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Melting Hardened Desires: Confronting the Far Right by Cultivating Reflective Taste

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**MELTING HARDENED DESIRES: CONFRONTING THE FAR RIGHT BY
CULTIVATING REFLECTIVE TASTE**

By

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B.S. Arizona State University, 2016

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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(in Communication)

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Prompted by the ascendance of the far right, this thesis reinterprets pertinent aspects of Kant's aesthetic philosophy to confront far-right political rhetoric. This aesthetic frame provides insights into the shortcomings of a predominant rational-deliberative rhetoric, new understanding of the resilience of far-right rhetoric, and imagines a cultivation of more open taste via reflective judgment to more effectively challenge this rhetoric and cultivates democratic practices.

Examining key contemporary discursive examples, philosophy, and rhetorical theory, I first argue that (neo)fascism cannot be "fact-checked" out of existence; indifference to traditional evidence means those who adhere to far-right politics are antagonistic to anything that contradicts what they feel to be true.

Leaning on Jenny Rice to locate sentimental aesthetics and hardened desire underwriting what some designate as the far-right's bullshit, I locate the power of these politics in cultivated resentment based in American historical, cultural, and temporal dissatisfactions. From this genealogy, I suggest that these dissatisfactions, which atrophy the democratic imagination and manifest authoritarian longings, produce dogmatic tastes and feelings that maintain and reinforce

themselves. These self-reinforcing dogmatic tastes and feelings help make far-right rhetoric resilient.

To contest this, I propose rhetoric that would *cultivate a prejudice for reflective judgment* in matters of aesthetic and political taste. If brought to engage with rich particulars that are difficult to subsume under preconceived convictions, people can become more accustomed to consider the specificity of situations. If this becomes habitual, then this habit can provide an indirect means of weakening far-right sentiments through greater openness to alterity.

To locate this possibility within existing far-right sentiments, the author revisits Hannah Arendt's examination of Adolf Eichmann. Through this, I locate a fascistic style of reflective judgment and empathy. Therefore, I argue this existent way of judging still offers a difficult yet necessary ground within far-right sentiments to build upon to foster democratic tastes, ethics, and practices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A CALL TO AESTHETICS IN AN AGE OF ASCENDANT FAR- RIGHT POLITICS

An Interpretation of “Aesthetics”

In regard to rhetorical projects confronting far-right politics, this work argues that a deliberative-rationalistic approach to rhetoric is insufficient, that an attraction to or taste for the far-right style contributes to this insufficiency, and that inculcating a taste for reflection within aesthetic preferences can open the possibility for undermining rightwing tastes and developing new and better ones. Without fully abandoning the traditional notions of rationality, credibility, and expertise, I argue for informing and creating rhetoric with taste and feeling as its basis to contest the ascendance of anti-democratic and authoritarian politics. My approach considers the aesthetic aspects of the far right in particular and in the United States more generally and suggests that such aesthetics may be contested.

At first glance, it may appear that aesthetics and political rhetoric have little relation to each other. What do shape, color, form etc. have to do with the real and pressing political questions of the day? Further, some may rightly caution that attention to aesthetic considerations, if detached from political concerns, risks being counterproductive to addressing such concerns. For example, analyzing the style of “tiki-torch” rallies, the formal qualities of neo-Nazi rituals, or the appeals of the imagery of phrases like “build the wall” risks drawing attention away from the lived sufferings of others. Rather than engage the symbolic trappings of anti-democratic discourses, this political moment demands material change. Indeed, Marx’s famous 11th thesis on

Feuerbach, “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, the point is to change it” may be applied to this context.¹ Criticism must have relevance to improving the world.

Concerns about the traditional disconnectedness of aesthetic matters from political matters in the West are not without warrant. If aesthetic considerations had little relation to politics, then it would be inadvisable to engage in aesthetic considerations because they would detract from political ones. Yet, by offering a broader and more nuanced consideration of the meaning of “aesthetic,” I hope to assuage if not extinguish such concerns. Moreover, I hope to display the inexorable link between aesthetic questions, (i.e. questions related to taste, attraction, and repulsion), and how people feel, act, and judge politically. I understand aesthetics, ethics, and politics to be enmeshed. Through their enmeshed character, I suggest it is possible and necessary to tackle far-right authoritarian and resentful politics through encouragement and discouragement of particular tastes. For example, Jeremy Engel’s *Politics of Resentment* persuasively describes the relatedness between resentful styles of rhetoric and material and political violence.² Also, at least as important as this is the cultivation of a reflective orientation to judgments of taste in general.³ Resorting to reflection when making judgments would, with any luck, open individuals to consideration of different tastes. I believe this approach to inculcating taste relative to judgment may even lead to “leaving behind” old tastes and adoption of new tastes. Such tastes include appreciating the complexities of particular happenings, respecting evidence to inform judgments, and valuing changes in one’s thoughts and practices.

¹ Karl Marx, *German Ideology*, (London: Electric Book Company, 2000), 170.

² Jeremy Engels, *The Politics of Resentment*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Cultivating reflection is a way to cultivate a taste for democratic discourse and practices that contest anti-democratic discourse and practices.

In this introduction, I discuss the aesthetic dimension of contesting far-right authoritarian politics and the need for cultivating a taste for reflection, followed by an outline of the subsequent chapters. I describe the terrain of taste following Kant and French philosopher Luc Ferry. From them, differences in taste become apparent. Differences in political taste need to be addressed, especially when some tastes are contrary to democratic discourse, ethics, and projects. The taste for anti-democratic, far-right politics that is prevalent today globally must be contested and changed to maintain democratic discourse and politics. With this need to cultivate different tastes, I locate the possibility of this through the *communicability* of taste with others. Discourse about taste can change habits by encouraging a reflective attitude. To sketch the complex terrain of taste, I then lean on Schiller and Marcuse to describe the understanding of aesthetics that informs this project.

Working from the communicability of rhetorical tastes, I sketch the rhetorical style of the American far right. Following Richard Hofstadter, I interpret this style as “paranoid.”⁴ I trace a history of right-wing paranoia from the beginnings of the United States, through the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president, to the contemporary situation. The paranoid right-wing style appears immunized against contrary interpretations, contributing to its resilience and impeding democratic discourse. To contest this paranoid dogmatic style, I argue the aesthetic appeal of this style needs to be challenged through the cultivation of habits of reflective judgment. One must

⁴ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Nov, 1964.

become open to changing tastes for changes to occur. Otherwise, it is too easy to maintain existing aesthetic inclinations, disinclinations, and their related politics.

The Communicability of Taste

Accordingly, if aesthetic considerations are at play in ethical judgments and motivate political behavior, then this aspect should be taken into consideration in communicative projects hoping to contest the neo-fascist tendencies. Moreover, qualitative political changes appear to necessitate changes in existing aesthetic preferences, the creation of new ones – in a word, aesthetic education toward more ethical being-in-the-world. More immediately, those who hope to contest far-right politics cannot presuppose that their opponents share their own taste for democracy. To use contemporary psychoanalyst Adam Phillip’s turn of phrase, many want to merely “fit in rather than create the taste by which they might be judged.”⁵ Applying this to the context of this project, this is to say that while it is easier to not engage in differences of political and ethical taste, especially when more “solid” questions like those of factuality are already difficult enough, it is more risky not to engage in this difficult yet necessary task of cultivating taste. When questions of ethico-political taste are insufficiently addressed, the possibility of meaningful communication with those whose tastes are problematic is, at best, limited if not impossible. To illustrate, it is unlikely that someone who is attracted to a US-Mexico border wall could even listen to, let alone be swayed by, “proper” ethical, political, and economic arguments against a wall, unless that attraction is contested aesthetically. More generally, without working to create the tastes that make possible meaningful reflection, opponents of neo-fascistic politics

⁵ Adam Phillips, “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Measure,” *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2006.

cannot even hope to challenge, let alone best, the appeal of such politics for those with sympathetic tastes.

In order to cultivate new tastes and a better form of aesthetic judgment to challenge far-right politics one must ask, “how might tastes change?” Or, “what are conditions for the possibility of changing people’s tastes?” Through experience, we know that people’s tastes do, in fact, change. From developing a disgust for saccharine foods when moving from childhood into adulthood, through the university student who comes to find the politics of her parents distasteful, to the parent who comes to prefer the style of more relaxed and conservative-fitting clothing over the eccentric, “fashion-forward,” and tight-fit of their youth, all of these examples show that tastes can, and do change.

Provisionally, an answer lies in the potential to communicate about matters of taste with one another. French philosopher Luc Ferry speaks to the challenging, though nevertheless possible communication of tastes. He cites Hume’s statement, “The great variety of Taste, as well of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under everyone’s observation.”⁶ This variety of tastes appears to preclude the possibility of communication across differences in taste. How can taste be communicated if there are so many differences in taste? Does the variety of taste mean that it is futile to engage in discourses of taste? Indeed, popular maxims like “to each his own taste,” or as Kant puts this saying, “everyone has their own taste,” imply that there is an impasse in conflicts of taste.⁷ There does not appear to be some proof that can *compel* someone to forfeit his or her tastes in favor of other ones.

⁶ Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, trans. Robert De Loaza, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 96.

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 165.

In situations where tastes conflict, it is common to lean on the notion of liberal tolerance in order to prevent or limit the fallout from these conflicts. Wendy Brown in *The Power of Tolerance* describes this idea and practice:

The whole idea of [tolerance of another's practices or beliefs] is that there are individual differences – beliefs, habits, *tastes*, ways of life, desires – that cannot be brokered at a rational, reasonable, political, moral level and *that do not need to be*.⁸

Religious tolerance is a classic example of tolerance. Though there are differences between Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, tolerance can allow these people to live together. There is no “overcoming” of these differences; all Hindus and Sikhs do not need to become Buddhists or some amalgamation of the other religions, not all Buddhists and Sikhs need to become Hindus and so on. While these differences may not be resolved “at a rational, reasonable, political moral level,” they do not need to be resolved for the continuity of a democratic society. In other words, for differences that cannot be resolved or overcome through the rational-ethical-political level, this conception of toleration can deal with such persistent differences. These differences may exist as long as they do not need to be resolved for democratic discourse and politics to continue. Tolerance can “smooth out” these differences without having to erase them.

But applying Brown's description of tolerance to conflicts of taste involving the far-right, creates a problem. For tolerance to “work,” i.e. handle differences without overcoming them to maintain a polity, such differences cannot threaten the foundations of the polity that make tolerance possible. Some tastes *need to be resolved* and cannot be brokered at a rational, reasonable, political, moral level. For example, tolerance cannot contain a conflict between a

⁸ Wendy Brown, and Rainer Forst, *The Power of Tolerance: A Debate*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 17. Emphasis Added.

taste for democracy, reflection, and evidence-based politics versus a taste for far-right authoritarian, dogmatic, and resentment politics. This is a conflict that cannot be brokered at a rational-ethical-political level *and* demands brokering, if not resolution. They are irreconcilable. If certain beliefs, habits, tastes, ways of life etc. are dogmatic (i.e. absolutely intolerant of differences and equally certain of their way), then deliberative democratic discourses decay.

This issue has an aesthetic dimension, the repulsion felt by far-right adherents to opposing and deliberative discourses. We hear this in attacks on the free-press (disparaging the “liberal” or “mainstream” media as “fake news”). The makeup and practice of tolerance need to be changed (to be maintained at all?) if it is to handle differences that cannot be brokered by deliberative-rationalistic discourse. In his “Repressive Tolerance,” Marcuse suggests “the practice of *discriminating tolerance* . . . shifting the balance between Right and Left by restraining the liberty of the Right . . . [thereby] strengthening the oppressed against the oppressors,” to address an analogous type of situation.⁹ Given that forces sympathetic to (if not a part of) the far-right hold the levers of governmental power, such a strategy does not seem pragmatic, even if desirable. Yet, provisionally, it seems worthwhile to imagine a *discriminating tolerance* that can address conflicts of taste that require brokering but cannot be managed through traditional rationalistic-deliberative discourse.

Related to this “soft spot” of tolerance, the inability to compel others and difficulty in communicating cross-aesthetic dispositions should not be confused with an impossibility of communication in these matters. Additionally, this does not necessarily mean that everyone has

⁹ Herbert Marcuse, postscript to “Repressive Tolerance,” in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965). Emphasis Added.

their own taste and therefore it is impossible to motivate changes in taste.¹⁰ Failure to reach aesthetic consensus should not be confused with a futility of communicating. Even in disagreement, the fact that we can communicate with each other in matters of taste makes possible changing (and improving) people's taste.¹¹ Short of this, it may ease such disagreements in taste, where tensions between tastes are deployed democratically instead of dogmatically. Indeed, Ferry cites several points in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to point to the communicability of taste: that "he [or she] who judges with taste . . . may take his [or her] sentiment to be generally communicable," that "the judgment of taste allows for a 'general communicability of sensation (pleasure, displeasure)'" , and that "one could even define taste as the faculty of judgment that makes our feeling about a given representation universally communicable."¹² Thus, the communicability of taste coincides with the possibility of changing people's tastes. Through discourse with others, it is possible to compare one's tastes with others, such that one might adopt another's taste. Also, individuals may develop different or new tastes, sentiments, and inclinations through the process of discourse.

To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of aesthetics to inform conflicts of taste that inform political practices, I turn to Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization*.¹³ On the meaning of "aesthetics" in the West, Marcuse writes that the term "originally designated 'pertaining to the

¹⁰ See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Section 56-57.

¹¹ It is important to note here that the idea of improving taste is itself an aesthetic evaluation. In other words, aesthetic judgments happen *within* taste; there is not "outside" of taste (in a broad sense) from which to judge about matters of taste. However, this is not to say that improving taste should mean, "making it more like mine." The intersubjective character of taste, the ability to "check" or "test" one's taste with and through others seems to be an important element of changing and improving people's tastes.

¹² Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus*, 96.

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

senses' with stress on their cognitive function.”¹⁴ This connotation of “aesthetics” refers to the “direct” sensation received by sense-apparatus organs (e.g. eyes). From this interpretation, such organs provide the material to be operated upon by the mind or brain. For example, the eyeball may sense the wavelength 460-nanometer wavelength that the brain then computes as the color blue. One can imagine a similar understanding of ‘aesthetic’ for the tongue tasting sugar that is imported by cognition to generate sweetness and so on. These sensations of blue may prompt further cognitions, such as the correlation of the color blue with the sky, the sweetness as stemming from an apple, or a high pitch with a bird’s song. All of these examples of aesthetics as sensation demonstrate a strict separation and ancillary role of aesthetics with perception and cognition. From this understanding, they are “lower” faculties because they merely provide the material, whether the 460 nanometers of light, sweetness, or high pitch, for a separate (and more important) perception and cognition. In essence, understanding aesthetics as sensation distills aesthetics down to a “raw,” immediately intuitive, and thoughtless apprehension of phenomena.¹⁵

However, according to Marcuse, the “raw” notion of aesthetics was nuanced with eighteenth-century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten’s philosophical introduction of the term proper changing “the meaning [of ‘aesthetics’] from ‘pertaining to the senses’ to ‘pertaining to beauty and art.’”¹⁶ The latter definition aligns closely with the prevalent understanding of aesthetics as separate from questions of politics and the association of aesthetics primarily referring to what happens in museums. By shifting aesthetics from the “dumb” ingestion of objects to a “higher” appreciation of beauty and art, aesthetics comes to be understood as a more

¹⁴ Ibid, 180.

¹⁵ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 181.

significant and meaningful aspect of the human condition. This is because with beauty and art, there is a greater exercise of psychological energy expended than in the more passive sense-perception under aesthetics understood as mere sensation. Correspondingly, aesthetics are understood as more active in the perception of phenomena than sensation under the yoke of cognition.

From such an active conception of aesthetics, granting that aesthetics inform political convictions and practices, then people are not simply passive in aesthetic practices. Therefore, there is some freedom and ability for aesthetic perception to change. The active character of aesthetic perception begins to disclose the possibility of changes in taste. For the context of contesting the far right, if aesthetics were merely passive and these informed far-right politics, then it would be nearly impossible and counterproductive to contest such aesthetics, and would mean contesting the far right on the aesthetic terrain would be a dubious tactic at best. However, this is not the case with an active conception of aesthetics. Though still difficult, an active conception of aesthetics allows for changes in aesthetic perception and taste. In other words, people have some agency in their aesthetic relation to others and the world. Thus, applying aesthetic agency to contesting far-right politics, the possibility of changing taste stems in part from the active character of aesthetics. This agency in aesthetics contributes to the possibility of cultivating a taste for reflective judgment, and thereby to the potential for changes in aesthetic taste for those sympathetic to far-right and anti-democratic politics.

Perhaps most importantly to the project of cultivating a taste for reflection are the rich aspects of attraction/repulsion, feeling/sentiment, and creativity that *orbit* aesthetic phenomenon under this updated conception. With art and beauty, something about an object may “draw us in” or “push us away.” We may be *moved* by it. For example, the viewer of Goya’s *Saturn*

Devouring His Son may be repulsed by the grotesque figure of Saturn in the painting. Or, in the overtly political realm, the attraction by some to the image produced by “Make America Great Again.” As experienced, the viewer does not experience the color wavelengths as raw sensation later cognitively derived at. Instead, the sensation is active. It immediately is taken up as perception and judgment with the image. Thereby, aesthetics is moved into a prominent aspect of the human condition.

More nuances are available yet under the umbrella of aesthetics. While aesthetics is clearly more than “mere sensation” offered in the first interpretation of the term, this does not mean it should be vague such that “everything is aesthetic” or is unbounded. In his *Letters on The Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller describes the term “aesthetic” as “much abused through ignorance.”¹⁷ Accordingly, he provides a means of understanding the depth of the term without subsuming it underneath other human faculties. Nor does he make it so vacuous that it could apply to everything.

Toward this, Schiller denotes four different aspects of phenomena—the physical, logical/rational, moral/ethical, and the aesthetic.¹⁸ These categories should be interpreted as a means of understanding, not to imply that these categories are strictly separated from each other.¹⁹ While sustenance can be physically satisfying, “food for thought” logically satisfying,

¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1993), FN 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, FN 146.

¹⁹ From this understanding of aesthetics, aesthetics are involved with the physical, logical, and ethical realms. Put differently, they are related but not reducible to physical, logical, and ethical considerations. For example, the style and attractive or unattractive character of food plays a part in how agreeable or disagreeable it is to us. This can influence how healthy our physical diet is. If someone is attracted to unhealthy food and repulsed by healthy food, then they are more likely to have an unhealthy diet because of a preference for what is agreeable over what is disagreeable.

and good character ethically satisfying, “the sheer manner of [someone’s] being” can be aesthetically satisfying.”²⁰ In other words, being attracted to, repulsed by, or indifferent to the *style* or *appearance* of another constitutes an aesthetic judgment of them.

Related to the aesthetic interlacing with the physical, logical, and ethical dimensions of existence, there are different ways of “taking up” each of these aspects of being. Some of these ways are better or worse than others. Physically, our diets may be healthier or less healthy. There is a multiplicity of ways to be physically healthy and unhealthy. Rationally, we may have better or worse consistency in understanding. Different people understand and enact logic differently. Some of us may be more or less ethical than another and understand ethical imperatives differently. And with regard to aesthetics, there are different tastes and ways of tasting, some better and some worse than others. With difference, gradation, and better/worse manifestations in each of these phenomenal categories, Schiller notes, “there is an education to health, an education to understanding [logic], an education to morality [ethics], *an education to taste and*

In other words, if one has distaste for what is healthy, it is more difficult and less likely that they will be healthy.

Logic and aesthetics are also interrelated. Some note an *appeal* of logic is its conciseness and elegance of form. Further, there is attractiveness for some toward consistency that logical thinking (at least) purports to uphold. Others are frustrated by the rigidity and sometime unforgiving demands of adhering to logical constraints. These are examples of aesthetic judgments about logic; there is a taste or distaste, feelings, and pleasure/displeasure, and stylistic evaluations of this phenomenal aspect.

Finally, a similar relationship holds true for aesthetics and ethics. This is the most pertinent relationship for this project. A part of judging whether something is right or not is its coalescence with one’s taste. What individuals believe is ethical is also appealing. Reciprocally, there is distaste, even disgust for what individuals find unethical or wrong. In sum, what people find good is also aesthetically attractive, what they find bad is aesthetically repulsive. Compare with *Critique of Judgement* Section 5. Plato’s equation of the beautiful and the good. “If acts are beautiful, then they are good...,” See Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W.C Helmbold, (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Educational Publishing, 1952), 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

beauty.”²¹ Aesthetic taste may be improved (or degraded). Indeed, we may refer to such a cultivation of taste with Schiller as an aesthetic education.

From this explanation, taste can be considered an aspect of aesthetics. In addition to feelings of attraction and repulsion, individuals are neither wholly active nor passive in their taste. They cannot just choose whatever taste they would like, as if one could “just decide” what they are inclined and disinclined toward. Nor are they bound to whatever are the predominant tastes inherited by their community. In sum, given that aesthetics inform the physical, logical, and ethical, this active-passive character of aesthetics has implication for all of these phenomenal aspects.

The pleasure/pain and appetitive/desirous aspects of aesthetic phenomena are important for understanding the “pull” or draw of the aesthetic dimension of politics. Authoritarian styles seem to be desirable to and produce pleasure for their audience. Therefore, exploring the place of aesthetic pleasure seems to offer a richer account of far-right politics. In Marcuse’s interpretation of aesthetics, then, he leans on the German *sinnlichkeit* “to connote instinctual (especially sexual) gratification *as well as* cognitive sense-perceptiveness and representation [sensation].”²² From this interpretation, the sensation itself is always-already entwined with its “accompanying” pleasure or pain. Sensation and the feeling of sensation are phenomenally already “linked up.” Marcuse denotes this aesthetics as “sensation plus affections” where the plus indicates a pre-established and preconnected “link” (sensation and affection at once), rather than a procedural process (first sensation, then affection). Sensation, pleasure/pain, and affect are experienced

²¹ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

²² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 182. Emphasis Added.

simultaneously and “tied up” to each other. From this conception of affect and pleasure co-constituting aesthetics, one can better appreciate the complexity of the aesthetic terrain.

