

# Are you now or have you ever been a bourgeois philosopher?

Michael Wayne, *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014. 226 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 1 47251 134 8.

This book intends to proffer a Marxist or, more specifically, 'anti-bourgeois' reading of Kant's critical project and the third *Critique* in particular, and to draw out the political value of the aesthetic as a 'critical communicative act in a sensuous imaginative form'. 'Bourgeois' here generally describes that Kantian scholarship which is 'constitutionally incapable' of interrogating the historical and class-conditioned basis of Kant's project, and tends to read it as a static philosophical system, missing what Wayne perceives as a 'more unstable', dynamic and proto-materialist critical interrogation of subjectivity itself. This is an ambitious project indeed, and Wayne begins by making a series of further distinctions between his project and other 'Kantian-Marxist'

political-philosophical positions. These he subdivides into three areas – the dominant 'liberal bourgeois tradition' (in which he, perhaps oddly, includes such anti-bourgeois thinkers as Deleuze, Lyotard and Rancière, albeit as a radical subgroup within this tradition), a Kantian-Marxist tradition which fails to be sufficiently critical of the positivism and dualism in the first critique, and an 'orthodox' Marxist reading, which sees Kant as inherently contradiction-bound, and thus reinforces, even if it rejects, the 'bourgeois' interpretation of Kant that Wayne believes to be dominant to this day.

For Wayne, a more authentic anti-bourgeois understanding of Kant will emerge once we place aesthetic experience back at the heart of the critical project, allowing us to reframe broader political issues of freedom, community, reification and the spectacle. This 'red Kant' will negate the dialectical need to turn idealism 'on its head' in Marx's famous formulation – certainly saving a lot of philosophical labour, and, for Wayne, allowing a thoroughgoing critique of the bourgeois conception of subjectivity based on Kant's writings alone. Wayne thus offers, for example, a productive account of how the Kantian aesthetic emerges out of a dynamic 'gulf' identified by Kant himself (with 'courageous honesty') between the technically practical and the morally practical, or Reason as determination and as (potential) freedom. Whilst previous ('bourgeois') Kantian scholars such as Paul Guyer have subsumed such contradictions under the identity of a unified transcendental subject, Wayne wants to re-emphasize how these gulfs or breaks are in fact symptoms of actual historical problems which Kant identifies in a proto-materialist manner. The



project as a whole is thus an attempt to philosophically critique a 'collapsed' modernity – where the majority of aesthetic experiences are subsumed under the 'functional ends' of commodity culture – by finding a critical conception of the aesthetic which escapes bourgeois utilitarianism or commodification. Chapter 3 ('The Aesthetic, the Beautiful and Praxis'), for example, stresses the importance of the *noumena* as a non-sensible idea of freedom and the role this plays in the methodological development of the critical project. Wayne builds upon this to provide compelling re-evaluations of the sublime, labour and metaphor – all read via the aesthetic – while juggling and briefly critiquing numerous Marxist and post-Marxist philosophies along the way (Lukács, Kracauer, Benjamin, Althusser). Given the breadth and volume of the post-Kantian philosophical history he wants to cover, Wayne's accounts are inevitably brief and, sometimes frustratingly, end up begging more questions than they answer. However, as high-level overviews they largely work well.

It is worth reflecting on the title of the book itself. Although Wayne acknowledges Robert Kaufman as the first to name and seriously delineate a 'red Kant', one senses a certain playfulness in the choice of title. The term 'red' as a political appellation of course has strong historical (and perhaps even quaint) connotations – a 'mid-century modern' example of political shorthand, which here signals the ironic juxtaposition of Kant's name (and all the innate conservatism that popularly connotes) with radical politics. It is a neat way to signal the intent of this book, as a counter-intuitive attempt to read Kant as a secret 'red' all along. Perhaps one is being led to expect a sort of McCarthy witch trial in reverse: a public grilling of those who ever professed to be Kantian Marxists with 'are you now or have you ever been a bourgeois philosopher?' But this of course begs a further question: as with McCarthy and his victims, is Wayne trying too hard to find 'redness' in Kant? Is the political description more projection than reality?

Despite the ironies of the title, the method revealed here is a not uncommon strategy in philosophical rereadings – if it is possible to retrieve something truly 'red' in Kant it will help us understand and even undo the wrong turn of subsequent political philosophy and create a new interpretation of Kant, different even to the previous 'red' readings which Wayne goes to such lengths to compartmentalize. Perhaps all philosophical 'returns' have this in common – something got lost, got misinterpreted, and it is this author's job to lead us back to the source

and take a different turn, find the right path. Kant already underwent a series of such 'returns' in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, for example with the 'left' and 'right' neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen or Ernst Cassirer, where what was at stake was what had been occluded by the narrow systematicity of the Kantian inheritance itself, or the possible grounding of experience and the value of historical knowledge.

But symptomatic of many such philosophical 'returns' (and this was the criticism of neo-Kantianism itself) is their frequent inability or unwillingness to address the specific conditions of the contemporary, or to confront the latent anachronism of, for example, addressing current political problems from an eighteenth-century philosophical point of view. The failure of neo-Kantianism – whether diagnosed by Heidegger, Husserl or Benjamin – was on the broadest level its inability to successfully identify and confront philosophical issues unique to their 'now', however they may be conceived. This is a problem that repeats itself within aesthetic theories that attempt to revive Kant: how relevant is Kant's own understanding of aesthetic experience to artistic or cultural experience in the contemporary world? How much can this enlightenment thinker – even if widely recognized for first articulating the core issues of a burgeoning modernity – tell us anything about art and aesthetic experience after modernity?

