates the similarity of consumers' actions in relationship to these cultural objects, and the central role that narratives play in both subject- and object-stabilization as consumers/audiences search for self-congruency in their long-term engagement with cultural objects. These case studies reinforce the placement of aesthetics on a continuum between everyday and art. Also, the paper suggests how both opera and football jerseys are the result of a constellation of mediations which are produced in the substitution/adaptation process by art practitioners to recapture fans' 'original' affect, and in the consequential adjustments of their fans. The article conveys the view that the aesthetic is distributed across these various mediations. Different groups of fans pay attention to different aspects of the overall change, depending on their assumptions, values, etc. The contribution of this paper to our understanding of the aesthetics is therefore not only pointing to the similar processes concerning opera and football jerseys in terms of attachment to cultural objects, especially when undergoing change, but also to the fact that fans respond to different aesthetic elements distributed on a continuum (assemblage) of mediations that constitute each cultural object. This reinforces

the idea that the aesthetic is a continuum spanning mundane aspects of life (i.e. the chit-chat in the hall of an opera theatre) and more abstract aspects of cultural production (i.e. singing), and this continuum is constituted by mediations and interactions. Emotional attachment can occur in relation to any of this mediation.

In the early Twenty-first century the relationship between sociology and the aesthetic has a new urgency. Although these three papers are different, we none the less can see them all putting the social and the aesthetic in more effective tension with each other than is usually the case in sociological analysis. This special section reflects on how 'the aesthetic turn' offers rich resources for a sensitive sociology to explore the challenges of contemporary sociality. Grasping this possibility requires us to reconfigure our understanding of the relationship between sociology and arts and humanities disciplines, and requires us to see the aesthetic in non-reductive terms. This requires us to move beyond standard tropes which see the aesthetic in instrumental terms as a resource, simply as a kind of cultural capital, and instead to see the aesthetic as immanently located within the social. The aim is therefore to seize the growing interest in elaborating a distinctive aesthetic sociology which arises out of post-Bourdieuian debates and which seeks to avoid reducing the aesthetic to a product of social relationships which are somehow deemed to be 'deeper' or more 'fundamental'.

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