To summarize, this above description understands aesthetics as concerned with taste, feeling, attraction/repulsion, an active understanding of sensation, and pleasure/displeasure. With this description of aesthetics, the relation to democratic ethics and projects in general, and the contemporary American political context, in particular, may be sketched. From the above understanding of aesthetics, the ties to questions of ethics and politics may be taken up. Kant’s description of the relatedness of the beautiful and human beings offers a germane entry point. By showing that kinship between human beings and aesthetics, this will pave the way to reaching a sense of aesthetic ethics for politics in general and the contemporary situation in particular. If we presuppose that ethics is entwined into the human condition and understand that aesthetics is similarly so, then aesthetics also has a relation to ethics.

Taste, Judgment, and Ethics

Kant elegantly writes, “beauty has purport and significance only for human beings, i.e. for beings *at once* animal and rational (but not merely for them as rational beings . . . but only for them as *both* animal and rational).”²³ In this passage, Kant describes aesthetics as akin to the human condition. He does not privilege either the traditionally rational aspects of human beings (e.g. logic, factuality, knowledge), or the traditionally animal or instinctual aspects (e.g. sensuousness, pleasure/pain, appetite). Instead, the animal and the rational are both understood as parts of being human. They are both appreciated. More radically, they are never wholly separate, distinct, or in mere interchange with each other. Given that animality and rationality are both present or “play out” in human beings, then it seems more plausible that they co-constitute each

²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 41. Emphasis Added.

other than that they are independent of each other. While delineating these aspects of human beings may be helpful for understanding each part, the interplay and entanglement of the two are needed for a more holistic approach.

A holistic approach is necessary because it enables understanding and contestation of far-right politics. How one understands the character of human beings impacts the character of the rhetorical approaches to contest such politics. Treating those sympathetic to far-right politics as simply misguided in their rationality, as I argue below, operates from a misunderstanding of those sympathetic to the far right and the general character of the human condition. Such a misunderstanding will likely produce an ineffective contestation of these anti-democratic forces.

The same holds true for the character of aesthetics. Classically, questions of aesthetics tended to privilege rationality (e.g. primarily objective and universal imperatives of taste) or animality (e.g. primarily sentimental and individual/subjective feeling of taste).²⁴ In contrast, a holistic view of aesthetics yields to neither privileged tendency without rejecting the truth of either. This Kantian-influenced approach to aesthetics that I adopt recognizes that aesthetics is not *simply* akin to either rationality or animality. It is both at once. Therefore, beauty, and aesthetics more generally, has purport and significance for human beings because we are akin to them; aesthetics and human beings are simultaneously animal and rational.

Admittedly, Kant draws too sharp a division between animality and rationality, and understands aesthetics as only applicable to human beings. Nonetheless, this moment offers a glimpse at the aesthetic dimension of human beings, and consequently, at the ethical implications of aesthetics for politics. To reinterpret Marcuse, then, this understanding of aesthetics and

²⁴ See Ferry Chapter 2 and 3 in *Homo Aestheticus*.

ethics, “bases morality [ethics] on a sensuous [aesthetic] ground.”²⁵ This is not to say that ethics should be subsumed underneath aesthetics. There are things that may be attractive that are also understood as unethical, and things that are unattractive that are also understood as ethical.²⁶ For example, one’s attraction to nationalistic rhetoric and repulsion for immigrants alone do not make these positions ethical. However, such attractions and repulsion do seem to inform ethical judgments. The attraction to nationalism and repulsion toward immigrants likely inform one’s *feeling* that nationalism is good and immigrants are bad.

Generally speaking, aesthetics as taste, wedded with inclination, feeling, and pleasure seems to be a major factor in ethical thinking and behavior. Although taste does not dictate ethics, what individuals find pleasing, in a broad sense, tends to align with their ethics. In other words, one takes up the ethical thinking, feeling, and acting that one does because one is attracted to those ethical postures. Conversely, one often finds something unethical because one is disgusted or repulsed by that thing. In essence, there is aesthetic judgment and preference at play in ethical evaluations and decisions.

As a result, contestation of unethical politics does not occur in a completely “pure” or “rational” ethical realm. There is an aesthetic dimension to rightwing, anti-democratic politics. For example, hearing the chant “build that wall” enralls some while it disgusts others. The feeling itself, i.e. the taste of these words, and one's pleasure or displeasure with this image, play a part in whether one thinks this policy goal is good or bad. Therefore, if aesthetic judgments are a part of the ground for ethical evaluation and political preferences and behavior, then the

²⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 190.

²⁶ Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* is a prime example of some of the consequences of aesthetic attraction to what is unethical. In this novel, the protagonist’s attraction to beauty without regard for the ethical consequences leads to his demise.

problem of ethicality as it relates to political taste in a democratic society is that there is an attraction to what is ethically repulsive to some and a repulsion to what is ethically attractive to others. Authoritarian adherents are attracted to what is ethically repulsive pro-democratic individuals and vice versa. Conflicts of taste compose the political terrain. Different tastes and approaches to taste (e.g. reflective, tolerant, dogmatic, indifferent) seem to be, and often are irreconcilable. Someone who finds the image of a border wall beautiful does not share the same taste as someone who finds it ugly.

Genealogical Sketch of the American Far-Right Rhetorical Style

If we are to aesthetically critique and contest neo-fascistic rhetoric, then it is important that we recognize that it is not an apparition that has spontaneously appeared from nowhere. As Naomi Klein plainly puts it, “Trump is not a rupture at all, but rather the culmination—the logical end point— of a great number of dangerous stories our culture has been telling us for a very long time.”²⁷ The sentiments that have more or less been status quo have let fester, laid the foundation, if not actively cultivated the rhetoric, culture, and politics that we now live in. This is not new, yet is not just the mere repetition of resentments of the past.²⁸

Therefore, it is important to sketch some of the key stylistic features of the far right. This will help provide a basis in the subsequent chapters as to why the predominant contestations of this rhetoric are insufficient, what its attractiveness for its audience is, and how it might be better contested. Toward this, I rely on twentieth-century American historian Richard Hofstadter’s classic 1964 essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”²⁹ He provides a historical account

²⁷ Naomi Klein, *No is Not Enough*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 257.

²⁸ See Lawrence Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right*, (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

²⁹ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”

of the characteristics of various far-right impulses in the United States, which dispels the idea that current far-right politics are unprecedented. Then I move to Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and Theodor Adorno's "Freudian Theory and The Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" to provide a modernist interpretation of a fascistic political style.³⁰ Finally, I consider the contemporary features of neo-fascism with political theorist Jodi Dean's *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* and cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg's *Under The Cover of Chaos*.³¹

Hofstadter defines a paranoid style to far-right politics. By this, he is referring to "the use of paranoid modes of expression by *more or less normal people* that makes [this] phenomenon significant."³² As a historian, his writing was prompted by the rise of Barry Goldwater's securing of the 1964 Republican presidential nomination, and a political style that Grossberg retrospectively notes as an "affective tone of the movement," to seek the historical context and antecedents for this happening. He argues that this paranoid style of Goldwater is an "old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has been frequently linked with movements of suspicious discontent."³³ Indeed, Hofstadter traces this from the anti-Masonic movement of the early nineteenth century, through anti-Jesuit and Catholic sentiments persisting into the twentieth century, to McCarthyism and anti-Communist attitudes of the Cold War.³⁴ One can imagine this

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1976). Theodor Adorno, "Freudian Theory and The Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays On Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001).

³¹ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009). Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right*.

³² Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 77.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 78-81.

line extended to the present via the resentments of the Tea Party exemplified in figures like Sarah Palin and Ted Cruz.³⁵

Through this historical trajectory, there are key common threads to a rightwing paranoid style. Of the anti-Masonic movement of the early eighteenth-century, Hofstadter notes “an obsession with conspiracy” and an “apocalyptic and absolutist framework in which. . . hostility was commonly expressed.”³⁶ This is eerily similar to the conspiratorial and absolutist character of many on the far right (*par excellence* Alex Jones). Nearly everything is understood as driven by conspiracy, and there is almost nothing that could challenge an adherent’s *certainty* in their convictions.

This eeriness continues with the continuity of a feeling of loss among these political adherents. Indeed, during Trump’s inauguration and electoral victory speeches, he claims, “The forgotten men and women of the country will be forgotten no longer.”³⁷ He recognizes and validates their perception that they have been “getting a raw deal.” Anticipating this, Hofstadter observed that the modern right wing, “feels dispossessed: [they believe] America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try and repossess it . . .”³⁸ In tandem with absolutist and conspiratorial tendencies, this feeling of loss is difficult to contest, even if untrue. This is because absolute beliefs and conspiratorial “evidence” necessarily reinforce each other; one does not attach oneself to conspiracies unless they are already

³⁵ Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 71.

³⁶ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 79.

³⁷ Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” *White House*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

³⁸ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 81.

sympathetic to them and already convinced of their truthfulness.³⁹ This phenomenon of “find[ing] conspiracy to be betrayal from on high” can be seen in talk of the so-called deep state and wanting to “drain the swamp.”⁴⁰

Related to the absolute conviction of conspiracy is the far-right understanding of what evidence means and the function it serves. In contrast to what some may argue, the far right does have concern for evidence, but not in the same way of traditional conventions like falsifiability of evidence and for use in argumentation toward persuasion. Hofstadter describes this orientation toward evidence: “the paranoid seems to have little expectation of actually convincing a hostile world, but he can accumulate evidence in order to protect his [or her] cherished convictions from [others].”⁴¹ In short, the paranoid style does not engage in good faith from a more rationalistic understanding of persuasion. Evidence is not for persuading others as much as it is for preventing the possibility of being persuaded.

Given this ambivalence toward persuasion of others in a traditional sense, there are at least two important notes to gather about the paranoid style of the far right. First, is the meaning of “evidence.” Conventionally, evidence is sought to create, inform, and potentially modulate a position. Evidence may be disputed, but once agreed upon, it can potentially become a motivating factor in changing one’s attitudes. Following this model, someone may be skeptical of climate change, but then be swayed after seeing photographic evidence of glacial melting or increased carbon density readings in an Arctic ice sample.

³⁹ This connects with Arendt’s description of the greater simplicity, consistency and cohesion of a totalitarian worldview in contrast to an understanding of events as ambiguous, at times contradictory, and complex. In my view, the latter understanding better reflects the character of events. However, the appeal of the former should not be underestimated. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 351-354.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 86.

In contrast, evidence means something different within a paranoid style. Rather than being a means of informing one's position, instead, evidence almost exclusively serves one's pre-established attitudes. From this approach, evidence and what one feels and believes to be true almost never come into conflict. The evidence of a paranoid style reflects one's beliefs, this evidence does not challenge or inform them in good faith (i.e. where the evidence can prompt a reevaluation and potential change in one's convictions). For example, Hofstadter cites the retired candy manufacturer Robert H. Welch's purported knowledge that President Eisenhower was a communist "based on an accumulation of detailed evidence so extensive and so palpable that it seems to put this conviction beyond any reasonable doubt," (Hofstadter dubs Welch as the successor to McCarthy's paranoid style).⁴² For Welch and his audience, the evidence confirms what he already "knows," it does not constitute knowledge. This is to say that the evidence appears conclusive to a paranoid style because it complements their pre-established desires and sentiments.

This type of "evidence" is not aimed to persuade others. It demands acceptance and compliance rather than prompting reflection and judgment. Put simply, this alternative evidence corresponds to an alternative type of persuasion, one concerned with the maintenance of one's convictions and in-group status.⁴³ Further, if this "evidence" merely serves to maintain and reinforce one's preexisting attitudes, then one must already have this attitude present. Even if only latently, this attitude must be present to "take hold" for sympathetic audiences. Once one

⁴² Ibid, 82.

⁴³ This sense of the word "alternative" alludes to the infamous Kellyanne Conway "alternative facts" interview explored in the first chapter. Alternative evidence, facts, and persuasion imply a different way of approaching truth, rather than abandonment of truth as such. They believe what they are saying relates to the truth. Therefore, rather than this being post-truth, instead, they seem to be post-fact and post-reason in the traditional Enlightenment sense of these terms.

has become paranoid, then evidence changes its status to upholding paranoid convictions. However, paranoid evidence is not persuasive unless one is already amenable to the style. This is because those who adhere to a more rational-deliberative notion of evidence are unlikely to be persuaded by paranoid evidence. For instance, the forty-fifth president claimed, “In many places the same person in California votes many times. They always like to say, 'Oh that's a conspiracy theory.' It's not a conspiracy theory. Millions and millions of people and it's very hard because the state guards their records." Unless one is already sympathetic to the convictions that the president garnered more votes, won the biggest landslide, or is trying to be removed by the “deep state” etc., then this evidence is not persuasive.⁴⁴ Therefore, such evidence cannot create or alter attitudes, only maintain and magnify them. For this evidence to have any weight, supportive attitudes must already be present.

This shift in the character and purpose of evidence changes the discursive terrain. Using September 11th conspiracy theories for her basis, Jodi Dean in her *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* asks if the ascendance of (false) certainty is contributing to conditions that “[concern] the possibility for knowledge and credibility.”⁴⁵ At least as contemporary happenings have been playing out discursively, it seems safe to answer in the affirmative. The contradiction of climate science in environmental and economic policy is one of many examples of the “brave new world” we find ourselves in. Democratic societies in the present moment are wrestling with the paradoxical prospect that those with power are increasingly understood to “have the facts” and the facts increasingly are understood as aligned with individuals one is already

⁴⁴ Chris Cilliza, “Donald Trump’s Illegal Voters Fantasy, Part 281” *CNN* online, last modified April 5, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/05/politics/donald-trump-illegal-voters-fantasy/index.html>.

⁴⁵ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 146.

sympathetic to. Reformulating Nietzsche's famous assertion, facts are tailored to interpretations that fit one's preexisting taste, if they are adhered to at all.⁴⁶ Evidence almost always confirms, rather than challenges one's convictions. It rarely serves as a prompt for or means of reflection in judging.

Moreover, an important aspect of this phenomenon is the maintenance of group character and cohesion in what is taken up as evidence and its relationship to affect and understanding. Expanding upon Hofstadter's understanding of paranoid evidence, Dean asks, "what if the so-called facts circulate tribally, consolidating communities of the like-minded even as they fail to impress—or even register to—anyone else."⁴⁷ Instead of evidence informing one's choice of group identity, one's evidence is a *de facto* indicator of group identity. Under such a "group-think" approach, people do not read Breitbart News and then become convinced of their convictions. People read Breitbart News *because* they are already sympathetic to or convinced of their convictions. They coincide with their perception of the world.

Taking up the aesthetic aspect of this perception, sympathetic aesthetic tastes can account for complementary ways of perceiving others and the world. Extending the above example, one reads Breitbart because it is appealing, because of the reader's attraction to this understanding of the world and related sympathetic ways of perceiving the world. In other words, having a similar taste, at least as much as the taste "itself," motivates the attraction. When a friend puts *Revolver* by The Beatles onto the turntable, I am attracted to the fact we have a similar taste for this album as much as that we are listening to *Revolver*. Or, as Arendt puts it, "By communicating one's feelings, one's displeasures and disinterested delights, one tells one's *choices* and chooses one's

⁴⁶ "There are not facts, only interpretations." See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 458.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 147. Emphasis Added.

company [community or group].”⁴⁸ Complimentary taste appears to be an important part of group identity as much as the specific content of group beliefs.

Accordingly, tastes and beliefs should not only be approached in an epistemic manner. The aesthetic-social or intersubjective character of group beliefs need to be confronted to counter the far-right paranoid style. Without addressing the feelings and tastes that inform and motivate these understandings, oppositional rhetorics will have limited success. This is equally difficult as it is necessary. If what one believes to be true is tied with deep anti-reflective or dogmatic group taste and feelings, such taste and feelings are essential to who one is. This is to say that such attitudes are a part of one’s character and style of being. To reorient far-right aesthetics is to reorient who its adherents are. In a sense, it is to encourage them to become different people. When what we believe to be true and good is intimately linked with our taste and feelings (i.e. our aesthetic comportment), and these are anti-reflective or dogmatic, then changing aesthetic attitudes is necessary to motivating changes in what one finds to be true/untrue and good/bad. For this change to occur, dogmatic aesthetic attitudes must be confronted; an opening must be created to “revise” one’s aesthetic perception if one is to change and if one’s interpretation of truth and ethics are to change.

Aesthetic tastes and feelings of dogmatic groups in general, and far-right groups in particular, then, seem to cement group convictions. Concerning September 11th conspiracy theories, Dean writes, “The *jouissance* connecting each fact to another produces certainty as an effect—it *feels true* (we can feel it in our gut).”⁴⁹ Aesthetics orient people toward understandings of truth and goodness. Therefore, the dogmatic convictions of the far right suggest dogmatic

⁴⁸ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 74. Emphasis Original.

⁴⁹ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 150. Emphasis Original.

aesthetic attitudes; certain feelings lend themselves to certain convictions. For example, resentment feels true and righteous for those who are resentful. Thus, if the intuitiveness of the far right informs the certainty and dogmatism of their convictions, such intuitions must be challenged to undermine this certainty and dogmatism. That is, the aesthetic pull toward these politics needs to be undercut and reoriented or changed for a chance of contesting these politics. Undercutting dogmatism could provide an opening for different aesthetics to motivate one's politics, different ways of feeling to inform one's judgments, and different tastes that informs one's attitudes. This opening could clear the way for better aesthetics and ways of judging political matters.

Against the possibility of such an opening, (potentially) supportive attitudes for a paranoid far-right political style are present in the American context (at the very least). With figures ranging from McCarthy and Goldwater to Palin and Trump, it is clear there is a basis for support. As Hofstadter writes:

Certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of [paranoid] psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties . . . American experience[s] [of] ethnic and religious conflict have plainly been a major focus for militant and suspicious minds of this sort.⁵⁰

Certainly then, under these circumstances there is a vast array of social and cultural material in the United States in which to embed such convictions.

Rhetorically, this is why discourse disputing or calling into question the evidence of those with this paranoid style has limited influence. If one presupposes a traditional understanding of

⁵⁰ Ibid, 86.

evidence with someone of a paranoid style, then they will be unlikely to break the pattern of calcified convictions because evidence for the paranoid style serves to reinforce far-right convictions. This is because one must confront the attractiveness of far-right convictions and this vicious cycle of “overdetermined” judgment that sustains them if one is to alter attitudes. Conversely, there is the sense that far-right claims and evidence are trying to convince others who are not already sympathetic to their ideas.

There is, then, a double bind. Misunderstanding the meaning and purpose of the evidence within far-right rhetoric leaves those who hope to rhetorically contest such politics in a precarious situation because they operate on the wrong terrain. Preliminarily, rather than dispute or undermine the evidence or claims of a paranoid style, rhetoricians should seek ways to disrupt this vicious process of primarily (if not only) seeking and accepting “evidence” that only serves to reinforce one’s existing convictions. As a play on the Kantian phrase, I interpret this approach to conviction and evidence as a form of *overdetermined* judgment. While Kant designates determinate judgment as presupposing the rule/principle and applying it to the particular case at hand, overdetermined judgment finds all particulars to reinforce their universal conviction.⁵¹ In other words, there is no *application* of universals to particulars in overdetermined judgment; all particulars are believed to adhere to preexisting absolutes, *ipso facto* in accord with dogmatic beliefs. In what Arendt describes as the desire of the masses for consistency, Hofstadter sees overdetermined judgment that “produces heroic strivings for evidence to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed.”⁵² The unwavering commitment that one is

⁵¹ See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 15-16.

⁵² Arendt offers a great example of the paranoid overdetermined judgment’s desire for consistency. She writes, “Figuratively speaking, it is as though the masses demand a constant repetition of the miracle of Septuagint, when, according to ancient legend, seventy isolated

unquestionably and unconditionally right means the far right, as a collective, is almost entirely numb to being moved by its opposition.

Crucially, it is important to note that this way in which convictions are felt is not wholly or necessarily counter-factual. This is to say that a paranoid far-right style is indifferent or ambivalent about traditional factuality, not antagonistic. For example, while McCarthy's accusations were certainly paranoid, Hofstadter concedes, "In our time an actual laxity in security allowed some communists to find a place in governmental circles, and innumerable decisions of World War Two and the Cold War could be faulted."⁵³ That is, McCarthy was not simply factually incorrect. His claims could not completely be dubbed false, even if misleading and disingenuous from the point of view of his opponents. To use a contemporary example, Trump claimed that the United States has "lost, over a fairly short period of time, sixty thousand factories in our country" as justification for tariffs against China.⁵⁴ This number is correct, though this does not inherently mean China is the chief cause of this loss or that imposing tariffs will solve this problem. Therefore, as discussed in the following chapter, opponents of far-right politics cannot merely point out the counter-factual status of the far right. This is because this type of evidence is not always false and usually does not aim to persuade opponents. Pointing out the counter-factual status will not be enough and is not always possible because some paranoid claims correspond to facts.

translators produced an identical Greek version of the Old Testament. Common sense can accept this tale only as a legend or a miracle; *yet it could also be adduced as proof of the absolute faithfulness of every single word in the translated text.* See Arendt, "Totalitarian Propaganda," in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Emphasis Added. Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style of American Politics, 85.

⁵³ Ibid, 86.