Despite the compelling account of an 'anti-bourgeois' Kant, ultimately variations of these two problems manifest themselves again in Wayne's project. First, there is the looming and largely unexplored question of what value this 'red Kant' has in terms of a contemporary philosophy of politics and/or the specific demands of our current political situation (framed either in general terms as 'late' or 'post' modernism; that is, as something radically different to the proto-modernity which Kant addressed, or in the more specific terms of a fully defined contemporary political situation). The contemporary here is defined only in vague, mournful terms ('the twilight of reason') or in more general Marxist terms (capitalism's violation of our species-being) whose contemporary relevance is not evaluated at length. Only briefly does Wayne signal a view of contemporary politics as 'the rise of cognitive capitalism, the culture industries, the rise of intellectual and symbolic labour and so forth...' Second – and perhaps more worryingly given the central role played within this political philosophy by aesthetic experience – there is little truly critical reflection on the conception of aesthetic

experience in the *Third Critique* or how this might need reworking in light of the subsequent historical development of art, art practices and aesthetic experiences since the 1790s. Perhaps this is an impossible task for a single book, but it is a consideration which is conspicuously absent once 'modern' art examples begin to play a role in the project.

So how is 'art' conceived here? Works of aesthetics or art theory are often judged, rightly or wrongly, on the art that appears within them, both what works are chosen (crudely, the quality and quantity of examples) and how art itself operates in relation to the philosophical method. In terms of quantity, the two extremes of course are Kant and Hegel – the *Third Critique* famously described no actual artwork in any detail (though a palace, a dinner party, Voltaire and a native American make passing appearances) whilst Hegel's mammoth *Aesthetics* overflows with the tangible manifestations of *Geist* through the ages, piling up, analysing and classifying its objects just like the national museums which were being constructed at the same time. For many post-Kantian philosophical positions, the relationship between writing and aesthetic production is so intimate that they need in fact to be adequate to each other and not mere 'illustration'. Hegel of course also conceives of the relationship between art and philosophy very differently – as self-reflection before philosophy, *Geist* taking material form on the way to fuller self-realization in philosophy. This introduces another key issue around the aesthetic and its role in modernity about which Wayne remains silent – despite his reckonings with Hegel, Adorno and Heidegger – namely the problem of the end of art as it has been variously conceived both in philosophy and in the avant-garde itself.

The first artwork makes an appearance just over a third of the way through the book, and, as with the title, one might feel that Wayne is deliberately going against expectation by picking an artwork which is non-canonical and perhaps even, for many, *artless*: the 1999 film version of *The Mummy*. Nearly all the examples after this are films. But, oddly, there is no consideration or rationale offered for the examples chosen, nor for the implicit insistence on these cinematic examples as the best exemplars of anti-bourgeois aesthetic practice. Even Kant's model of consciousness gets refracted, anachronistically, through film (Wayne feels that it 'is not unlike Hollywood continuity editing, where we move from long shot to medium shot while retaining in our minds the wider context'). Yet this project does not at any

point describe itself as a work of film theory. In fact, we soon come to realize that not only are nearly all the examples discussed films, but they are picked from a rather narrow spectrum that never travels very far from mainstream cinema (Disney, Danny Boyle, George Romero) or familiar twentieth-century *auteurs* (Buñuel, Hawks, Lang). There is no discussion of experimental, avant-garde or other alternative film practices (with the possible exception of Haneke's *Hidden*, but this is only briefly mentioned) or anything which might offer alternative models of cinematic practice. Nor is there any consideration of the historical context of film, as, for example, a discourse which develops in a specific relationship with technological modernity. The only non-cinematic artwork discussed in any detail is a painfully overfamiliar one, Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, around which debates from Foucault and psychoanalytic theory are rehearsed.

Furthermore, there is an issue with the ways in which Wayne utilizes his film examples here. They appear largely as philosophical metaphors based on a reading of their *content* (so *Little Nemo*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *Night at the Museum* offer, at the narrative level, a Kantian 'optical pedagogy' of the sublime, nature versus culture, power and miniaturization) and are rarely considered as issues of *form*. Where formal issues are considered (the sublime, the role of metaphor, and, briefly, defamiliarization) this is undertaken largely at the theoretical level. There is some account of opposing viewpoints within film theory (Eco's conventionalism versus cognitivism), but film itself as a formal, medium-specific or visual transformation in the history of human visibility, and the qualitative effects this may have had on subjectivity or aesthetic experience itself after Kant, are not really addressed. In short, one gets the sense that the examples appear based on subjective choice or because they usefully illustrate the red Kant thesis. In the end, this ambitious project to find a politically effective 'critical communicative act in sensuous imaginative form' is rather undermined by the narrowness and, in some cases, banality of examples. Of course revolutionary experiences can emerge from mainstream or middlebrow culture, but if we really want to 'extract an image from all the clichés and set it up against them', as Deleuze puts it, quoted here by Wayne, then we require a better model of the non-cliché in the first place.

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