⁵⁴ Salvador Rizzo, "President Trump's Claim that China caused 60,000 U.S. Factories to Close," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2018/03/26/president-trumps-claim-that-china-caused-60000-u-s-factories-to-close/>

That is why I contend the paranoid style of the far right must be understood as more than an epistemological issue. It has powerful aesthetic underpinnings. Hofstadter carefully notes, “[This] style has more to do with the *way* in which ideas are *believed* than the truth or falsity of their content.”⁵⁵ Their affinity with and attraction to their convictions is a part of far-right discourse. Conversely, their aversion to and abhorrence of sentiments that do not align with their own fortify them against incursions. These conditions contribute to the difficulty in undermining these convictions. The paranoid style is a fully fleshed way of feeling and judging, not a temporary mix-up. This suggests an aesthetic approach to contesting the taste for the paranoid style, distaste for their opponents, and the overdetermined way of judging itself.

Taking an aesthetic approach, in this project I consider what contesting the paranoid style of the far right might look like from a rhetorical point of view. In the first chapter, I will argue that a predominant strand of deliberative-rationalistic rhetoric is insufficient in contesting the paranoid style of far-right politics. Contemporary events, such as the infamous “alternative facts” interview of Kellyanne Conway will demonstrate that this approach is not working. Informed by a nuanced understanding of aesthetics, I criticize these events to display the resilience of far-right paranoid style and the impotence of the predominant approach to contesting this style.

If rational-deliberative discourse is ineffective in contesting far-right political discourse, then one must first understand why the paranoid style is resilient to rational-deliberative discourse. That is, understanding the symptom is not enough. Understanding that rational-deliberative discourse is ineffective is necessary for recognizing a need for different rhetorical approaches, yet is not enough to develop better approaches. To effectively contest the paranoid style, one needs to appreciate the motivations for paranoid style and its consequences. In the

⁵⁵ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style of American Politics,” 77. Emphasis Added.

second chapter then, I offer dogmatic taste and perception as a major motivating factor in the resilience of far-right rhetoric and politics. In a word, the inability of deliberative-discourse to contest a far-right paranoid style lies in the aesthetic register. It is not an error in reasoning or simply an epistemic issue. Dogmatic taste for neo-fascistic styles and distaste for (left) democratic politics contributes to the resilience of far-right politics. I interpret rhetoricians Jenny Rice and Jeremy Engels's ideas about the character of bullshit and resentment to deepen the account of paranoid style offered in the introduction. Further, I look to Grossberg's notion of affective landscapes to "round out" an aesthetic account of the far right.

I argue in the third chapter that the *taste* for far-right paranoia style requires rhetorical contestation if opponents of these politics are to succeed. The resilient distaste for democratic politics and taste for authoritarian politics need to be countered. Though difficult, these tastes must be tackled. This difficulty stems from an unreflective, even anti-reflective *way* of judging in matters of taste. Therefore, to change tastes, rhetoricians should cultivate a prejudice for reflective judgment, habits for addressing the particularity of experience, and a taste for wrestling with the complexities of decision-making. Cultivating this orientation, this way of feeling about intuitions, could undermine the dogmatic certainty of far-right convictions and sentiments. Such an orientation could aesthetically open up those sympathetic to far-right politics to more democratic, deliberative, and evidence-based tastes.

CHAPTER 2

COMMON SENSE IS ALL TOO COMMON: *SENSUS COMMUNIS*, TASTE, AND THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE DELIBERATIVE-RATIONAL MODEL OF RHETORIC

In contesting what we find unacceptable, it naturally follows that one reflexively wants to take the most assured method to undermine and best our political opponents. It is commonly held that addressing climate change, exorbitant wealth inequality, mass incarceration that disproportionately affects minorities, threats of nuclear war, or the specter of terrorism are too important to take anything but the safest and most sure route to tackle them. So much is at stake. From this conventional, rationalist perspective, these issues are so important, the possibility of unquestionable, neutral, and unbiased claims may appear attractive in an increasingly questionable, partial, and biased climate. For many of the issues of concern, the problem may appear as a lack of knowledge—too many people do not appreciate the rapidity of climate-change, the breadth of wealth inequality and its social implications, or the scale and consequences of systemic racism in the criminal justice system. If the problem with the far right is bias and misunderstanding, correcting this by supplying unbiased knowledge might seem intuitive. Here, I am talking about the power to persuade from facts and its twin of common sense—the silver bullet that even our worst opponents must submit to, that even the most outrageous claims must pay homage to. From the rhetorical approach that I designate as “rational-deliberative,” the careful and correct assemblage of these certainties will, with enough effort, make us “come to our senses” and even “see the light of reason.” As John Adams said, channeling the Enlightenment air of rationality, “Facts are stubborn things; whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” In true juridical fashion, a rational-deliberative approach believes that facts

communicated to impartial minds must necessarily be judged correctly and fairly. People's wishes, inclinations, and passions must (and will) yield to the facts and evidence.

Yet, given the character of contemporary politics and how “mad” they are, there seems to be reason to put this proposition into question. Faith in the rhetorical potency of facts warrants examination. If facts are so assured, how could we be where we are? How could such transparent, misleading, and seemingly dismissible lies be so effective in directing public discourse? The current flight from reason not only suggests putting into question the persuasiveness of facts in public discourse, but there also seems to be cause to consider how effectively facts appeal, affect, and move us. Said differently, what is the relationship between facts *and* wishes, inclinations, and passions? We should take seriously how or even whether facts make people reflect, reconsider, and reorient ourselves. The election and presidency of Trump should make us meaningfully consider how facts are *judged*, how their coincidence or conflict with public *tastes* impacts if and how they are taken up, and their relationship to *ways of seeing* (or not seeing) others and the world.

Accordingly, this chapter will explore the reasons and implications of questioning faith in facticity. Building on Hofstadter's description of the paranoid style of the far right, I describe what I mean by “far right” and establish the applicability of this description for the contemporary far right. Through a variety of discursive examples, I will critique what I call a rational-deliberative approach and argue that this approach to rhetoric has proved insufficient in confronting the rise of far-right politics. Specifically, I look to an overestimation of the power of facticity in persuasion and a misunderstanding of the character of *sensus communis* (or common aesthetic sense) as reasons for this insufficiency. When faced with a paranoid style that is indifferent to facticity, and has different rhetorical tastes, I suggest such rational-deliberative

rhetoric underappreciates the importance of aesthetic taste and attitudes in the constitution of how groups think and act politically. Provisionally, instead of aiming to compel and dictate the far-right into compliance through evidence and common sense, opponents should woo and court them aesthetically—should cultivate a taste for reflection that can inculcate a taste democratic politics. This will setup a consideration of an aesthetically oriented understanding of the far right and of rhetorics that might more effectively contest these politics in the succeeding chapter.

An Interpretation of “Far Right”

To argue that far-right politics have a paranoid style and that this is insufficiently contested by the predominant rational-deliberative rhetoric, I first need to describe who and what I am referring to as “far right.” Defining the far right can provide a basis for understanding and differentiating between them and other political forces. However, too strict of a definition would risk too sharply delineating who is and is not far right. Overly strict definitions will likely underappreciate the amorphous, dynamic, and changing character of these politics. Appreciating the spectrum of support and sympathy for the far right is also important in understanding these politics so they may be opposed. Thus, it is difficult and perhaps undesirable to “pin down” the meaning of “far right” in the context of the United States.

Still, a sketch of these politics is helpful for understanding them. What I refer to as “far right” and sometimes as “neofascism” is more popularly dubbed as the so-called alternative right or “alt right.” I do not use this term. As Grossberg describes, “the label ‘alt-right’ strikes me as self-serving: not only does it serve to cover the differences. . . but in the end, it serves as cover for the most hateful (neo-Nazi) versions of reactionary conservatism.”⁵⁶ It appears that the term “alt right” serves to “soften the edges,” even “airbrush” the viciousness of these politics. Like

⁵⁶ Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 74.

any political label, “far right” cannot encapsulate all of the differences between people who subscribe to these politics. Yet, far right seems to better describe the reactionary character because it challenges the normalization of these politics. Therefore, this term can serve as a pointer for the common ascendant political orientation on the Right in American politics.

Therefore, describing the two major factions of the far right provides the groundwork for an analysis of their paranoid style. Indeed, rather than providing a definition or set of maxims, Grossberg argues, “only by laying [the different fractions of far-right politics] out separately . . . one can see the frightening commonality operating in their political visions.”⁵⁷ Following Grossberg, the first major fraction is “post-libertarian” as exemplified in Allun Bokhart and Milo Yiannopoulos’ so-called alt-right manifesto.⁵⁸ They often troll with their “meme-team” (e.g. spreading false-news). Their activities “are almost always racist and misogynist” and “adopt many of the discourses of white nationalism and ‘white identity.’”⁵⁹

A key aspect of the “post-libertarian” style for my project is their encouragement of paranoia. Grossberg describes a primary motivation of this far-right political fraction as “want[ing] to drive people crazy, make them *paranoid*, and unsure what is going on, create panic and above all, chaos.”⁶⁰ I relate this nurturing of the conditions for paranoia with Hofstadter’s description of the paranoid style of far-right politics. By aiding a chaotic political atmosphere, they encourage the conditions of a correspondingly paranoid style to potentially appear attractive.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. See Allun Bokhart and Milo Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” *Breitbart News*, March 29 2016. <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>

⁵⁹ Ibid, 75-76.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

Ironically, Bokhart and Yiannopoulos openly state that the predominant rational-deliberative rhetoric of their opponents will not alter their attitudes or sureness of their convictions. In their manifesto, they write, “The Left can’t language-police and name-call [the far right] away . . . and the Right can’t snobbishly dissociate itself from them and hope they go away either.”⁶¹ While it is a hasty generalization to argue the Left is censoring language rather than more often pointing out the racist and sexist beliefs of the far right, this still displays the resilience of far-right politics to any opposition. When most opposition from the Left is reduced to language policing or name-calling, this displays the resilience of these politics to the conventional opposition. Though likely not intended by Bokhart and Yiannopoulos, I interpret this to say that predominant, left-leaning rhetorics are largely ineffective. Truly, the conventional playbook will not do (and they are even telling us so!).

Grossberg's second fraction appears more akin to overt neo-fascism. He describes them as “directly connected to earlier groups excluded by the New Right” and as taking up “forms of white supremacism and anti-Semitism.”⁶² Figures like Steve Bannon and Richard Spencer exemplify the tendencies of this fraction. They claim the work of twentieth-century Italian fascist Julius Evola as their “intellectual” foundation.⁶³ Grossberg explains Evola’s political aim: “Revolution [that] cannot seek to simply change or undermine or even escape the disaster that is modernity, it must . . . ‘blow everything up.’”⁶⁴ It is safe to say that such motivations inform their rhetorical style. Why then would they adhere to the predominant rational-deliberative

⁶¹ Bokhart and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-right.”

⁶² Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 76.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 77.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 77-78.

rhetorical orientation, in part a product of the Enlightenment world they want to ‘blow up,’ when they are actively anti-Enlightenment and favor a return to a pre-Enlightenment world?

Perhaps most importantly, I include major elements of the (formerly?) New Right Republican Party in this sketch of far-right politics. Some might object to this. They might argue it is unfair to place “rank-and-file” Republicans as “far right” because they are traditionally understood as “center right.” By lumping together a sizable portion of Republicans with the far right, such a move also risks overestimating the actual rhetorical and political power of the far right. As the shock for many of the 2016 electoral results displays, even if these concerns are sincere, there is greater risk in *underestimating* the appeal of the far right to the American people than in overestimating it. Beyond pragmatically erring on the side of caution, were one unwilling to label sizable portions of the GOP as far right, such unwillingness would misapprehend the stoking of resentments already occurring within the New Right. It would not recognize the ascendant and increasingly dominant status of “Trumpist” candidates that is part of the far right's ascendancy (e.g. Roy Moore's defeat of his New Right opponent in the Alabama primary contest). It would ignore the “falling in line” of most Republicans with the President and the unpopularity and defeats of those who do criticize or challenge this agenda (e.g. Senator Flake of Arizona and South Carolina Representative Mark Sanford).⁶⁵

⁶⁵ For the “falling in line” of the GOP around Trump, the Chairwoman of the GOP's remarks are informative. “Anyone that does not embrace the @realDonaldTrump agenda of making America great again will be making a mistake.” See Ronna McDaniel, Twitter Post. June 13, 2018, 6:22 PM. Republican Senator Jeff Flake is not seeking reelection. His approval rating is eighteen percent. He even goes as far as admitting that he could not win the GOP Senate Primary contest. See Adam Edelman, “Jeff Flake Admits He Couldn't Win GOP Primary as Trump Hails GOP ‘Love Fest,’” *NBC News*, October 25, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/flake-admits-i-couldn-t-win-gop-primary-be-proud-n814111>. Mark Sanford lost his contest after Trump's endorsement of his opponent. Sanford has publicly criticized Trump. See Veronica Stracqualursi, “Trump takes credit for Sanford loss in South Carolina Primary,” *CNN*, June 13,

Paranoid Character of Far-Right Rhetoric

Accordingly, I draw upon discourse from the above fractions of the far right to display their paranoid style. I provide a number of brief examples to point toward the paranoid style as a general phenomenon on the far right. Senator Orrin Hatch's commentary about whether to fund the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) displays the paranoid style. In an exchange with a colleague about whether to provide sufficient funding for the program, he states, "We're going to do CHIP . . . I happen to think CHIP has done a terrific job for people who really needed the help."⁶⁶ Here, he seems to express support for this program. He even brags, "I invented [CHIP]. I was the one who wrote it."⁶⁷ Yet, in the next breath, he puts this support into question: "I have a rough time spending billions and billions and trillions of dollars to help people *who won't help themselves—won't lift a finger.*"⁶⁸ After seeming to express support for this program, he insinuates that those who benefit from CHIP funding are undeserving; they are responsible for the nation's financial woes. Then he quickly reiterates his "support" for CHIP: "[I do not] know anyone here who is not going to support CHIP when we bring it up and I am one who wants to make sure we bring it up."⁶⁹

Here, Hatch displays the suspicious and chaotic character of the paranoid style. He presents a conspiracy of "the liberal philosophy that has created millions of people. . . who believe everything they ever are or hope to be depends upon the federal government." He

2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/13/politics/trump-south-carolina-primary-mark-sanford/index.html>.

⁶⁶ Martin Pengelly, "Orrin Hatch Comments on Chip Health Program at Heart of Social Media Storm," *Guardian*, December 3, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/03/orrin-hatch-chip-healthcare-program-joe-scarborough>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

matches Hofstadter's characterization exactly, an "absolutist framework in which . . . hostility [is] commonly expressed" by saying "it's pretty hard to argue against these comments" of liberal conspiracy."⁷⁰ This matter-of-fact belief presents itself as if "it is an ascertained fact," emblematic of paranoid style.⁷¹

Or, look to Sheriff Joe Arpaio, (whose particularly notorious tent city he jokingly compared to a concentration camp).⁷² Arpaio was convicted for "criminal contempt related to his hard-line tactics going after undocumented immigrants," but was later pardoned by the President.⁷³ At the time of writing, he is running in the Arizona Republican primary for the vacant U.S. Senate seat. In January, 2018, the President announced he was willing to consider a deal concerning the reinstatement of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a repealed program that allowed for undocumented immigrants brought by their parents to remain in the country.⁷⁴ Despite Arpaio's so-called tough stance on immigration, desiring to deport undocumented immigrants, he did not publicly disagree with the President. Instead, the former Sheriff expressed his alignment with the President, despite the potential ideological and policy inconsistency: "If I was a senator now and the President really wanted this, I probably would

⁷⁰ Ibid. See Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 79.

⁷¹ Ibid, 80.

⁷² Valeria Fernández, "Arizona's 'Concentration Camp': Why was Tent City Kept Open for 24 Years?", *Guardian*, August 21, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/aug/21/arizona-phoenix-concentration-camp-tent-city-jail-joe-arpaio-immigration>.

⁷³ Kevin Liptak, Daniella Diaz and Sophie Tatum, "Trump pardons former Sheriff Joe Arpaio," *CNN*, August 27, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/25/politics/sheriff-joe-arpaio-donald-trump-pardon/index.html>

⁷⁴ Jason Hoffman, "Trump says he's Willing to Make DACA Deal after Downplaying Chances," *CNN*, January 14, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/14/politics/trump-tweets-daca-probably-dead/index.html>.

back him up on it because I really do respect his *judgment*.”⁷⁵ It does not matter that Arpaio has previously denounced DACA; the paranoid conviction of support for the leader cannot be undermined with evidence of ideological inconsistency. This aligns with Hofstadter’s paranoid characteristic of “protect[ing] cherished convictions from [inconsistency and contradiction].”⁷⁶ Indeed, Arendt notes that far-right propaganda is immune to ideological inconsistency and contradiction by any incongruity “being explained . . . as a ‘temporary tactical maneuver.’”⁷⁷ Arpaio can simply “brush off” this contradiction with Trump through his trust in Trump’s judgment as a mere tactic for later concessions (e.g. a southern border wall, future immigration restrictions, deportations etc.). The former Sheriff’s support of the President, even in areas where there “should” be disagreement, displays the resilience of paranoid character. It is futile to try to undermine this style through pointing out logical inconsistencies and/or contradictions.

Such resilience against inconsistency and contradiction is also apparent in the paranoid style of GOP U.S. Representative Paul Gosar and Senate candidate Roy Moore. They both deflect criticism and opposition through raising the specter of conspiracy. For instance, when asked about the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Gosar suggested the rally was a false flag operation “maybe that was created by the left.”⁷⁸ He suggests that “left-wing” billionaire George Soros may have funded the neo-Nazi rally. Moore mirrors this conspiratorial thinking by claiming the multiple allegations of sexual misconduct against him stem from a political

⁷⁵ Daniella Diaz, “Sheriff Joe Arpaio on DACA: If Trump Supports it, I will,” *CNN*, January 10, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/10/politics/sheriff-joe-arpaio-daca-immigrants-congress-senator-cnntv/index.html>.

⁷⁶ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 86.

⁷⁷ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 343.

⁷⁸ Derek Hawkins, “Arizona Congressman Repeats Bogus Claim that Charlottesville Violence was Left-Wing Plot,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/06/arizona-congressman-repeats-bogus-claim-that-charlottesville-violence-was-left-wing-plot/>

conspiracy.⁷⁹ In both cases, there is no evidence, or more precisely, merely a paranoid style of evidence, to support these claims. Recalling Dean, its paranoid “evidence” derives from that the conspiracy “*feels* true (we can feel it in our gut).”⁸⁰ Or, as Arendt writes, “they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their [paranoid] imaginations.”⁸¹ The paranoid imagination provides fantasies to prompt their (and their audiences’) eyes and ears to see, hear, and *believe* in conspiracy.

Given its resonance with fascistic rhetoric from the twentieth-century, the President’s rhetoric about immigrants is quite chilling in its conspiratorial paranoia: “[Democrats] don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and *infest* our Country.”⁸² Many rightfully have pointed out the use of this metaphor previously used by the National Socialist regime. However, one should not stop at this apt comparison. To appreciate the danger of this rhetoric to democracy precisely, one needs to appreciate the paranoid *style* and aesthetics of this statement.⁸³ By comparing immigrants with an infestation, this is likely motivated by and prompts *disgust* and repulsion to the tastes of sympathetic audiences. The affective charge of the verb “infest” seems to engage at the level of taste (rather than a “logical” evaluation). Such taste-driven evaluation lends itself to Hofstadter’s apocalyptic tone of the paranoid style; the language of parasitic infestation portrays the United States as threatened by

⁷⁹ Beth Reinhard, “Roy Moore Lawsuit Claims ‘Political Conspiracy’ Against him in Senate Race,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/roy-moore-lawsuit-claims-political-conspiracy-against-him-in-senate-race/2018/04/30/6ea1ad5a-4cbb-11e8-b966-bfb0da2dad62_story.html?utm_term=.65f584bebacc

⁸⁰ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 150. Emphasis Added.

⁸¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 351.

⁸² Abigail Simon, “People Are Angry President Trump Used This Word to Describe Undocumented Immigrants,” *Time*, June 19, 2018. <http://time.com/5316087/donald-trump-immigration-infest/>

⁸³ See Steven Perry, “Rhetorical Functions of the Infestation Metaphor in Hitler’s Rhetoric,” *Central States Speech Journal* 34, no. 4 (1983): 229-235.

undesirable and dangerous others. Indeed, this paranoid disgust stems from “an imagination [that] ha[s] been *inflamed*” by paranoid fantasy with effects that are all-too real.⁸⁴

Rational-Deliberative Overconfidence in Facticity

The rationalist-deliberative approach to contesting the far right is overconfident in its understanding of the persuasive power of facts. Typically, this approach operates as if correcting counter-factual claims with facts will undermine such claims and motivate changes in political thinking, acting, and feeling. Such an approach to rhetoric also appears with a “matter-of-fact” attitude; it does little to appeal to those sympathetic to counter-factual claims. This style insufficiently appeals to those ambivalent, hesitant, or hostile to its claims. It often does little more than assuage those who are already sympathetic. To demonstrate, I look to some contemporary examples to show how “compelling” facticity is understood and taken up in order to undermine the counterfactual character of (far)right claims and dissuade sympathetic audiences.

An illustrative example of this is present in a CNN advertisement entitled “This is an Apple.” It depicts a red apple on a white background and is narrated with the following:

This is an apple. Some people might try and tell you that it’s a banana. They might scream banana, banana, banana over and over and over again. They might put banana in all caps. You might even start to believe that this is a banana. But it’s not. This is an apple.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 78. Emphasis Added.

⁸⁵ Meghann Farnsworth, “CNN’s new ‘This is an apple’ ad targets Trump,” *Recode*, published October 23, 2017. <https://www.recode.net/2017/10/23/16524594/cnn-new-ad-apple-banana-trump-fake-news-mainstream-media>

The advertisement concludes with “Facts First” written in black for several seconds, followed by a brief flash of CNN’s logo. Contrary to the surrealist painter René Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images*, which depicts an image of a pipe with the provocation “this is *not* a pipe,” this advertisement begins by presupposing and then proclaiming the factual status of the image being an apple (i.e. “this *is* an apple”). CNN’s assertion that the image represents an apple is not likely challenged by the viewer; it is already understood, even common-sensical. There is no doubt that the narrator is correct. Moreover, only a contrarian would disagree: the assertion does not make us move from the status of doubting or questioning that this image of an apple is an apple. Relatedly, we do not move from believing that this is not (an image of) an apple to later realizing it is, in fact, an image of an apple. Accordingly, the narrator’s (factual) claim does not attempt to move us to a new position. Instead, it reinforces what viewers already think, and it alludes to similarly apparent and common-sensical claims in the political sphere.

Already, the rhetorical power of this approach to facticity is dubious. First, it reduces the complexity present in creating factual statements to something that should be recognized by everyone with ease (“this is as simple as identifying an apple”). Though some facts appear as simple to “us,” many require extensive work and verification through peer review to establish (e.g. reading changes in carbon dioxide levels in Arctic ice sheets). This is to say that if there is sometimes the need for extensive work to generate facts, it should follow that it takes rhetorical work to *display* the correctness of such statements, especially for those who are skeptical or antagonistic. In other words, if there is the possibility of misunderstanding for those sympathetic to factual claims (e.g. that hot summers demonstrate climate-change), then it is unlikely that these claims will be believed or will motivate changes for those attracted to counter-factual statements. While “this is not a pipe” suggests caution for overly simple and matter-of-fact

images, the rational-deliberative “this is an apple” equates this certainty with correctness. Such confidence, even if well intentioned, does not address the tastes of audiences sympathetic to counter-factual claims or apply to situations where defining what we are looking at, is not so simple as naming a piece of fruit.

Next, the narrator contrasts those of us who know this claim to be correct with “some people” who are not us. These other people will insist to “us” that this is not an apple, that “our” certainty is wrong, and provide a claim that is just as certainly wrong to our eyes as ours is to them. Here, then, is a clear division between those who understand what is correct, the narrator and the viewer, and the “some people” who are not directly being addressed.⁸⁶ “We” who (correctly) understand that this image is an apple and “they” or “those others” who misunderstand that this is a banana. “They” who misunderstand not only do not recognize the obvious character of the apple, not only recognize to be true something that is just as obviously incorrect (the banana), but then have the drive to tell us that *we are wrong*, that we are seeing incorrectly by not seeing a banana.

It is clear within these first two sentences that there are (at least) two different groups, “us” who are right and “they” who are wrong. At least initially, “they” cannot make “us” think otherwise. Perhaps, there reciprocally is an inability for “us” to meaningfully communicate with them. This reciprocal failure of communication becomes clear through the next two lines of the advertisement. The “banana group” is presented as insistent about how correct they are. We imply that they wildly scream in contrast to the narrator’s (and presumably our) calm and collected air of rationality. There is the sense that they are assured of what they think to such an

⁸⁶ See Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 109-119.

extent that they will do whatever is within their power to let “us” know that (they believe) this is a banana.

Finally, the narrator explains the effect of the status of the apple being challenged with the status of “banana-hood.” Because of those trying to tell us this is a banana, and more importantly, the self-assured *way* we are being told this image is a banana rather than an apple, some of us, maybe even the individual viewer (“me”), might start to take this claim seriously. Our sureness in the image being an apple, at the very least, might waver. This seemingly certain image-as-apple that our eyes tell us and we were confident in might become unsure and seriously put into question.

How does the narrator reassure us that we are right? How does she counter and persuade the viewer, and maybe even some of those convinced this is a banana though it is actually an apple, that it is better to see it as an apple, and maybe even more significantly, that the way of seeing that sees this image as an apple rather than a banana is a better way to see?

They do not. The narrator merely contests the claim by reasserting the factual character of the previous claim that she made. Confidently articulating, “but it’s not,” incredulously acting as if this mere assertion can truly speak to the people who are in doubt, let alone those, “scream[ing] banana, banana, banana!” She states, “This is an apple,” as if the repetition will finally allow this fact to “speak for itself.” To apply the same faith in facticity that will somehow *now* finally overcome all of those who believe otherwise. To believe we can and should dictate to others and compel them to see as we see, even if they do not and to do this while acting as if they already see the way “we” do. To act as if we can produce a statement that is outside of or “immune” to the needs of engaging in discourse and taking seriously the challenges of rhetoric for those who do not already subscribe to the worldview and ways of being-in-the-world that

“we” do. In short, it is optimistic to say the same thing at the beginning of the narration as at the end, without really taking up what others have to say, even if they are wrong, and expect a different result.

The advertisement concludes with the proclamation “facts first,” an empty platitude when, for better or for worse, the power of facticity is clearly in decline politically. Moreover, when facticity no longer appears as the neutral arbiter of truth everyone obeys, but instead as tools, means, and even weapons to be hurled at opponents, then “facts first” is not an arena outside of the political, but is enmeshed in it. Most plainly, when this advertisement that proclaims itself to be for “facts first” is created in response to a political attack claiming CNN as “fake news,” then it is too farfetched to believe in a neutrality or disinterestedness in the truth that the advertisement purports to uphold through an absurdly over simplistic depiction of truth’s opponents.

This advertisement is an example of what may be designated as a deliberative-rationalistic approach to rhetoric. As demonstrated above, it more-or-less presupposes that everyone operates through a generally detached approach to truth, goodness, and beauty. This approach affords deference to the powers of logic, meticulous and disinterested observation, and expertise deriving from these. It understands the human being, at our root, as *homo economicus*, the rational being.

A cursory glance at the newspaper should reveal that this model of the character of human beings is a clear misunderstanding, especially when it purports to describe human beings comprehensively and universally. The people who yell “banana, banana, banana,” are not just mistaken about the factual status of their claim. They do not care about a paradigm that yields to

claims and evidence of facticity. Therefore, they do not adhere to this essential requirement of the deliberative-rationalistic paradigm.

Far-Right Indifference to the Rational-Deliberative Idea of Facticity

If these irrational others did adhere to a rational-deliberative perspective, they could not maintain the overconfident stance demonstrated by the magnitude of the repetition of false statements that the 2016 was the largest electoral landslide since Reagan, or that the 2017 inauguration had the largest attendance in history, or that the 2018 State of the Union address had the largest viewership. (A recurring size-oriented theme is apparent). If these irrational individuals did adhere to the deliberative-rationalistic paradigm, they could not even utter these statements, not to mention doubting or retracting such statements. Under such a framework, the evidence of the status of these claims is unmistakably clear; we can easily compare all of the previous materials to find it untrue. Truly, statements like these are incomprehensible from the rational-deliberative view.

The challenge, then, is to comprehend this incomprehensibility; to understand how and why these claims (and far-right ones more generally) are made in order to suggest ways to counter, subvert, and hopefully best them. Further, we need to demonstrate that an overreliance on facticity is a problematic and insufficient approach to confronting far-right rhetoric. As such, I argue that a major problem with the rational-deliberative approach to rhetoric is that it does not appreciate the *indifference* of the far right to the notion of facticity. In contrast to those who portray them as “anti-fact,” I understand the far right as not necessarily antagonistic to facts because they are facts. Instead, recalling Hofstadter, they seem to only care about evidence that aligns with their preexisting convictions. Their so-called facts, or “alternative facts,” are necessarily those that align with their convictions. So antagonism for facts as such is not the

issue. Instead, it is the inability of the far right to appreciate and be moved by evidence that contests their convictions.

Toward this end, consider the infamous “alternative facts” exchange between reporter Chuck Todd and White House aid Kellyanne Conway following the inauguration of Donald Trump. After continuous talking over one another about the press secretary’s insistence on the record setting size of the new president’s inauguration crowd, the key moment of the exchange occurred:

Todd: . . . Answer the question of why the president asked the White House press secretary to come out in front of the podium for the first time and utter a falsehood? Why did he do that? It undermines the credibility of the entire White House press office . . .

Conway: Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. What – You're saying it's a falsehood. And they're giving Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that . . .

Todd: Wait a minute – Alternative facts? . . . Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods.⁸⁷

This exchange is interesting for several reasons. First, it is telling that the use of airtime is prioritized for undermining a claim that even Todd admits is a “small and petty thing.”⁸⁸ There is the sense that if Todd can get Conway to admit the smallest error or lie that it will erode her support. That if it becomes clear to Conway’s sympathetic audiences that she is not adhering to a rational-deliberative paradigm then Trump's supporters will no longer support such politics.

Instead of devoting energy to questioning and challenging the horrendous rhetoric and politics of

⁸⁷ Kellyanne Conway, interviewed by Chuck Todd, *Meet the Press*, January 22, 2017.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-01-22-17-n710491>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

the administration, he spends the entire interview attempting to maneuver Conway into a position where she has to admit that the president uttered “a small and petty” falsehood. That Todd would devote so much energy to this minor falsehood displays this rational-deliberative impulse to fact-check, even at the expense of rhetorically contesting more consequential aspects of far-right politics.

While Todd attempts to compel Conway to admit a falsehood, Conway is provided a platform to promote the policies and actions of the president that go unchallenged throughout the interview. Todd seems to act as if this will have meaningful, even great rhetorical significance in undermining the Trump presidency. When put so bluntly, it becomes abundantly clear that this is a ridiculous impulse to waste rhetorical energy and time this way, but it is telling about the character of the deliberative-rationalistic paradigm that is too frequently relied on.

Moreover, this maneuver had such little rhetorical potency to Conway that she completely disregards the adherence to facticity by making a claim that the press secretary’s claims were alternatively factual; disregarding the notion of a *single universal common sense* or way of seeing that is already universally agreed upon and that everyone therefore adheres to. When we imagine that Todd believes he has unleashed his trap successfully, forcing the admittance of a falsehood by the preposterous notion of facts as having alternatives, his tactic falls flat. It comes off just as small and petty as the remark he recognizes as such coming from the president.

More generally, this means Conway can continue to attack the press and be a mouthpiece for the administration’s agenda. Conway can simultaneously reassert the size of the crowd and defend the president’s “alternative fact,” while she leans on a fact (albeit a misleading one). She has no moral qualms about pointing to the Nielsen viewership ratings estimating thirty-one

million people watched the 2017 inauguration vs. approximately twenty-one million viewers for the 2013 inauguration. (Trump's inauguration was still smaller than Obama's 2009 inauguration, with an estimated thirty-eight million and the record set of about forty-two million viewers set by Reagan's 1981 inauguration).⁸⁹ Therefore, Conway and her sympathetic audiences are indifferent to the rational-deliberative notion of facticity; they coincidentally adhere to it when it fits their convictions and contradict it when this is necessary to maintain their convictions.

Consequently, because of her and her audience's indifference to the rational-deliberative idea of facticity, Conway easily pivots to other topics that are more contentious and important to a sizable portion of the American people than whether or not the president stated a falsehood or made an "exaggerated" claim about the size of his inaugural crowd. Again, throughout the whole interview, Conway is not challenged about the character of the executive orders Trump signed or other policy positions he holds. Todd failed in his likely aim to "nail" Conway on a lie or, to use former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin's term, to use a "gotcha question" that would make Conway slip up and, in effect, undermine the credibility of the President of the United States for those who voted for him was.

We may interpret this to be, in part, because of the misunderstanding of the character of our way of seeing, or to use the traditional philosophical term for our aesthetic common sense, a misunderstanding of *sensus communis*.⁹⁰ Provisionally, this is to say that underappreciating the aesthetic character of *sensus communis* and overestimating what Kant calls "common human understanding" puts rational-deliberative rhetoric on shaky terrain. Rational-deliberative and far-

⁸⁹ "Nearly 37.8 Million Watch President Obama's Oath and Speech on TV," *Nielsen*, last modified January 21, 2009. <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2009/nearly-378-million-watch-president-obamas-oath-and-speech.html>

⁹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Merideth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123-127.

right rhetoric do not share the same epistemological concerns. This is because, as is apparent in the exchange between Todd and Conway, there is not a single universal and common way of sensing and perceiving; Conway's ability to utter the phrase "alternative facts" displays that she is operating under a dissimilar way of seeing. I will address the relationship between misunderstanding *sensus communis* as universal epistemology and "alternative facts" further after describing the rhetorical fickleness of the predominant rational-deliberative notion of facticity.

Fickleness of Facticity

A final note concerning the precarious nature of an approach relying chiefly on facticity to engage in political persuasion is that facts and political evaluation have a capricious alignment. This is to say that there is cleavage between our beliefs and the "side" the facts "come down on." For example, in a recent fact-check by CNN of The State of the Union Address, CNN's so-called "reality check team" evaluated as true Trump's claim that his presidency has overseen the creation of 2.4 million jobs and the lowest rate of African-American unemployment, and that the "defeat [of] ISIS has liberated very close to 100% of the territory held by these killers."⁹¹ If one holds a political position that is contrary to the Trump administration, and if one's position upholds the supremacy of facticity in the political realm, then one is left in an awkward position. On the one hand, it is possible to find these politics profoundly distasteful and unethical, and yet particular facts or elements of facticity do support

⁹¹ Interestingly, the video broadcast began with a statement they evaluate as true, while the corresponding linked article begins with evaluating a claim about the GOP tax plan being the most comprehensive reform in history as false. Whether the first claim is evaluated as true or as false can "color" how one reads the subsequent evaluations of Trump's claims. See Reality Check Team, "CNN's Reality Check Team vets Trump's State of the Union," last modified on January 31, 2018. <http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/30/politics/state-of-the-union-address-fact-check/index.html>

these politics. They are not *simply* counter-factual. In other words, to disagree with Trump, and to find that facticity does not exclusively align with political positions contrary to his creates the uncomfortable problem of having to admit the accuracy of such claims *and* yet nevertheless disagree with the politics of the president. Facts cannot dictate beliefs, they can only inform them. Facticity can contradict beliefs without *warranting* or compelling a change of heart.

Consequently, one either needs to entertain positions that are abhorrent or admit that facticity alone should not dictate political taste. Additionally, even if one “sides” with facticity, the “fact” that dissonance can be *felt* between facticity and political desires means that there is never a simple adherence to facticity—the nature of the world must be negotiated, including our feelings and our desires for how the world could and should be. Thus, rather than accept abhorrent politics because of some alignment with aspects of facticity, it seems justified to admit the truth of *political taste*, i.e. aesthetic sensibilities and ethical proclivities that reject these politics because of their *appearance* to us. Therefore, because of the (at-times) fickleness of facticity with regard to politics, there are limits to basing political taste in facts, Yet, this does not mean one needs to abandon facticity as such. Perhaps then, because people are often more apt to adhere to political *sense* rather than (and even in contradiction to) notions of facticity, a notion of truth of and from our feelings should be entertained.

In sum then, facticity as such has no exclusive friends; we can imagine a style of facticity that necessarily tailors particular claims toward a (to some degree) preconceived general understanding of the world. Recalling Nietzsche’s famous provocation, “there are no facts, only interpretations,” we may interpret him in this context to mean that there is nowhere outside the

boundaries of perception, i.e. how sense is made of the world, from which judgments are made and acted on.⁹²

The Rhetorical Problem of *Sensus Communis* as Universal Common Human

Understanding

From this rhetorical insufficiency of facticity, one may believe it possible to return to a fundamental notion of common sense, something that we can all agree upon. From this, ostensibly, it might be possible to create the tools to undermine the power of neo-fascistic rhetoric. Put otherwise, even if we cannot persuade others through sheer facticity, perhaps we can do so through the common sense we share. Indeed, if everyone shares a similar way of understanding themselves, others, and world, and conclusions from this way of perceiving the world manifest as a more-or-less uniform particular content that all can work from, then it would seem that a simple rhetorical application of this universal sensibility would be overwhelmingly moving politically.

However, the notion of a universal sensibility misunderstands the character of common sense and its relation and relatedness to the social, political, and cultural spheres. This is because if such an understanding of common sense was reflected in the world, it seems unlikely that far-right politics could emerge unless the world was already understood in such a way. Further, this conception could not account for the variety of ways that people perceive the world. If such common sense was truly common, then agreement would already be readily achievable—leaning on common sense would compel people to “come to their senses” in a similar way they supposedly would when presented with evidence of facticity. With this in mind, I will explore how a rationalistic deliberative style of rhetoric misunderstands common sense and how this

⁹² Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 458.

misunderstanding relates to its rhetorical shortcomings. Then I explore the character of *sensus communis*, leaning on aesthetic philosophy, to better understand the character and role of common sense and to uncover the role of taste and judgment regarding attraction, repulsion, or indifference to particular ways of being-in-the-world.

To demonstrate this, take an example that relates strongly to the need for an aesthetic notion of common sense in order to persuade others. Shortly after the Las Vegas shooting, Jimmy Kimmel, during his opening monologue, addressed the need to act on gun violence.⁹³ Reaching the peak of his crescendo, Kimmel made a desperate appeal to a seemingly *universal* notion of common sense “beyond” politics for something to be done. “What I’m talking about tonight isn’t about gun control, it’s about *common sense*. Common sense says no good will ever come from allowing weapons that can take down 527 Americans at a concert.”⁹⁴ He makes an appeal to common sense understood as what Kant designates “common human understanding.” Kant describes mere common human understanding as “the *least* we can expect from anyone claiming the name of a human being.”⁹⁵ This is in contrast to *sensus communis aestheticus* as shared or communal feelings presupposed as generally valid for the American public. In other words, *sensus communis aestheticus* is a communal sense as compared with “common human understanding”; *sensus communis aestheticus* is the *a priori* grounds that informs the tastes and feelings of communities and that make these communicable to others. An uncomfortable question that arises from this, then, is whether Kimmel is truly appealing to the lowest common denominator of understanding. Relatedly, is this rhetorically motivating for those who need to be

⁹³ Jimmy Kimmel, “Jimmy Kimmel on Mass Shooting in Las Vegas,” American Broadcasting Company, October 2, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruYeBXudsds>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Merideth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123.

moved for action to occur? Can appealing to common human understanding rather than *sensus communis aestheticus* contest the right-wing politics that prevent meaningful reforms from occurring?

Accordingly, then, Kimmel is right that we are working from and with the ground of common sense when engaging discursively about this issue, but perhaps not in the way that he supposes. Rather than understanding such a level of common understanding as a yet-to-be achievement (that we can debate the possibilities and merits of), Kimmel acts as if this common understanding is already pre-given and constructed to such an extent that it is obvious and accepted upon by almost everyone. It *should* constitute the very least that anyone can presuppose in the understanding of others. Here is the rub: Kimmel's description of common understanding is already beyond the purview of Kant's common understanding, the *very least* we can expect from other human beings concerning the lowest common denominator of understanding concerning gun violence. It is *not* common sense; the structure of *sensus communis* does not grant us this pre-given level of understanding concerning this (or any other) issue.

This conflation of common understanding with *sensus communis* is most evident in Kimmel's next sentences. He continues by describing his interpretation of a supposed shared universal understanding of this issue but then points to 56 senators who do not share this sentiment. "Common sense says don't let those who suffer from mental illness buy guns. *Who thinks that makes sense? Them I guess.*"⁹⁶ Presupposing the common understanding of others, when a sizable and disproportionately powerful group adheres to a different view, is a rhetorically questionable approach and should prompt us to reevaluate our interpretation of *sensus communis* if we are to work from it toward changing the status-quo. Kimmel himself

⁹⁶ Kimmel, "Jimmy Kimmel on the Mass Shooting in Las Vegas." Emphasis Added.

displays the non-universal character of his own claims by pointing to a majority of US senators who do not act on Kimmel's notion of common sense and who, at the very least, represent a sizable chunk of the American public that also do not adhere to his view of common understanding.

Accordingly, it is unwise to operate as if only when positions, beliefs, and attitudes are universally shared could one presuppose and build discourse from them. Indeed, if the public were truly in possession of Kimmel's hoped for common sense it seems less likely like there would be the cycle of violence and outrage in the first place or, at least, more ability to change the laws and the culture so as to break the cycle.

A Contest of Taste: The Need for Rhetorical Contestation of the Far Right on the Terrain of Sensus Communis Aestheticus

However, with Kant, common human understanding does not exhaust the meaning of *sensus communis*. Kant offers us a different notion of common sense that reflects the aesthetic dimension of politics. He also describes the public faculty of taste as a kind of *sensus communis*. For the contemporary context, this means considering the terrain of aesthetic taste as a factor in the resilience of the far-right against rational-deliberative rhetoric and as a sign of hope that the terrain can be modified. Moreover, the ability to be moved to different tastes and politics is contingent on how narrowly or broadly one's communal taste can imagine the standpoint of others, can reflect on these feelings, and can allow reflection to meaningfully inform one's judgment. Put another way, if the far right is dogmatic in their consideration of contrary tastes, and rational-deliberative rhetoric does not address this distaste for oppositional politics, then opponents of the far right need to imagine rhetorics that contest the dogmatism of far-right taste and not just the apparent lack of sense in far-right politics. Therefore, taste as a kind of *sensus*

communis should not be conflated with the lowest common denominator of common human understanding.

In this historical moment, perhaps because of an inability to *meaningfully* imagine and reflect upon the standpoint of others and because of a default to discord over accord, there appears to be an absence of *sensus communis*. It appears that many are dogmatic in their tastes, especially among the far right whose solidified convictions Hofstadter describes. Yet, common and potentially pluralistic-democratic tastes need to be built from and with the common tastes of others. Tastes are not formed in a vacuum. The community one finds oneself in influences one's tastes. To rhetorically move others toward imagining and creating better worlds, then, is a matter of working from the tastes and judgments of others *as they are*. If democratic tastes and feelings are to be cultivated, then this is where it may be safely presupposed that work should begin. Moreover, it is important to understand that *sensus communis* is always related to and imbued with particular historical content, i.e. aesthetic history conditions how able or well we are to imagine the viewpoints of others; that is, it conditions the ground of our rhetorical situation. Therefore, it is important to deal with the ever-changing historical content and particulars of *sensus communis aestheticus* instead of believing that an ahistorical common human understanding can provide a blueprint for discourse and practices by which to contest the far right.

Although reliance on common human understanding is impossible, taste as *sensus communis* is a ground on which the far right can be contested. Common aesthetic tastes can be presupposed and worked from to construct different contents of common sense. We may point to the ontological character of language and communication to demonstrate this. Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology Perception* writes, "Through speech . . . there is a taking up of the *other*

person's thought, a reflection in *others*, a power of thinking according to *others*, which enriches our own thoughts."⁹⁷ By virtue of being-in-the-world, we are granted the *potentiality* of imagining the different possible feelings of others. This notion of communal sense, not reducible to any particular content or context of understanding, is the form and ability to feel and be felt by others (though admittedly is also the ground of misapprehension). Indeed, feeling always "takes place" with and in the views of others, i.e. publicly. This *mitsein* or being-with is not separate from the "I" that I am, as if I am first an individual that does or does not take up the relations of *sensus communis*. I do not choose at one moment to be in this public and at another moment to retire into a wholly separate isolated "I." Rather, this connection, relation, and with-ness are imbued into my very way of being such that I could not be an "I" without a "We," or, to use Heidegger's phrase, a "they."⁹⁸

However, it is important to note that this ontological characteristic should not be confused with an endorsement of our historical "taking-up" of communal sense. Just because we can imagine and reflect upon the possible viewpoints of others and cannot help but be ontologically social, this does not mean it can be done well or easily. And yet what is needed is precisely to do this well if one is to confront and ultimately best the rise of increasing banal *and* vicious sentiments in the public. Therefore, although the public cannot help but have a communal sense and that sense cannot help but be entwined with its publicness, there are nonetheless better and worse ways of developing this sense.

Applying the conception of *sensus communis* just outlined to the rhetorical question of confronting far-right rhetoric and, recognizing the insufficiency of a deliberative-rationalistic

⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 184.

⁹⁸ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

rhetorical model, it is important to stress that the communal character of *sensus communis* is intimately related to our tastes and judgment as a condition for its possibility. Following Kant and Arendt, it is important to understand taste (as a kind of *sensus communis*) that is intertwined with our communal makeup. For example, when Jimmy Kimmel points to the others who do not adhere to the common sense he is discussing, it is not simply a matter of logical disagreement. Rather, the differences in their communal sense and in their communal tastes necessitate that they see this issue differently. They are a part of a different group with different preferences and therefore see things differently. So different, that it is *as if* they are not dealing with the “same thing.”

Concerning the character of disagreements between groups in relation to their sense of community taste, Hannah Arendt in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* cites Cicero observation, “I would rather be wrong *with* Plato than right *with* the Pythagoreans.”⁹⁹ This provocation demonstrates that people do not simply aim to be correct or to avoid being incorrect in dealing with others, as if it does not matter who one is “with” or what community one desires to be a part of. Conversely, the styles, attitudes, and preferences of the group with which one identifies often matter more than whether their views are correct or not. Whom one identifies with stylistically matters a great deal in one’s judgment of the truth and goodness of others. For example, when one finds likable a politician who “tells it like it is,” a part of the attraction seems to stem from the *way* they tell “it” at least as much as *what* they tell. The communities that people believe embody truth and goodness are usually also found attractive, such that attraction and repulsion (i.e. aesthetics) are related to judgments of truth and goodness.

⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt and Ronald Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 74. Emphasis Added.

This relationship between tastes that produce affective discrimination and judgments of truth and goodness is not incidental. As Arendt notes, “One *judges* always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*.”¹⁰⁰ What is key here for this project is that common sense is not a particular universal content that we all share, or even a universal kinship that identically colors all of our seeing; instead a multiplicity of common senses are enmeshed with our ways of judging and the particular judgments that we make. To use Kantian parlance, *sensus communis* is not exhausted by *sensus communis logicus*, but also includes *sensus communis aestheticus*.¹⁰¹ Communal sense, then, necessarily includes a sense of communal taste—what attracts and repulses *us*, *our* inclinations and disinclinations, what *we* are pleased and displeased by. In essence, that we all judge is given; how we judge is contingent.

Taking a multiplicity of communal senses as the present rhetorical context, a deliberative-rationalistic paradigm is insufficient, at the very least because it does not adequately take into account the aesthetic register of *sensus communis*. Specifically, I argue, the aspects of communal character of common sense and its related aesthetic tastes and judgments are underappreciated as a way for motivating others through discourse. Correspondingly then, there must be something about far-right rhetoric’s ability to not only appeal to different groups’ senses of and tastes from common sense, but also to cultivate and encourage certain preferences from existing preferences.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 75. Emphasis Added.

¹⁰¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 125.

CHAPTER 3

APPRECIATING AFFECTIVE ARMOR: SKETCHING AN AESTHETIC DIAGNOSTIC OF THE FAR RIGHT

In the previous chapter, I described rational-deliberative rhetoric as insufficient to contest the far right. I also suggested that the aesthetic dimension of *sensus communis*, i.e. communal taste and feelings, informs and contributes to the resilience of far-right politics against its opposition. If far-right politics do not adhere to a rational-deliberative paradigm of understanding and collective decision-making, and this paradigm is not effective in countering such politics, then a different rhetorical approach should be taken.

Before sketching a rhetorical orientation that might better contest far-right politics, it is important to appreciate *why* they are resilient. Therefore, it is necessary to sketch elements of the aesthetic terrain of the far right in order to point toward what opposing the far right should entail rhetorically. To imagine *therapies* that could address the ailment of authoritarian attitudes to democratic politics, one needs a good *diagnosis* to inform the appropriate therapy. As the previous chapter suggests, the predominant form of rational-deliberative rhetoric misunderstands what it opposes. Adherents to this form of rhetoric tend to conceive of human beings as *homo economicus*, which presumes that people are motivated by neutral and rational analysis of evidence, and offer their corrective to far-right politics based on this view. In contrast, this chapter offers a diagnosis of far-right politics based on Luc Ferry's notion of *homo aestheticus*, which conceives of human beings as significantly motivated by their communal tastes and feelings.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus*.

From this interpretation of the character of human beings, I begin with a diagnosis of far-right political rhetoric drawn from contemporary rhetorician Jenny Rice's critique of "bullshit," in which she deepens understanding of the aesthetic motivations of the far-right. Her analysis explains the problem of "hardened desire," or dogmatic taste that lacks "porousness" toward other viewpoints and that resists reflection and reconsideration of convictions. From the symptomatic far-right preference for "bullshit," I turn to Jeremy Engel's genealogy of resentment to provide a contextual basis for the hardened rhetorical desire of far-right politics. One can see the cultivation of particular tastes in the rise of resentment-based politics. If far-right aesthetic judgments have been cultivated over time, this suggests that it is possible to engender different aesthetic inclinations, to reorient *sensus communis* toward democratic ethics. Such a possibility is daunting to consider, given the tenacity of an established *sensus communis* in the face of opposition.

To describe the difficult yet possible challenge of reorienting *sensus communis aestheticus*, I examine Susan Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" to appreciate how such politics can be attractive and their affective pull given the history of resentful politics. To amplify and extend this analysis, I then consider Lawrence Grossberg's dissection of the cultural dissatisfaction with the present through his idea of affective landscapes. Cultural judgments about the nature of the past, present, and future – and how they relate to each other as a trajectory – obscure other, possibly better, futures. Finally, I stitch Kant's distinction between determinant and reflective judgment to Grossberg's description of contemporary politics. I suggest that Kant's aesthetic vocabulary offers a means for an appropriate diagnosis of *overdetermined* judgments of possibilities that are present. Such vocabulary also suggests cultivating a taste for *reflective* political judgment as a therapeutic orientation to overdetermined judgment.

Resilience of Bullshit: Appreciating Far-Right Hardened Desires

Faced with the disregard (rather than necessarily the disdain) for facticity animating far-right rhetoric, it hard not to find that the disregard and its discourses are “bullshit.” If a paranoid style characterizes far-right rhetoric, then bullshit is what it sounds like. It can be quite frustrating to confront such discourse because of its “bulletproof” character; bullshit is immune to conventional rhetorical tactics and rebuttals. As rhetorician Jenny Rice notes in her essay, “Disgusting Bullshit,” “The bullshitter bullshits whether or not she actually believes something to be the case.”¹⁰³ This point is key in the confrontation with bullshit rhetoric. Too often, many would-be opponents of far-right discourse act as if bullshitters may be swayed in their thinking—that it is simply a matter of them being misinformed. Accordingly, this purportedly can be rectified by “calling bullshit,” (pointing out the fallacious, inconsistent, or contradictory character of the claim), which will ostensibly rob it of its rhetorical power. Once robbed of this power, the bullshitter and her audience will “see the light” and, in good faith, change their position. Chuck Todd surely acted on this premise when he sparred with Kellyanne Conway over alternative facts.

Clearly, this is not the case that calling bullshit works. In fact, if this was the case, it seems the world would have long ago been rid of the practice of bullshitting. If the mere naming of bullshit stopped bullshit, then bullshitting probably would not occur. Bullshit persists even when called out as such (and perhaps especially so!). Therefore, the continuous attempts of pointing out the bullshit character of far-right claims appear as an insufficient, if not counterproductive, strategy to confront this type of rhetoric. This leaves the question: given the

¹⁰³ Jenny Rice, “Disgusting Bullshit,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 5 (2015): 470.

negative consequences of bullshit, what can be done to effectively counter it, if merely “calling bullshit” fails to deprive it of its power?

To provide an answer requires a better understanding of the character of bullshit, its aims, and why it emerges in the first place. Rather than simply noting its counter-factual status, this will help provide an account of the resilience of this phenomenon. To do so, I rely on Rice’s definition, “Bullshit is a lack of concern for truth; bullshit is fakery for the purpose of achieving some hidden motive.”¹⁰⁴ There are at least two important points to this definition. First, the “bullshitter” is not “playing the same game” as the person seeking truth in the rational-deliberative sense. Their positions are not put forth in good faith in that they are not open to modulation, revision, or transformation. Nor do they really listen to responses. By this, I mean that the bullshitter does not take up what others have to say in such a way that the bullshitter may be changed by the encounter. It does not matter what one says in response against, to appease, or to provoke the bullshitter; if the aim is to move the bullshitter based on evidence and claims to truth “head on” one almost certainly cannot succeed.

Second, bullshit is about power, not truth. Following a deliberative-rational paradigm to rhetoric, many of us operate from the idea that truth, especially around notions of facticity, is powerful or that power eventually goes to those who are truthful. This gives the sense that truth will prevail and, in the end, emerge as powerful. Yet, a part of the disgust and revulsion toward bullshit is that it works—it often achieves its end without regard for truth. Indeed, Rice notes, “For the bullshitter, what matters is whether or not his or her goal is accomplished.”¹⁰⁵

Therefore, the usual rhetorical strategies that concentrate on inconsistency, contradiction, and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 468.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

even conflict of interest are often ineffectual because these merely point out the character of something expressed as bullshit. They presuppose that decrying its counter-factual status and/or the negative aim it seeks can deprive bullshit of its potency. Again, following Rice's understanding, "calling bullshit" is usually insufficient at best because this does not hamper the aim toward which bullshit is directed or lessen its indifference toward adhering to truths. Bullshit is not really a result of misunderstanding or ignorance. Consequently, the *intentional* character of bullshit is often underappreciated, yet necessary to understand and address this phenomenon.

To appreciate why people are drawn to bullshitting as a practice, we should consider the powerful connection to sedimented desires, in place of reflection, as one of its key constitutive aspects. Describing the rhetorical concerns versus the more "properly" philosophical descriptions of bullshit, Rice writes, "As rhetoricians, what should concern us about bullshit's blockages is not so much the issue of truth . . . but the fact that any attempts to question, engage, or respond to bullshit's claims are obstructed by layer[s] of *hardened desire*."¹⁰⁶ Here is where the aesthetic dimension of bullshit is apparent. Bullshit is resilient because it is attractive to its audiences. Both the emergence of and the resort to bullshit are intimately related to desire—the more intuitive, sentimental, and reactive aspects traditionally ascribed to human beings. Bullshit's formation from and intimate communication with desire accounts for its *ambivalence* toward, rather than outright rejection of, truths in the rational-deliberative sense. As displayed from common maxims about the irrational aspects of human beings such as "the heart wants what it wants," these demonstrate that the character and aims of desires are not determined calculated analysis, but instead by seemingly automatic reaction.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 470. Emphasis Added.

Nor are these desires monolithic. People seem to find themselves pulled toward different, even contradictory ends. This is not inherently good or bad. Indeed, as Hofstadter's observes, while "the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good . . . nothing really prevents a sound program or demand from being advocated in the paranoid style."¹⁰⁷ Yet for this project, when linked with far-right politics, a key problematic quality with the desire of bullshit is that it is *hardened*; it is impermeable, reinforcing its unyielding character in the face of and regardless of whatever response is provided.¹⁰⁸ As Rice explains, "Countering bullshit . . . must deploy a response that does not begin from the assumption of porousness."¹⁰⁹ Rice uses the notion of rhetorical "blockage" or "build up" to describe impermeability, which may be interpreted as a metaphor for obstacles preventing discourse in good faith, to argue that we cannot presuppose bullshitters and those that "buy into it" are open to the possibility of being *moved*. Therefore, if the aims of bullshit are to be avoided, confronted, or contested, the counter-rhetoric to bullshit must be able to create a rhetorical porousness— it must open the way for meaningful listening to occur—to "de-bullshit" rather than just calling bullshit. If this rhetoric is to be contested, opponents of the far-right need to cultivate openness to reconsideration, or what I call in the next chapter a "prejudice for reflective judgment." Concisely, rhetorical projects need to undo or dismantle rather than merely dismiss bullshit if they are to have a chance at success.

This is no easy task. The hardened desire that makes bullshitting possible and its reception often have many antecedents that cannot simply be undone. As I will suggest below

¹⁰⁷ Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style of American Politics," 77.

¹⁰⁸ This is not to say that there cannot be "bullshitters" across the political spectrum, i.e. there is also bullshit in the Center and on the Left. However, it seems to be most prevalent and dangerous on the (far-)Right in this historical moment. Therefore, this where I focus my attention.

¹⁰⁹ Rice, "Disgusting Bullshit," 470.

following thinkers like Jeremy Engels, the festering of resentment will not be undone or overcome (assuming it can be undone and that this is a desirable outcome) through clever rebuttals or verbalization of sympathy. Admittedly, these may be necessary tactics to counter bullshit. Yet, by recognizing the character of bullshit as a power maneuver rather than rationalistic truth claim, its impermeability and its resistance to such efforts, and its foundation in desire, we at least have a better sense of how to orient rhetorical projects aiming to contest malignant forms of bullshit. Cultivating reflection and receptivity to others must be a common aim of such projects.

The question of responding to neo-fascistic rhetoric, then, may come down to the question of what works? What can break through, or weaken this hardened desire? Jenny Rice's account of deliberative rhetoric bouncing off of far-right bullshit is helpful in understanding the contemporary rhetorical situation in the United States. The problem is that deliberative rhetoric does not lessen recalcitrant desire; it does not make a mark or an impression upon either the rhetors of bullshit or those impressed by them. Accordingly then, we need rhetorics that temper desire, take hold, and persist; ones that make an impression upon those moved by bullshit. This is difficult because such rhetoric is resilient—it resists everything else. In this case, encouraging porousness requires a simultaneous acidity of an aesthetic orientation to weaken this type of rhetoric and a creativity that can catch on that may emerge from the artistic aspects of aesthetics to make an impression upon others.

At the basis of bullshit, then, are the aesthetics that inform its hardened desires. Rice argues that aesthetic responses, “work to expose ways in which bullshit discourse is itself rooted

in a *sentimental aesthetics*.”¹¹⁰ This is to say that the explicit aesthetic responses to bullshit (e.g. disgust, revulsion, nausea) help illustrate the essential character of feelings and aesthetic evaluations and preferences of the desires that constitute bullshit. Richard Spencer’s provocation on the character of the so-called white race is an instance of this style of desire: “To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer, and a conqueror. We build, we produce, we go upward . . . For us it is conquer or die.”¹¹¹ Here, the ideas of whiteness, authority, and dominance are key objects of the desire. These also imply to repulsion against what is not white; fear of a diverse or brown nation, and quasi-Christian values antithetical to science and democratic values. While a view toward truth in a rationalistic sense leaves us puzzled as to the character of bullshit, let alone how to successfully challenge it, an aesthetic orientation offers the chance to understand these desires so that they might be *reoriented* toward porousness.¹¹²

If Rice is correct that, “Bullshit references nothing but its own sentiment,” then projects that challenge bullshit need to work from, through, and with these sentiments *as they are*. A

¹¹⁰ Rice, “Disgusting Bullshit,” 471. Emphasis Added.

¹¹¹ Grame Wood, “His Kampf,” *Atlantic*, June 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>

¹¹² Rice suggests disgust as a possible aesthetic antidote to the blockage of bullshit. In some contexts, revulsion as an emotional response might unblock those susceptible to bullshit to listen and consider other perspectives. Disgust could encourage others to become disgusted or prompt shame that coincides with reevaluating worldviews and ways of being. If a style of politeness is associated with weakness and not taken seriously, then disgust might provide a shock that can challenge the resilience of bullshit. Disgust might weaken blockage and encourage porousness. Alternatively, the display of disgust might further block listening because of disgust at the very display of disgust; that some are disgusted by what others find appealing can prompt re-entrenchment or “doubling-down” into present positions. Indeed, this mirrors psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich’s contention that fascists create a political situation, “that is not to be *ridiculed* out of existence.”¹¹² Disgust might reinforce blockage rather than encourage porousness. Further, such a response might be ridiculed for its “thoughtless” quality, even if one’s own position is colored by affect and aesthetic preferences. Regardless of the specific means, contesting far-right rhetoric needs to engage the aesthetic register to “unblock” or make porous the desires of susceptible audiences to open the way for democratic tastes. See Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970).

rhetoric that can counter bullshit rhetoric ought to address the taste, inclinations, and ways of evaluating, and desires of others to become more porous. Such openness could allow people to consider different evaluations. Moreover, broadmindedness could become attractive as a way of evaluating. Aesthetic strategies ought to encourage people to accept that not everything felt to be true or good is so, without denying the truthfulness of what, how, and why it is felt (even if in need of development). Indeed, with Rice, “We must create the conditions for which the call of conscience can be heard.”¹¹³ Left-leaning opponents of the far right must create the conditions for openness in addition to the specific democratic tastes, feelings, and desires that they hope to communicate. Openness must be created, it cannot be presupposed. Therefore, they would encourage democratic sentiments from a space of openness against the present closed and authoritarian desires. We need to orient our sentiments toward being open to *different* sentiments and *sentimentality*, so that even resentful, far-right citizens might feel the need to take up democratic ethics. Moreover, they might feel ethics anew.

Historically Habituated Resentment and a Need for Democratic Aesthetic Imagination

If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all.¹¹⁴

In the preceding analysis of bullshit, I have argued from Rice that bullshit is motivated by hardened desire and takes the form of a dogmatic rhetorical aesthetic. Bullshitters are resistant to any convictions contrary to their own, which suggests that opponents of far-right “bullshit” need to make hardened desire more porous to the views of others. To counter the rhetoric of far-right

¹¹³ Rice, “Disgusting Bullshit,” 471.

¹¹⁴ Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment,’” in *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 1.

politics requires recreating the conditions whereby democratic ethics may be not only heard, but also, necessarily, communicated. This requires more than aesthetic strategies; it requires a firm grasp of the emotional, contextual basis that grounds the paranoid bullshit of far-right rhetoric. I argue, following Jeremy Engels, that resentment can be understood as a key motivation for the rhetorical “symptom” of bullshit. I draw on pertinent aspects of Engels’ genealogy of American resentment in order to provide that context. With the understanding that resentment is the soil in which paranoia grows and that bullshit fertilizes, I suggest that an atrophying democratic imagination and a surging authoritarian imagination contribute to the resilience of far-right politics.

An Interpretation of “Resentment”

Consider the evolution of “resentment.” Classical Greco-Roman and liberal notions of democratic resentment saw it as the disempowered masses revolting against the ruling elite. According to Engels, Richard Nixon crystalized a shift in the political nature of resentment in the United States that divided the *demos* to the benefit of the elite. If democracy is always yet-to-come, i.e. a perpetual project that is worked toward, and there are injustices that need to be addressed, then resentment is intertwined with necessarily imperfect democracy.¹¹⁵ This can be vital; channeling the feeling of dissatisfaction at one’s place in the world in comparison to the privileged is key to confronting and overcoming particular injustices. However, with Nixon’s style of resentment, legitimate reasons for the *demos* to be resentful were reoriented toward conflicts that split the *demos* into “the great silent majority” and the undemocratic and unpatriotic minority (e.g. student protestors, civil rights activists, racial minorities etc.). Accordingly, Engels writes, “[when] fractured into simple, simplistic, and all-too-easy binaries . .

¹¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

. it [is] difficult to *imagine* ourselves as a *demos* acting *collectively* as a mighty agent of change and justice.”¹¹⁶ This is to say that the paranoid style’s caricatures of its political opponents, or, more precisely, enemies from such a view, have a long historical basis. Given a history of rigid caricature, it is nearly impossible to communicate with each other about resolving (or at least confronting) the causes of resentment. Communication even appears to be *unnecessary*; convictions do not need to be reevaluated in conversation with others when one feels obligated to choose between crude binaries—to stick with those in one’s own camp or defect.

Resentment seems to *encourage* calcification of convictions, the hardened desire of a paranoid style. Inability or unwillingness to appreciate the political nuances of left-opposition tends to reinforce far-right convictions and *vice versa*. Indeed, concerning resentment, Engels writes, “As it is routinized, becoming over time civic *habit*, [such] politics *cultivates an orientation* of resentment that encourages citizens to live reactive rather than active lives.”¹¹⁷ If this is the case, the style of resentment exemplified by Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Sarah Palin, and exaggerated by Donald Trump is not endemic to democracy; rightwing culture has provided a milieu in which such an orientation was possible and eventually has become actual.

Resentment as Habitual

However, the success of resentment politics makes it appear inevitable. Though resentment is culturally acquired rather than inherent to human nature, its habitual status can make it appear as intuitive, even natural and without alternatives. This is why it is resilient. If one has been acculturated into a reactive stance, i.e. if resentment has become habitual, then this

¹¹⁶ Engels, *The Politics of Resentment*, 101-102, Emphasis Added.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 130. Emphasis Added.

habit tends to cement itself. Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* offers a relevant example. He argues:

It's unlikely that I would in this moment destroy an inferiority complex in which I have been complacent now for twenty years . . . this past, *if not a destiny*, has at least a specific weight. . . Our freedom does not destroy [this] situation . . . so long as we are alive, our situation is open...¹¹⁸

Like the person with a habitual inferiority complex, the cultural habit and resilience of resentment mean that in any given moment, it is unlikely that resentment will be exchanged for better democratic habits. That this tendency has been cultivated over decades means that it will be difficult to challenge. When resentment feels intuitive for many, it is unlikely, though still possible, that other feelings will be taken up. By being politically and culturally habitual, though it tends to perpetuate itself, these existing habits are still open to different habits. While resentment is resilient, it is not invincible. Habits can become otherwise. It is from this possibility that one can imagine rhetorical means for disrupting the civic habit of resentment and reorienting it and/or cultivating new habits.

The tendency toward resentment reinforcing itself, thus, is a tendency and not an inevitability. *This difference makes all the difference*. It is the difference between the unlikely (or less likely) and the impossible. If we can disrupt the habituation of this civic habit and develop other habits, if we can encourage more active ways of being together, if we can cultivate *prejudices for reflective judgment* upon the particular happenings rather than subsume them under our previous conceptions, then we might be able to live more active lives. We might be able to re-orient resentment toward cathartic action that addresses the roots of resentment instead

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 467. Emphasis Added.

of toward scapegoating others that perpetuates this feeling of dissatisfaction. We might be able to construct new forms of common sense; how we live in common with others, are attracted and repulsed by particular happenings, and our capability of being affected.

Even if one is unconvinced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of habits as resilient yet open, the historical record demonstrates the potential to challenge resentment. Ironically, that Nixon crystalized the political habit of *e pluribus duo* displays the potential for new habits. This form of resentment was not always present. Political desire has not always manifested this way. The *demos* can change because it has changed. Though detrimental, nonetheless, there was a novelty about this style; certain attitudes were cultivated and adopted while others were discouraged and neglected. The possibility of novelty displays that the present style of resentment may also be discouraged and different attitudes may be encouraged. Therefore, what are the conditions for the possibility of challenging the habitual taste for resentment? How can democratic political tastes and habits become attractive to those sympathetic to the far right?

A problem of habitual resentment is that if such a reactive stance is habitual, and there are limited spaces that encourage the creativity, imagination, and experimentation to consider and take up different convictions, then this habit tends to *cement* itself. In other words, many political, social, and cultural happenings *reinforce* the habitual blockages in peoples' ways of seeing and acting. For example, the Las Vegas shooting of audience members at an outdoor merely concert sustained or reinforced many people's convictions about the regulation of firearms in the United States.

Atrophy of the Democratic Imagination

Nixon's shift to resentment in the form of *e pluribus duo* signals the habitual atrophy of the democratic imagination. There is no need to meaningfully imagine others because many believe they already know all they need to about others. Thus, there is no great need or value in understanding others. If there is little need to exercise a democratic imagination toward the Other because of the predominance of predigested caricatures of Otherness, then this tends to confirm prejudices, particular judgments toward difference and an overdetermined way of judging differences. Relatedly, because many who are possessed by resentment do not feel the need to broaden their views beyond their present ones, they seem to be rarely *reflective* in rendering judgment and instead merely apply what they already believe irrespective of particular situations. For example, the tragedies of inadequate action concerning the Flint water crisis or of Hurricane Maria are, at best, only marginally taken up in the course of judging. Instead, far-right rhetoric tends merely to apply pre-existing convictions, such as the imperative to restrain "big government" with austerity, to the given situation. The conditions are irrelevant to the desire. Indeed, such pre-judgment *determines* judgment.¹¹⁹

Therefore, members of the far right often overlook the living, material, and particular happenings of a given situation in favor of untethered, determinate, and "sedimented" truisms. This sedimentation is vicious; all happenings tend (and are all-but determined) to confirm and

¹¹⁹ Newspaper columnist and humorist Molly Ivins offers a good example of the irrelevance of the conditions to the desires and judgments of the Right. She writes, "Bush argued for both the '01 tax cut and for further tax cuts so many ways it started to resemble a Monty Python sketch: first we needed tax cuts because the economy was doing so well, then we needed tax cuts because the economy was doing so poorly. We need tax cuts because of September 11 and tax cuts because of corporate scandals. If it rains, we need tax cuts and if the sky is falling, we need tax cuts." See Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose, *Shrub: The Short But Happy Political Life of George W. Bush*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

reinforce our way of seeing the world. The calcification of judgment employs the imagination only to *re-produce* an image of the given issue in line with previous judgments, rather than make present or create an image that can put into question and challenge pre-judgments to broaden and sharpen feelings and understandings of political and cultural issues.

Accordingly, one of the casualties of a habitually atrophied democratic imagination is the inability (and unwillingness?) to conjure up more distant and desirable possibilities. Under such conditions only the more limited possibilities present themselves to be actualized. This is because an emaciated imagination is more limited in what it may envision and instead tends toward anemic, degraded repetition. When the *demos* finds itself under conditions that prompt resentment, such visual and affective stagnation of what could be only serve to maintain or intensify resentment to the point of reactionary outbursts. Rather than producing a long-awaited qualitative change to finally tackle the causes of resentful dissatisfaction (e.g. structural sexism, racism, and classicism), the tendency is toward maintaining and exacerbating these tensions. Relatedly, Engels writes that in contemporary rhetoric of resentment, “people [do] not *act* as much as *react*.”¹²⁰ An atrophy of the imagination, or, the preponderance of the re-creative imagination over the creative imagination tends to produce shortsighted responses. Though the *demos*’ intuition prompts resentment because of its distaste for its place in society, it cannot conjure, let alone actualize, imaginative enough alternatives to set in motion a future different than the present. Or, at minimum, a resentful imagination cannot spark action adequate to address the roots of resentment. Rather, the present is merely negated without creating positive alternatives. Engels continues; “Citizens find it difficult to *even imagine* the transformative

¹²⁰ Ibid, Emphasis Original.

power of democratic fraternity.”¹²¹ If democratic imagination has atrophied, i.e. our collective ability to make present and be open to new and preferable possibilities, then this only aids the perpetuations of our habitual resentment in its current form. A difficult paradox then arises; for the hope of democratic fraternity to be actualized, its potential must be imagined to excite us to this possibility and make it be desirable. Yet, to excite the imagination, there must already be the latent creativity that can allow for the chance of us imagining this possibility. Such a possibility may appear as unavailable because this democratic fraternity is not active in our memory, is not presently occurring, and is not foretold as likely to occur or worth occurring in the future.

Therefore, displays or *images* of a possible democratic fraternity are needed to prompt the imagination to understand this possibility as possible and desirable, i.e. achievable and worth working for. At least two questions emerge: how can the imagination be excited to encourage attempts at democratic fraternity at smaller and larger scales before it is actualized, especially when the habit of resentment has become so cemented? Relatedly, what activities that “forecast” democratic fraternity can be “magnified” to excite the imagining of this possibility, and to excite the desire to incite action from and toward democratic fraternity? While not claiming to provide any definitive answers to these questions, I do think the importance of the imaginative aspects of projects are important in seeking to disrupt current incarnations of resentment and cultivate new ways of being together democratically.

To review, we can and should critique the politics of resentment that motivate the rhetoric of *e pluribus duo*. Nonetheless, there is hope in the possibility of changing habits and far right’s success because they demonstrate the ability to shape and modify rhetorical taste that differs from the status quo of an ascendant far right. Even if we do not know beforehand what

¹²¹ Ibid.

such a world precisely will look like, such a move is possible and seems necessary if there is to be hope in realizing a better world. Cultivating an aesthetic orientation toward democratic ethics and ends, one that feeds a desire for flexibility and not dogmatism, might be the right response to the hardened desire that motivates far-right political rhetoric.

“Fascinating Fascism”: Aesthetic Appeal as “Non-Politically” Political

From Engel’s understanding of the historical and habitual resentment and an atrophy of the democratic imagination from Engels, I turn to the attractiveness of this habit by revisiting Susan Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism.”¹²² Sontag offers an understanding of the staying power of resentment. By arguing that (neo)fascist longings are still felt, its resilience can be better understood. Resilience from (neo)fascist longings are difficult to communicate with for those hoping to contest their corresponding politics, especially when challenging the intuitive taste for and feeling of attraction for resentment. While Rice describes the challenge presented by resilient far-right bullshit, and Engels describes the strength of the historical and habituated character of far-right resentment, Sontag identifies and analyzes an even more profoundly difficult challenge to democracy from the far-right’s aesthetic longings. Such longings “charge” the far right; they not only immunize them against epistemic challenges, nor just inoculate them against deliberative politics, but also reflect dogmatic tastes that feel self-evident. Democratic projects face the difficult yet necessary task of undermining these tastes and feelings. Appreciating the depth of these tastes and feelings and their interrelation to the politics of resentment further develops the diagnosis of the far-right by looking at their aesthetic inclinations. I suggest that the aesthetics of traditional fascism of the 1920s-40s is echoed in the seemingly “cooler” neo-fascism of the present.

¹²² Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *New York York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.

In “Fascinating Fascism,” Sontag reviews Leni Riefenstahl’s film *The Last of Nuba*, the “air-brushing” of fascist aesthetics and their continued appeal. Sontag displays through discourse analysis the “rehabilitation” of Riefenstahl through the ostensible divorce of the aesthetic and the political and the growing appeal of her style a mere 30 years after the end of the second world war. This is similar to the rehabilitation and habituation of far-right politics in the present. By analyzing key moments in Sontag’s text, we can find insights into the continued relevance of the appeal of, taste for, and attractiveness of resentful and potentially fascistic habits. This can highlight the uncomfortable interrelatedness between the attraction to such aesthetics and (latent) taste for these politics. Perhaps the uncomfortable truth is that if we are to contest neo-fascistic politics, we must acknowledge their aesthetic appeal (even for those against such politics). Further, rhetorical programs that contest such politics may need to operate on the level of taste; they need to appreciate the taste for far-right politics if they are to cultivate *distaste* for these aesthetics and tastes for democratic ethical alternatives.

To begin, we may turn to an interview with Riefenstahl on her most famous works, *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad*. In a line eerily similar to Trump’s infamous Access Hollywood recording, Sontag quotes Riefenstahl’s interview, “I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful . . . I am *fascinated* by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living.”¹²³ Here, we may get the sense that Riefenstahl is *simply* concerned with aesthetic, not political matters. She purports to be only attracted to beautiful

¹²³ Ibid. Emphasis Added. Trump was recorded saying the following, “You know, *I’m automatically attracted to beautiful* — I just start kissing them. *It’s like a magnet*. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.” See Penn Bullock, “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Taped Comment about Women,” *New York Times*, published on October 8, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>. Emphasis Added.

forms. This seemingly grants her innocence from the ethical and political muddiness (to put it mildly) of the content of her work.

Yet, the aesthetic appeal of her work and its political-ethical ramifications are more related than Riefenstahl claims. We can see this from within this very statement responding to the “German concern for form.” That her aesthetic fascination is with the “strong”, “healthy,” “what is living,” “harmony,” and makes her happy implies an ethical evaluation of the content, rather than an exclusively aesthetic evaluation concerning form. The qualities of being strong, healthy, living, harmonious, and happy are not solely aesthetic; to call something strong, healthy, living etc. is also to call something excellent which has ramifications for ethics and politics. In other words, Riefenstahl deeply associates, if not conflates, what she finds beautiful with what she finds to be good. To use a contemporary example, calling a southern border wall “beautiful” displays the connection between aesthetic judgments and the attraction to a politics of resentment. All of these traits are simultaneously aesthetically and ethically appealing.

By tying aesthetic evaluation to resentful politics, affective fascination is a part of the staying power of neo-fascistic rhetorical habits. The power of resentful politics seems to stem from its affective charge; its ability to appeal to and to shift tastes. Therefore, being fascinated by resentful politics, one is simultaneously making an ethical evaluation; aesthetic judgments inform one’s ethical stance at least as much as ethical evaluations inform aesthetic judgments. As difficult as conflicts of ethics are, contesting seemingly self-evident and intuitive feelings is a difficult proposition. Moreover, when these attitudes have “contempt for all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic,” or as Andrew Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos describe as “a preference for homogeneity over diversity, for stability over change, and for hierarchy and

order,” then these attitudes are *de facto* uncontested.¹²⁴ Even if these attitudes are conventionally contested, the very feelings are armored against the possibility of feeling differently. Thus, their viciousness is twofold—not only in their specific content, (e.g. taste for unquestioned authority and obedience and disgust with diversity), but also its violence in principle to alternative sentiments as such.

A part of this armoring arises from the belief in the self-evident and unchallengeable character of feelings. Concerning Riefenstahl’s rehabilitation, (which I link to the rehabilitation of far-right rhetoric), Sontag writes, “A [strong] reason for the change in attitude toward Riefenstahl lies in a *shift in taste* which makes it impossible to reject art if it is ‘beautiful.’”¹²⁵ Here, Sontag is describing the growing sentiment that, if art (and affect) is understood as a purely aesthetic phenomenon, that we may then only judge it aesthetically. Put differently, if the work seems only concerned with form (rather than form and content), then one may only judge it based on its ability to produce formal appeals irrespective of content. This understanding did not spontaneously arise; the Western aesthetic tradition often separates the aesthetic from the ethical and political spheres. Walter Benjamin is famous for equating aesthetic politics with the danger of fascism in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”¹²⁶ From the rise of such an attitude, critiques of the tastes and sentiments of resentful politics are impossible; merely “authentically” feeling something establishes its truth.

¹²⁴ Ibid. See Brokhart and Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide To The Alt-Right,” *Breitbart*.

¹²⁵ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism.” Emphasis Added.

¹²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Accordingly, as Sontag writes, “Riefenstahl’s films are still effective because . . . their longings are still felt.”¹²⁷ These feelings react against what Goebbels describes as the tendency of “putting the head over the heart, the individual over the community, [and] intellect over feeling.”¹²⁸ As displayed by the growth of neo-fascist rhetoric and sentiment, our culture maintains the conditions for the possibility of far-right politics; we are still inclined toward, enchanted by, and fascinated with this viciousness. Truly, many are still moved by these ways of being.

Consequently, one of the differences between this cultural-political moment and the one Sontag discusses is that while she was working against the failure “to detect the fascist longings in our midst,” we are combatting the failure to contest the *materialization* of neo-fascism in our political institutions. What were (more or less) latent fascist tendencies have become manifest neo-fascistic rhetoric and practices. The place and relation of taste and aesthetics can no longer be ignored if we are to address one of the roots that allow for and make actual these practices.

Affective Landscapes: Temporal Dissatisfaction and Kant’s Modes of Judgment

An Interpretation of “Affective Landscapes.”

It is one thing to understand the depth of feeling in far-right paranoia’s resentful bullshit and that it is a habituated, historical form of rhetoric that can change. It is another to conceptualize *how* such feelings can and do change. I consider Lawrence Grossberg’s notion of affective landscapes for a social and cultural perspective on this phenomenon. The metaphor of affective landscapes offer a helpful account for diagnosing the motivations of far-right politics in that changing ‘landscapes’ suggests potential rhetorical therapies that adequately appreciate the

¹²⁷ Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism.”

¹²⁸ Ibid.

social character of aesthetic cultivation. Then, I stitch his observation of a popular belief in the impossibility and unnecessary character of judgment in the public consciousness to suggest a turn to Kant's aesthetic vocabulary. Kant's differentiation between determinant and reflective judgment offers a fitting description of the different *ways* people judge politically. I use this vocabulary to provide a diagnosis of (over)determinant judgment within the far right and suggest a corrective or therapy through cultivating a prejudice toward habit of reflective judgment.

Affective landscapes offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenge of contesting far-right affective politics. Grossberg describes an affective landscapes as, "a complex *social* way of being in the world, a densely textured space within which some experiences, behaviors, choices, and emotions are possible, some 'feel' inevitable and obvious, and still others are impossible or unimaginable."¹²⁹ He likens affective landscapes to a fog or atmosphere that permeates not only the situations we passively experience, but also "its *active* conditions and expressions."¹³⁰ I understand this to denote the common and shared sentiments and attitudes that "one" (Heidegger's *das Man*) feels; the terrain of sentiments and perceptions that inform peoples' practices and comportment to the world.

The social sentiments and perceptions of affective landscapes can be applied to make sense of the far right. Similar to how Engel's genealogy displays Nixonian resentful politics are historical rather than ontologically or naturally endemic to democracy, I understand these politics as social and cultural phenomena rather than only individualistic. To see resentment as derived from a social milieu better accounts for the character of this political phenomenon; it appreciates an intersubjective influence in motivating political convictions. Indeed, Grossberg describes

¹²⁹ Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 91. Emphasis Added.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 92. Emphasis Added.

affective landscapes as “a key element in any calculation about how to change the [cultural and political] story.”¹³¹ We need to grasp where we are to better imagine where we can and should be. Such imaginings can inform the political actions that are taken. If affect arises from intersubjective landscapes, then the aim of countering far-right rhetoric should target the social and cultural aspects of feeling, rather than the specific feelings of individuals on the hope of simply persuading enough individuals to abandon the far right.

Temporal Dissatisfaction

Resonating with Engels’ description of contemporary politics of resentment, Grossberg understands the emerging affective landscape in the United States to be “an organization of passive nihilism.”¹³² He maps four predominant strands: affective autonomy, anxiety and hyperactivism, sociality as personalization (narcissism), and temporal alienation.¹³³ For this section, I briefly review affective autonomy and focus on temporal alienation. The affective autonomy links well with the previous chapter’s description of *sensus communis aestheticus*. Grossberg asserts, “people are increasingly aware of the contradictions that define their common sense, and they have learned to live *comfortably* with them.”¹³⁴ As argued in the previous chapter, simply revealing the unknown facts or inconsistencies within people’s worldviews cannot change those views. At least to a certain degree, the contradictions do not matter. They are sustained through commitments to particular forms of common sense, the *sensus communis* that is essential to selfhood. To alter or abandon aesthetic common sense, even if understood as

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid, 93-94.

¹³⁴ Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 95. Emphasis Added.

inconsistent or self-contradictory, is to alter and abandon one's current way of being—to become a “new” person.

Therefore, it is necessary to dis-ease habitual resentment. Here, understanding the feature of temporal alienation in the present affective landscape advances my diagnosis of the resilience of the far right. A part of this dis-easing of common sense should disrupt senses of temporality. This is to say our understanding and how we act on what we believe/feel about time is co-constitutive of *sensus communis*. Grossberg concisely describes our attitude toward time: “It is *as if* it is always too soon too late; there is no present that can be the right time.”¹³⁵ Indeed, this echoes the famous proclamation in Hamlet that is of particular interest to Derrida, “Time is out of joint.” Part of the fuel feeding a vicious resentment derives from a collective feeling of the exhaustion of the past, dissatisfaction with the present, and futility of the future. Many on the right seem to imagine the past as spent, the present as more-or-less static, and the future as the mere continuation of what already is and has been. No present or series of presents can amount to a future, or something worth traveling toward. To use Ernst Bloch's phrase, there is within far-right rhetoric an underappreciation of the “not-yet”—the possibilities in the present that are informed by memories of the past to imagine and actualize (un)certain futures.

A greater appreciation of the not-yet seems to be precisely what is needed if we are to orient a public common sense toward better possibilities; to “lean into” a re-enchanted present that can give birth to qualitatively different futures. To *feel* the power and promise of possibility—to understand that not-yet as potentially yet-to-be so that it can become actual. Contrary to the current temporal alienation, it seems our affective landscape, our *sensus communis*, should appreciate and remember the past, so that the future is more open, hopeful, and can be

¹³⁵ Ibid, 109. Emphasis Added.

qualitatively different. We need to feel that the present is dynamic, that it is a rich enough place for individuals to learn from the past and to work on projects for a better and more democratic future. This “pragmatic utopian” orientation does not purport to work toward an ever-receding future, though success is never certain. Instead, the aim is to imagine workable moments in the present that can produce better futures. To do so will require an aesthetic orientation to the present that is hopeful and reflective and not resentful and calcified.

A Reconsideration of Kantian Aesthetic Vocabulary for Contemporary Politics

As demonstrated in the first chapter, the rhetorical boundaries between feelings or sentiments and truth are becoming less distinct. Grossberg addresses this condition as it relates to the phenomenon of “fake news,” providing a link between the contemporary moment and Kant’s aesthetic vocabulary about determinant and reflective ways of judging. Grossberg writes, “Truth itself is becoming a matter of affect! The problem with fake news is not simply that it denies Truth, or even that it denies the possibility of judgment, but that it *denies the necessity of judgment*, the link between judgment and credibility.”¹³⁶ There is a sense that our feelings are self-evidently correct, are the very ground where truth is. If sentiment is self-referential, meaning that there are no underlying or contributing factors to its existence, then it appears as *intuitively* right. When this intuition contributes to authoritarian politics, it seems that reflection upon this intuition is needed to potentially revise such feelings. From a belief in feelings as self-evident, there is no possible judgment “underneath” or within taste, feeling, or affect. Therefore, there is no credible or meaningful possibility of reflective judgment upon our feelings—they are the beginning, middle, and end of the truth.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 126. Emphasis Added.

Resentful civic habits, tastes, and feelings are made possible, maintained, and reinforced through the (over-) exercise of what Kant calls determinant judgment—the *way* of judging that merely applies its universal premise regardless of the particular context.¹³⁷ Using the Las Vegas shooting as an example again, a determinant judgment about the shooting would take one’s pre-judgment, (e.g. that, in general, assault weapons should or should not be banned), and apply that thinking to this particular situation. This would mean that proponents or opponents of an assault weapon ban would see this situation as an example proving that they have been and are already “right” about this issue.

Admittedly, determinant judgment is a necessary way of judging for some contexts. We cannot “reinvent the wheel” of society at every moment and live a healthily ordered life. Some determinant judgment is required politically; not every single political situation can be decided “from scratch.” Nevertheless, with the rise of a paranoid style and its accompanying calcified convictions that threaten healthy democratic discourse, one must challenge this calcification to resist the rise of authoritarian politics. Civic habits discourage meaningful habits of reflection, as everything we already believe is merely confirmed.

If there is any hope of challenging these calcified convictions, I argue in the next chapter that a more *reflective way* of judging needs to be cultivated and taken up. Following Kant, a reflective way of judging primarily engages the particular; the particular is not merely subsumed underneath a pre-given universal conviction.¹³⁸ One’s general convictions are suspended or bracketed in reflective judgment; universal sentiments do not *dictate* how one feels about a given situation or happening. Moreover, using Rice’s language, reflective judgments require the

¹³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 15.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

“porousness” to particular experiences so as to reconsider one’s general sentiments and convictions. In other words, this way of judging allows for particulars to “have their say” in general convictions.

Letting particulars have their say through reflective judgment opens the possibility for tastes to change. Through reflective judgment, there is a chance for one’s feelings about a particular situation and one’s related general convictions to come into *conflict*. If the particular situation is taken seriously enough, this opening can prompt a reassessment of one’s general conviction. Reflective openings can *change* one’s general sentiments; appreciating the richness of particulars can dissolve hardened desires. Admittedly, there is no guarantee that a reflective way of judging *will* change general convictions. Upon reassessing a general conviction, one may reaffirm one’s preexisting conviction. Nevertheless, encouraging reflective judgment in taste, feelings, and conviction seems to offer a better chance of addressing the resilience of far-right politics. Recalling Rice, this is because practicing reflective judging tries to encourage and create the conditions for openness, rather than merely presupposing it.¹³⁹

In the case of the Las Vegas shooting example, a reflective way of judging would not allow one’s preformed general conviction, (e.g. that, in general, assault weapons should or

¹³⁹ It seems reflection ought not be reserved for “armchair speculations” about people and things that have little consequence, especially when concerning feelings, tastes, and ways of judging. To approach reflection in this way is to minimize the promise, even necessity, of reflection in matters of import. Great risk is taken when speed and reaction are carelessly preferred over contemplation of particulars. Of course, a “forever reflective” stance risks lethargy. All detours into reflection confront the dilemma that *further* reflection *could* produce better action, thereby causing inaction in the practical sphere. There must be a “leaping ahead” into action at some point. In this sense, all reflection is insufficient if it is not to be impotent. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that there is greater risk in the impotence of unreflective action—action uninformed by a fitting period of reflection orienting toward action. To hastily rush into action increases the likelihood that we do not sufficiently understand what we are doing and what we are doing might do to and for others.

should not be banned), to dictate their sentiments and perception of this particular situation. One's general stance on the desirability of regulating firearms would be open to input from the tragic character of what occurred in Las Vegas. This would mean that proponents or opponents of an assault weapon ban would *not* only see this situation as an example to subsume underneath their general conviction; they might come to see they have been "wrong" about this issue. This space provides the chance that they will feel differently about the regulation of firearms in this particular instance than they generally do. Such cleavage between feelings about gun control for the particular happening of the Las Vegas shooting (e.g. that *laissez-faire* gun laws contributed to *this* tragedy) and in general (e.g. that *laissez-faire* gun laws *generally* do not contribute to gun violence) can allow for the general conviction to change.

With resentful and paranoid politics, then, it seems there is no habit or desire to reflectively judge, no lamenting of the "loss" of this potentially critical faculty. For those hoping to challenge, reorient, or put into question resentful feelings and authoritarian tastes, it seems the only course is to take up the difficult but necessary task of cultivating reflective habits in how people's tastes and judgments.

CHAPTER 4

**CULTIVATING A PREJUDICE FOR REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT:
IMAGINING AN AESTHETIC ORIENTATION TO RHETORIC
TO CONTEST THE FAR RIGHT**

The preceding chapters provide a better sense of why far-right rhetoric appears resilient against a predominant strain of rationalist-deliberative rhetoric, and also of the attractiveness of far-right, reactionary resentment. Because of this, it is unwise to keep adhering to a rational-deliberative style of rhetoric in response to the far right and expect different or better results. Lawrence Grossberg describes this need for novelty by writing, “We need to offer something other than the stories we have been telling for decades, which have, in case you have not noticed, largely failed.”¹⁴⁰ If this is the case, the place of the imagination, creativity, and reflective thinking seem to be essential to offer new narratives to confront, counter, and hopefully improve our political, economic, and socio-cultural practices. To conjure up new stories, new affective landscapes, new directions for *sensus communis aestheticus*, I argue an aesthetic openness must be present. New stories need to be listened to if they really are to be taken up. Sedimented tastes, desires, and feelings need to be weakened if new ones are to be considered. This is to say that flexibility and willingness to consider what is at least initially distasteful, undesirable, and uncomfortable is indispensable for novelty.

Therefore, I argue for *cultivating a prejudice for reflective judgment* to encourage aesthetic porousness. The openness that comes with reflection would challenge the overdetermined, closed judgment of the far right. To do so, I explain the need for reflective judgment to be a cultural prejudice (“pre-judgment”), habit, or general attitude. Paradoxically,

¹⁴⁰ Grossberg, *Under The Cover of Chaos*, 145.

for reflective judgment to have some staying power, especially against overdetermined judgment, it requires a determinant judgment that understands the meaningful consideration of particular experiences to be necessary and desirable. Then, I imagine a theoretical approach to cultivating this habit of judgment through “rich particulars,” i.e. happenings that resist being subsumed by overdetermination and that “lend themselves” to reflective judging, exemplars that encourage reflective judgment as a way of judging, and shaping what I call the “feeling of feeling” to reorient people’s more immediate and intuitive sentiments through their judgment about the initial feeling.

Before sketching some key aspects of such an orientation, it is worthwhile to take a moment to understand the weight of the contemporary situation; specifically, the potential withering away of the very creative aspects of culture that offer the chance for something different to emerge. Grossberg presents this scenario: “How do we imagine the present as a field of actualities and possibilities? What if it is the imagination itself that is in jeopardy? *Imagination dead; imagine*. Is this the fascism of our age!”¹⁴¹ Imagining this unimaginable, yet possible future is profoundly disturbing. The vitality and vital character of the imagination is difficult to overstate. As I discuss below, the imagination is essential to meaningful reflection and therefore to the manifestation of different stories and worlds. It is key to the recognition of what is, is not-yet, and perhaps even what is yet-to-be. Imagining the death of the democratic imagination is frightening because it relies upon the very faculty it foretells as dead to bring forth this image. We are prompted to envision a world that could no longer be envisioned if it came to be. Irrespective of the possibility of such an occurrence, I hope to work against this image by

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 154.

advocating for an aesthetic orientation to rhetoric that cultivates a prejudice for reflective judgment.

Reflective Judgment as a Form of Porousness

The key, I believe, to an aesthetic orientation to rhetoric that could contest the far right is what I describe as a *cultivation of a prejudice for reflective judgment*. This style of judgment, when brought to bear in the face of new or different particular experiences, can decalcify overdetermined and instantaneous, or “knee-jerk,” ways of judging. Such decalcification would replace, or encourage reflection on, judgments that are common sensical to present tastes, in these of being seemingly obvious or self-evident.

Reflection here is not sought as an end in itself. Rather, reflection is sought as a means for making judgments, more precisely for reflective *judging*, in the practical sphere of decision-making. Such a mode of judging would not necessarily reject one’s initial judgments or prejudices (pre-judgments). It will also not *guarantee* a “correct” decision after a period of reflection. Even if truly open to the particularity of the context, reflection is still not a recipe to “get it right.” While reflection cannot produce perfect judgment, this way of judging can allow for better judgment because it respects the importance of particulars for informing ethical, aesthetic and epistemic phenomena. Even in the case when reflective judging confirms our prejudgments, this way of judging better guards us against confirmation bias by allowing us to more thoroughly consider diverse, even contradictory sentiments and convictions.

Given this, reflection, or more specifically a way of judging that delays final judgment until after consideration of the particular context, can produce more nuanced or rich judgments. To contest the habituated, calcified rhetorical taste of far-right politics, the case for a more reflective form of judging is that democracy is only healthy when other tastes, ideas, and

practices can prompt changes in the perception and sentiments of a people. By not challenging the hardened convictions of the far right “head on,” but instead by targeting the firmness of felt conviction itself, the cultivation of a more reflection regarding the significance of events in political rhetoric has the potential to restore some measure of democratic discourse. For example, after the Las Vegas shooting, country artists Josh Abbott and Caleb Keeter expressed a reversal of their feelings and position on gun control.¹⁴² In a twitter post, Keeter writes, “I’ve been a proponent of the 2nd amendment my entire life. *Until the events of last night*. I cannot express how wrong I was. We actually have members of our crew with [Concealed Handgun Licenses], and legal firearms on the bus . . . They were useless.”¹⁴³ Here, Keeter describes his general feelings on gun control changing because of this particular happening. In other words, the visceral quality of this event appears to compel Keeter to reassess and ultimately change his view on this issue. Yet, it seems fair to say that if Keeter were not on the scene of this tragedy, that his position on this issue would be less likely to change. That is, if he had not experienced this shooting “first-hand,” his relationship to this the general policy position would probably remain the same. This is because he has tended to oppose gun regulations his “entire life.”

Because of this claimed life-long habit, it took experiencing an extraordinary event *first-hand* (which unfortunately seems to have become increasingly ordinary) to prompt reflection on his previous position to ultimately change it. Accordingly, reflective judgment need not take an onerous period of time, spanning months, years, or decades before a decision is made and action is taken. Instead, following Kant, it refers to the *form* of judging that works from or starts with

¹⁴² Emily Yahr, “‘I Cannot Express How Wrong I Was’: Country Guitarist Changes Mind on Gun Control after Vegas,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/10/02/i-cannot-express-how-wrong-i-was-country-guitarist-changes-mind-on-gun-control-after-vegas/>

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* Emphasis Added.

the particulars (e.g. the Las Vegas shooting) and works toward universals, decision, and action (e.g. *general* stance on gun control). A Kantian notion of determinant judgment that would start with, for example, a pre-determined stance on gun control policy, and then just apply it to the how to feel about the Las Vegas shooting. But as seen in this instance of reflective judgment, judging can be “instantaneous” though still reflective. Because reflection can be intuitive, it is important to develop said reflection as kind of habit.

Reflective Judgment as a Aesthetico-Political Prejudice and Habit

Some might object to the prejudicial character of reflective judgment that I am advancing. They may argue that if reflection, which appears to be contrary to the overdetermined or “reflex-like” way of judging, is to be made a prejudice that it could not be authentically reflective. This is to say that one might object that authentic reflection requires an absence of prejudicial judgment. Everyone and everything would need to be open to reevaluation to be truly reflective.

Further, it may be raised as an objection that by being prejudicial, a cultivated prejudice for reflective judgment would undermine its call for reflection by ceding ground to a particular form of prejudice, thus being “self-contradictory.” Even if a prejudice or habit for reflective judgment purports to work against calcified tastes, feelings, and sentiments, by encouraging a habitual or non-reflective tendency for reflection, it is doomed to fail because such a prejudice is at war with itself. It will not ultimately undermine habitual ways of judging because it still relies upon habit to prompt and maintain reflective judgment.

While these objections observe a logic of consistency, they underestimate the importance of habits, unreflective practices, or “rules of thumb” in producing sustained modes of human behavior. Additionally, the pre-givenness of *sensus communis* necessarily provides an orientation

for the rhythms and routines. We cannot be without *sensus communis*, meaning socio-cultural thumbnails or inclinations. Because of this, there is no possibility of a space outside of some prejudices or, in common parlance, of “no judgment.” There are tendencies toward what we are open to and closed off from, to what attracts and repels us. Consequently, rather than taking on the dubious task of trying to rid people of *all* prejudices, cultivating *better* prejudices seems to be more feasible. A prejudice toward reflective judgment would have the advantage of being habitually intuitive while being open to different tastes and sentiments. Put differently, inculcating a communal taste for reflection would mean that one would socially inherit or develop it as a predisposition. A part of the reason for the staying power of far-right convictions seems to be its prejudicial character. Perhaps ironically then, shifting the power of prejudice toward reflection could cultivate this practice toward more democratic ends. From a prejudice for reflective judgment, the only thing “overdetermined” is that one can be *confident* only after consideration of particulars, yet never *certain* to the point of fundamentalism.

Particulars to Principles: Imagining the Cultivation of Habits for Reflective Judgment

How could such a prejudice for reflective judgment be cultivated? With the concept of a prejudice for reflective judgment in mind, it is necessary to seek the conditions for the possibility of *cultivating* such a prejudice so that it may be better understood how to go about encouraging its growth. If particular kinds of judgments and actions of the far right are deemed socially unethical, not to mention dangerous, by democratic standards and if these judgments are difficult to change due to the unreflective stance that supports making them, then it seems necessary to understand how one might encourage a counter-prejudice, reflective judgment that could ultimately supports an open culture of judgment embracing diverse tastes. Again, because reflective judgment need not occur over an extended period of time, it can and should apply

equally to epiphanies and to more gradual changes. In both cases, the change in the *way* of judging is key, in the movement from particulars to principles rather than the other way around.

Accordingly, any given particular, like the Las Vegas shooting, should trigger reflective judgment rather than rote conviction. Here, Keeter's remarks are instructive; he experienced firsthand the “useless[ness]” of the legal firearms available in deterring and responding to the mass-shooting. Recalling his change of heart, the massacre could not be reconciled with his life-long view, so he felt compelled to change his position. It is important to note here the power of the human ability to reconcile most happenings with already established feelings about almost anyone or anything in the world. This is to say that it is often more comfortable to find ways to maintain present tastes and ways of being than to change them in the face of contradictions. From the strength of the human faculty to maintain beliefs against change, we can gather that the *character* of this particular happening was powerful enough to challenge Keeter’s general feelings toward and conception of this issue. Moreover, it was powerful enough to overcome any propensity to rationalize or subsume most particular happenings underneath his general feelings. Why? When all other efforts, arguments, and conventional discourse had failed to prompt a reconsideration, let alone persuasion, what was different about this situation that made change possible?

To answer this, Abbott’s remarks on Twitter are helpful. He writes on twitter, “I’ll never *unhear* those gunshots; and our band and crew will never forget how that moment made them *feel*. Our *hearts* are with all the victims.”¹⁴⁴ In this post, Abbott does not refer to lofty principles that are cognitively deduced to come to a conclusion on what his attitude should be—he hears and feels the suffering of others. Colloquially, his heart rather than his head motivates his judgment.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

Feeling drives change. The direct experiencing of this event provides an *image* that is moving. This reorients his relation to this issue. Abbott's *memory*, made possible through the imagination of the past, attempts to (re)create this image so that it can be communicated with others who have not directly experienced the shooting. Still, in being communicated, this recreation can never be, nor would we want it to be, a literal representation of the event as it occurred for Abbott. We have no choice but to get this "second-hand" from Abbott's account.

Consequently, while it is moving that Abbott and Keeter have seemed to genuinely reflect on this situation from within the situation, the first-hand experiencing of violence to alter attitudes would be difficult to, not to mention undesirable to, "scale up." More generally, we cannot exclusively rely upon weighty first-hand experiences that appear to compel us to reflect. It is morally repugnant to wait until most people have experienced gun violence or sufficiently compelling events to only then correct misjudgment. If we wait for this, it will likely be too late to take the appropriate actions. There would not be enough maneuverability to affect the conditions that contribute to so much violence if we wait until it becomes obvious to most people that a particular judgment on gun control is correct. More important, the trauma and cost in life is unacceptable. To wait for certainty before action, assuming this is even possible, is to wait too long to respond, not just to gun violence but to many of the complex decisions that we as a nation need to be make.

Following this, it is clear that the "best case scenario" would have creative and vibrant imaginations bringing forth answers to tragedies before they occur and thereby preventing them from happening, or at least mitigating their harm. While this may not always be possible, nevertheless, a cultivation of the imagination in ways of judging could allow the actual happening of tragedies to act more powerfully as prompts for reflection, and thus encourage

prevention of future tragedies and *better* mitigation of future harm. Put differently, if we acknowledge that painful and preventable catastrophes are going to occur, then it is not enough to simply assume that people's common sense will generate responsible judgments when faced with the nauseating character of future catastrophes and, then, lead to appropriate remedies. As demonstrated in the first chapter, those hoping to enact change in the wake of tragedy cannot presuppose that everyone shares the *same* common sense, nor will such common sense necessarily prompt solidarity toward common ends.

To prevent tragedies from being "for nothing" or remaining insufficiently addressed, we need to encourage a way of judging that can *change what its judgments are* when considering tragedies like the Las Vegas shooting, such that when events display themselves as abhorrent enough to prompt action, it is possible to imagine (and desire) a future in which they do not occur. We need to be able to imagine events in a visceral way so that we can feel the desire to live differently, so that we may act differently. As a result, it is essential to encourage people to enlarge their *capacity* of feeling in relation to making judgments. For this, creativity is necessary for both the attempts to prompt feeling and for the ability to be affected by something. This is because the ability to feel something about events, especially when not directly experienced, requires the (re)creation of something about those events to prompt feeling.

As suggested by Grossberg's notion of cultural affective landscapes, because the issues faced politically are necessarily collective rather than individualistic, the creative ability to feel that Diane Davis calls affectability, cannot take place simply on an individual level if it is to have a societal effect.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, it is necessary for this to be a political and cultural project and

¹⁴⁵ See Grossberg, *Under the Cover of Chaos*. Diane Davis, "Identification: Burke and Freud on who you are," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2008): 123-147.

not only a set of individualized projects. Above all, enlivening the exercise of creative potential is essential; crafting projects that depend on *sensus communis* and that excite the collective imagination and that make this excitement appealing, can help us better feel and thereby reflectively judge the particularity of the present so that we may work toward a different future. Still, despite the need to encourage reflection-at-a-distance, it is hard to deny the power of first-hand happenings to prompt reflection, offer the chance to alter tastes and attitudes, and potentially excite action. Therefore, for rhetorical projects aiming to prompt reflective judgment, it is a matter of understanding why first-hand experience can prompt reflection so powerfully *and* of creating a variety of ways to work with this force. We need to craft rhetoric that invites audiences to imagine *as if* they were experiencing particular events, real or hypothetical, so as to prompt reflection and to reorient feelings about cultural and political issues. In the history of rhetoric, there are many well-documented ways to excite a reflective imagination responsive to the needs of the context, including amplification, reversal, and imitation.

Judging Rich Particulars, Exemplars, and the Feeling of the Feeling for Reflective Attitudes

To help us understand how we can prompt reflective judgment and to understand the similarities and differences between the first-hand experience and potentially motivational second-hand images, the Kanto-Arendtian description of the imagination is helpful. Arendt in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* describes the imagination as “The faculty of making present what is absent.”¹⁴⁶ From this description, we may gather that the imagination is responsible for presenting us with a representation of what is not immediately at hand—it provides an image that we can sense (feel) as much as we can understand (think). By being

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 79.

fostering communication, or serving as an “intermediary” for both our particular feelings and our general attitudes, the terrain of the imagination seems to offer a unique place to manifest and potentially instill different ways of feeling and understanding about the act of judging itself. Accordingly, this imagination is essential to (re)producing images that strengthen our connection with the particulars of the context and that prompt reflective judgment.

Before going further in regard to imagination, however, we must confront an issue of “cause and effect.” To recognize and create rich particulars that can spark reflective judgment already presupposes the ability of our imaginations to appreciate particular happenings beyond the mere confirmation of our present inclinations. In other words, imagination is required to make present particulars richly enough so that we can reflectively judge them and not immediately subsume them under general tendencies of judgment. Reciprocally, atrophied imaginations would have trouble appreciating the rich particulars that could encourage the practice of reflective judgment. All shootings become the same shooting, which supports the same feeling about shootings, for instance. A case in point is the routine, near instantaneously made claim that any school shooting is a “false flag” operation meant to discredit gun owners and the National Rifle Association. In essence, the project of cultivating a prejudice for reflective judgment intertwines the rhetorical promise of rich particulars or exemplars with the potential of the imagination to break habituated judgments of right-wing “common sense.” Both exemplars and imagination are necessary but not sufficient, and each presupposes the other.

Therefore, if either the imagination or the appreciation of particulars in their particularity is absent, then one has a vicious cycle of aesthetics and rhetoric, in which the *sensus communis* protects hardened desires, takes pleasure in judgment being habitual and closed, and relishes a political rhetoric of bullshit. There could not be a desire for reflective judgment without an

attraction to the wealth of living particulars by way of an inventive imagination. Yet, there does not seem to be an *absence* of the imagination and appreciation of living particulars, i.e. the possibility for reflective judgment, as much as an *atrophy* (in the normative/ethical sense). These are either latent qualities, dormant in their exercise, primarily applied to spheres “outside” the political culture, or they are employed only in limited ways regarding our tastes within political culture. The latent potential of using the imagination to explore different futures through the particularities of experience is displayed most clearly through the fact that tastes *have* actually changed.

Since there must be something that motivates a change of taste for such change to occur, the challenge is to create contact with rich particulars or exemplars that can excite the imagination to imagine *differently*. Here, we have at least two ways forward with regard to how we may encourage particular tastes (and distastes) and, at least as importantly, cultivate particular *ways* of tasting. Regarding the richness of particular events, in their richness certain particulars can resist the ability of individuals to subsume them underneath their general tastes even when there is a tendency toward generalized, habituated evaluation. In other words, something about the quality of some events can disrupt the immediacy and comfort of making calcified judgments about them. For example, the Parkland High School and Charleston Church shootings are nuanced enough to resist attempts to merely incorporate them into and underneath people’s general views of gun policy and far-right politics. These happenings invite “new” feelings, suggest different ways of feeling and orientations to feeling, and can prompt people to feel differently about our feelings themselves. Such a disruption is precisely the ground of reflective judgment, wherein one acts as if they need to work from the “bottom-up” to evaluate rather than the “top-down,” which only preserves preexisting attitudes.

The rhetoric of exemplars is key regarding the use of rich particulars to challenge present sentiments. Kant goes as far to refer to examples as “the go-cart of judgments.”¹⁴⁷ Left rhetorical projects challenging far-right politics can craft exemplars that encourage the reflective mode of judgment itself as a general comportment, reflex, or prejudice. Arendt elaborates on the idea of the exemplar in Kant: “The example is the particular that contains in itself, or at least is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule.”¹⁴⁸ If we contrast exemplars with the idea of rich particulars more generally, while rich particulars may be crafted to prompt reflective judgment for a particular issue (e.g. gun control), exemplars may be understood as a specific subset of particulars that imply or orient us to a more general attitude. For this project, this may be interpreted as suggesting that an exemplar has the quality of being a particular that also suggests something that applies beyond the confines of its particularity. Certain situations lend them themselves to opening up our thinking beyond the case in point. It follows that employing effective examples can be a rhetorical approach to cultivating the general attitude or predisposition toward reflective judgment as an approach to taste. In essence, exemplars are particulars that point beyond the immediacies of their particularity without abandoning the richness that makes them valuable and effective. Thus, exemplars, through the richness of their particularity, can serve as a model for disrupting a calcified taste for closed, far-right discourses while simultaneously cultivating a predisposition toward the general concept or rule of reflective judgment.

As in the above example of Abbott and Keeter reflectively judging based on their direct experience, rhetorical actors can imagine and create exemplars to serve as a model for cultivating

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 76.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 84.

a prejudice for reflective judgment as a general way of judging. Arendt describes the use of examples as an approach to understanding:

One may encounter or think of some table that one judges to be the best possible table and take this as the example of how all tables actually should be: *the exemplary table* (“example” comes from *eximere*, “to single out some particular”). This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. [For instance,] courage is *like* Achilles.¹⁴⁹

Rather than provide an abstract definition, providing a model that orients someone toward a generality can more effectively contest preconceived notions. Abstraction is too easily fortified against; living exemplars can remain tied to specific events while suggesting or implying generality. Instead of remaining in the general and abstract, where only present attitudes tend to be considered, examples provide the opportunity to *imagine* a general principle through intuition of the particular. Finally, examples can offer a taste of the reflective process before it has become habituated; they resemble the act of imagining the standpoint of others by imagining the general from the particular. In that sense, exemplars can serve as a predecessor to the critical process of reflection upon a variety of particulars to come to decision. These examples can be attractive or unattractive to audiences, depending on the context, so that they can be communicable to the given audience depending on their existing tastes, attitudes, and approaches to judgment. In other words, rather than abstractly “preaching” the virtues of reflective judgment as a habit of taste, rhetoricians can model the attractiveness of such habits through the grasp-ability of examples.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 77. Emphasis Original.

Through careful display of the process of reflection regarding particulars, there is the possibility of bypassing overly rigid resistance to certain tastes by cultivating openness to (re)consideration.

From this consideration of rich particulars to encourage particular feelings and tastes, and exemplars to cultivate general attitudes, I turn to explore how such encouragement and cultivation might occur through different “levels” of feelings. Here, Arendt’s explanation of the potential difference of taste and reflection upon is instructive. She writes, “It is called taste because . . . it *chooses*. But this choice is itself subject to still another choice: one can approve or disapprove of the very fact of *pleasing*: this too is subject to approbation or disapprobation.”¹⁵⁰ By this, we can distinguish the immediate or “reactive” judgment of taste informed by our habits and the more reflective judgment upon our judgment. These need not always align. Kant provides the example of the “sorrow of a widow at the death of her excellent husband” such that “a deep grief may satisfy the person experiencing it.”¹⁵¹ In this example, the reactive feeling of the death of a loved one is displeasing, but the reflection upon this feeling, i.e. the feeling of the feeling, may be gratifying. This means that the reflection upon the feeling and the feeling itself need not align in whether they are pleasing. Feelings please or displease in multiple registers of feeling.

For this project, this means that there are at least two approaches to confronting existing unethical tastes at the aesthetic level. First, the rich particulars manifested for particular audiences can work to prompt pleasurable or displeasurable feelings surrounding a particular issue. As discussed above, the Parkland High School shooting can serve as a rich particular that can prompt feelings of disgust surrounding the tragic consequences of existing gun policies in

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 69. Emphasis Original.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

the United States. These aim at producing an “initial” feeling of approbation or disapprobation by associating attractive or repulsive particulars to a given issue. By focusing on tastes surrounding a given issue, one would try to prompt reflective judgment *as a way of being political and rhetorical* within the particular scope of tastes surrounding matters like gun control, climate change, and healthcare policy.

However, this approach has its limits. For one, when an unreflective approach to judgment is predominant, rich particulars need to help encourage the actualization of a reflective form of judgment in addition to prompting certain feelings. If reevaluation is to occur, the pleasurable or displeasurable particular feelings need to be “linked up” with a general stance toward rendering judgments. This is because the reactive taste is insufficient if it does not court reconsideration. For example, if someone deems *laissez faire* gun policy to be preferable, disgust about the Parkland shooting is insufficient if this disgust does not motivate reflection, decision, and action to change one’s sentiments concerning gun regulation. Additionally, rich particulars only tend to associate feelings toward reflection concerning a particular issue. The feeling of disgust about the Parkland shooting may prompt reflection about this issue, even just this shooting, but not necessarily cultivate a prejudice for reflective judgment as a specific taste in the exercise human intentionality. Therefore, while this is an important approach to prompting reflection, its gains in prompting reflection may not inculcate a habit of reflection to be applicable across contexts.

Realizing that new stories may fail is part of the challenge—that they may not sufficiently orient us to tackle the problems we face or counter the comforting and compelling narratives for the status quo or reactionary tales. No outcome is assured. Nonetheless, there is greater risk in not attempting to weaken the taste for paranoid bullshit among the far right—the maintenance of

the “same” is already disastrous and only risks further catastrophic practices. By not addressing the roots of resentment, i.e. democratic dissatisfaction (*regardless* of its virtuousness), we do not speak to the conditions that make far-right stories and practices possible. If this root of resentment is insufficiently addressed, then there seems to be little reason to believe that it will resolve itself or “get better” over time. For resentment to be, there must be some failure that, if is left to its own devices, will tend to perpetuate itself. Some may point to underlying economic dissatisfaction, to ideology or worldview, and others to longstanding institutions of racism and sexism. Regardless of whatever is designated as the “chief cause,” assuming such a move is accurate, maintaining our more comfortable, rational-deliberative style of rhetorically engaging this resentment seems naïve at best. Such efforts have proved incapable of hindering feelings of resentment (and prove themselves incapable daily), and have failed to reorient resentment toward more ethical ends. Reorienting rhetoric that resists far-right discourse around taste and *sensus communis aestheticus* is a risk worth taking if we are to actualize more democratic and ethical ways of living together. It is counter-intuitive, but using the tools of deliberative reason are incapable of maintaining a culture of deliberative reason. Rebuilding a taste for reflection is necessary for deliberative reason to flourish.

This is the promise that I believe an aesthetic orientation to rhetoric geared toward cultivating a prejudice for reflective judgment can aid. We need an orientation that meaningfully takes into account our ways of perceiving, tasting, and judging the world so that we may perceive, taste, and judge differently, and perhaps better. Only if we orient ourselves toward futures that take up what Grossberg refers to as strategic and diagnostic challenges in addition to the important work of imagining fantastic futures, can we end up with good, decent, or at least better ones.

CONCLUSION

HOW DO FASCISTS DREAM? OR ON THE LIMITS OF REFLECTIVE JUDGMENT

In recognition of the limits and risks of the approach advocated in this project, it is incumbent on me in conclusion to consider the precarious nature of reflection. Presupposing that reflective judgment is an ontological possibility, and that a genuine openness to particulars can de-calcify our present tastes, it is important to ask where is reflection presently being directed? Further, why has this been (and is) insufficient in addressing the need for tastes to change to motivate changing ways of living in common? In other words, why has reflective judgment failed to protect us against the rise of neo-fascism? Moreover, how might this way of judging actually aid contemporary far-right projects?

To begin provisionally, the common and banal character of catastrophically unethical practices can serve as an example of where democratic reflection's atrophy or impotence serves fascist ends. Here I examine Adolf Eichmann, one of the infamous men responsible for carrying out the so-called final solution (i.e. the extermination of millions of Jews, Roma peoples, homosexuals, and other "undesirables"). To consider the limits of reflective judgment to weaken the sedimentation of resentment, I look to this infamous case of a person seemingly absent of reflective and imaginative capacities (or at least not exercising these capacities). Indeed, Arendt famously condemns Eichmann not for being malevolently evil, but instead for a *banality* of evil—"ordinary," human badness with extraordinary consequences.

Crucially, rather than lacking reflective judgment, Eichmann seems to display a fascistic style of reflection. As I illustrate below, he takes up what he feels are relevant particulars to inform his convictions and practices. Therefore, I argue that cultivating a prejudice for a democratic style of reflective judgment needs to foster a greater quality and range of particulars,

and the openness to *change* one's ways of being from this process; it does not have to resurrect a destroyed faculty. At least at present, though fascist reflective judgment predominantly considers particulars that do not threaten convictions, and is therefore atrophied from a democratic point of view, there is still reflection that is minimally amenable to democratic politics and can develop within neo-fascist politics. This potentiality for development of democratic reflection, imagination, and taste from their existing fascistic counterparts is a key terrain for contesting the far right on the grounds of *sensus communis aestheticus*. If even Eichmann, the figure *par excellence* who is purported to be *without* reflection displays atrophied, though nonetheless *present* moments of reflection that might have been cultivated under different conditions, then it is safe to say that Left opponents of the far right can cultivate *better* reflective judging toward democratic taste, ethics, and politics.

At first glance, this example may seem extreme. Someone so unreflective can appear to be exceptional; surely the case of Eichmann cannot apply to the more general problem of insufficient reflective judgment with regard to taste and thought. Yet, the extreme character of this bureaucrat of genocide provides a nearly “absolute zero” case for the place of this way to judge in an apparently unreflective individual. It makes clearer the character of a fascistic style of reflection that appears from a democratic point of view as unreflective. Eichmann’s apparent “lack” of reflection provides insights into what fascistic reflection looks like and how such reflection might sustain these practices and make them resilient. In other words, because his character is so obviously unreflective, he provides a glimpse of the *way* far-right politics engages in reflective judgment. Therefore, this individual instance can provide some traits to be considered at a more widespread cultural level.

In what follows, I look to the story of Eichmann and *Kommerzialrat* Storfer, one of the leaders of the Viennese Jewish community during the period, to display a different way to reflect and imagine that reinforces fascistic proclivities. Rather than a simple lack or absence in the exercise of these faculties, I argue that a sliver of empathy contributed to the certainty of Eichmann's convictions and practices, not weakened them. Through this story, I suggest the uncomfortable proposition many individuals are susceptible to far-right styles of reflective judgment and imagination from contemporary culture. Then, drawing upon Jacques Ranciere, I argue that this shallowness of reflection has an aesthetic register; particular categories of people do not *appear* as proper political subjects to Eichmann, the National Socialist regime, and the contemporary far right.¹⁵² Far-right *sensus communis* does not view Others as suitable to imagine and reflect upon, in such a way that Others' particularity might challenge far-right hardened desires and convictions. Finally, I conclude by revisiting Grossberg's statement about imagining the death of the imagination and call for the Left to contest this aesthetic terrain and not cede it to the far right.

Arendt in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* describes his fatal character flaw as "his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the *other* fellow's point of view."¹⁵³ To some extent, this description fits with the interpretation offered in the previous chapter. Following Arendt's description, Eichmann was either incapable or had no desire to reflect upon the particulars of the situation that did not already confirm his present self. Further, he could not imagine or chose not to imagine what it was like for the people he was initially responsible for overseeing the

¹⁵² Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," trans. Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby. *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001).

¹⁵³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann and The Holocaust*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 18. Emphasis Added.

deportation, and later the deaths of. Finally, his stance was the antithesis of a broadmindedness (epistemological) and capacity for empathy (aesthetic/affect) that an imaginative and reflective orientation to judgment would hopefully produce. He did not feel the suffering of those he condemned. Or, at the very least, he did not feel the suffering enough to do anything meaningful to impede, mitigate, or prevent the Shoah (Holocaust), even within the confines of his role.

Yet, it is too simplistic to consider Eichmann, or neo-fascists generally, as devoid of the capacity and ability to exercise reflective judgment, imagination from the standpoint of others, and a feeling for broadmindedness and empathy. One episode about Eichmann's encounter with *Kommerzialrat* Storfer, one of the leaders of the Viennese Jewish community during the period, displays Eichmann's somewhat active, though severely atrophied ability to imagine and feel for another. Since Eichmann had been placed in Vienna in 1938 to help administrate the "emigration" (i.e. expulsion) of Jews, he felt it was worthwhile to investigate Storfer's situation after being informed that Storfer had been sent to Auschwitz. He felt this way because they personally worked together in Vienna and because Eichmann believed Storfer had "always behaved well."¹⁵⁴

After consulting the chief of the secret police of Vienna, Eichmann was told, "No one could get out once he was in. Nothing could be done." Rather than stopping at this news, he met with Storfer and Auschwitz Commandant Höss to see how he could "resolve" the situation. Eichmann described this meeting with Storfer as "a normal, human encounter."¹⁵⁵ He even

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 23.

displayed a limited degree of empathy with Storfer, telling him, “Well, my dear old friend [*Ja, mein lieber guter Storfer*] . . . we certainly got it! What rotten luck!”¹⁵⁶

Upon communicating to Storfer that he could not get him out of the camp because of his orders, Storfer asks if he may be exempted from work. Once again, Eichmann is informed by Höss that Storfer cannot be relieved from work duties because “everyone works here.”¹⁵⁷ Immediately accepting this statement, Eichmann imagines a “solution,” displaying some creativity, by simultaneously fulfilling the demand that “everyone at Auschwitz works (and/or dies),” and still responding to Storfer’s deep dissatisfaction with his work. Eichmann decides that Storfer will only have to “keep the gravel paths in order with a broom” and be provided a bench to occasionally sit upon. This is deemed acceptable to both Höss and Storfer.

In retrospect, most chillingly, Eichmann describes his reflection upon the encounter with Storfer—“It was a great *inner joy* to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak *with* each other.”¹⁵⁸ From this encounter with someone different from him, he *feels* pleasure at his ability to reflect within his bounds toward judgment and the decision to help Storfer. In this limited instance, he displays some empathy for this *individual* and makes efforts to mitigate his suffering. (Though not alleviating the suffering or the administration of the deaths of millions of other individuals). Perhaps astonishingly, Eichmann revels in the ability to speak with this individual in a “normal human encounter.” While clearly exceptional and limited, Eichmann still displays a level of reflection. However, this reflection is only applied in a minor change in the fate of Storfer. Arendt writes, “six weeks after this normal human encounter, Storfer was dead—not gassed, apparently, but

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

shot.” Eichmann’s imagination was not imaginative enough to change the fate of Storfer, nor his reflection reflective enough to connect this particular case with a challenge to the larger system of extermination.

Relatedly, another vignette displays Eichmann’s ability for remorse for particular Jewish individuals, without that remorse translating into changes in general convictions. Arendt notes:

It was not murder but, as it turned out, that he had *once slapped the face* of Dr. Josef Löwenherz, head of the Vienna Jewish community, who later became one of his favorite Jews. He apologized in front of his staff at the time, *but this incident kept bothering him*.¹⁵⁹

That Eichmann could feel remorse and the need to take corrective action for this individual Jew, yet feel nothing, and even retrospectively a “sense of elation,” suggests the nauseating, yet nonetheless present capacity for empathy.

From these examples, one can see how a minor moment of reflection may have helped contribute to the continuation of genocide, and, more specifically the attitudes that help make fascistic sentiments possible. However, this should not be interpreted to say that we should not engage in reflective judgment, or that this way of judging necessarily serves to reinforce rather than challenge unethical thinking, feeling, and acting in the world from the point of view of democratic ethics. Rather, this example displays that reflective judgment, imagination, creativity, broadmindedness, and empathy in regard to particular cases are insufficient (even if necessary) to being *ethical*. One can be reflective, imaginative, and broadminded and still be unethical. For the above example, Auschwitz was, at once, the failure of the promise of the imagination for

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 16-17. Emphasis Added.

democratic ethics and the actualization of creativity applied to totalitarian practice (fascistic sentiment imaginatively intended toward repugnant ethics).

Eichmann's infinitesimal moment of reflection served to reinforce, rather than challenge, his practices and attitudes. Arendt describes this brief reflective moment as follows; "Eichmann needed only to recall the past in order to feel assured that he was not lying and that he was not deceiving himself, for he and the world he lived in had once been in perfect harmony."¹⁶⁰ These "forays" into reflective judgment and their infinitesimal impact on changing the outcome of decision-making helped reinforce the feeling that Eichmann was living a virtuous life. The sense of being able to speak in a "normal, human way" helped restore his confidence in his practices, rather than challenging them. His feeble attempts at broadmindedness, such as reading the Zionist classic *The Jewish State*, learning Hebrew and Yiddish, and reading a Yiddish newspaper, likely helped confirm, even inculcate anti-Semitic attitudes and practices.¹⁶¹ Or, the feeling of remorse for slapping Löwenherz could have helped maintain Eichmann's self-understanding that he was an empathetic individual. Thereby, his self-understanding of being empathetic at the micro-level could have contributed to his unempathetic feelings toward the genocidal practices he contributed to at the macro-level.

Such an affective strategy and shift in the character of reflective judgment upon particulars was even considered by Himmler. Contrary to the understanding of an indifference or pleasure by the perpetrators of the Holocaust, Arendt notes, "A systematic effort was made to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 24.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 8. Usually the effort to learn another language may be understood as a meaningful attempt at broadmindedness. However, Arendt notes that Eichmann's particular case is, "not a very difficult accomplishment, since Yiddish . . . can be understood by any German-speaking person who has mastered a few dozen Hebrew words."

weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did.”¹⁶² Instead, the problem of affective disgust or revulsion at the destruction of human beings *by one’s own hands* was reoriented; these feelings were “directed toward the self [instead of against the genocidal system].”¹⁶³ Arendt describes how a concentration camp guard or administrator of Zyklon B into a gas chamber might work through their revulsion: “Instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things *I* had to watch in the pursuance of *my* duties. How heavily the task weighed upon *my* shoulders.”¹⁶⁴ Through this strategy, revulsion became a form of attraction. Instead of revulsion undermining genocidal practices, one’s disgust demonstrated one’s commitment to duty. This was their *individual* “burden” to fulfill, not cause for condemning the National Socialist regime.

To link this affective strategy to a (neo)fascistic way to judge reflectively, I turn to Rancière’s discussion of not seeing Others as political subjects. He writes, “If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths.”¹⁶⁵ This is not simply ignoring others; to ignore implies that one hears yet disregards another. To not even hear an utterance of an Other, for it to be *de jure* not worth understanding or feeling is a qualitatively different phenomenon. This explains why the far right refers to immigrants without legal recognition as illegal *aliens*.

When an Other is not seen as a political being, then there is no desire or reason to recognize them as a particular that can be judged upon reflectively. Purportedly “unpolitical”

¹⁶² Ibid, 45.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

¹⁶⁵ Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001).

beings are not even worthy of being understood as a particular, let alone taken up as such in reflective judging. By not being political particulars to inform judging, they cannot be taken up in such a way as to challenge or change one's preexisting convictions (especially when those convictions are dogmatically sustained through overdetermined judging). Crucially, if Others (e.g. Jews, non-whites, so-called illegal *aliens*) are not taken up as particulars in reflective judgment, then one can *still* reflectively judge without one's sentiments ever being meaningfully questioned. Even in rare moments of reflective judging, then, a fascistic approach to this way of judging is unlikely to challenge preexisting and overdetermined judgments. If anything, fascistic engagement with the particulars may help maintain and reinforce overdetermined judging; one can "arrive again" at their calcified conviction by not even perceiving anything contrary to such a conviction. Thus, like its counterpart in overdetermined judging, fascistic reflective judgment almost inevitably cements rather than challenges their convictions.

Such failure to even perceive particulars that could prompt democratic reflective judgment and imagination is perhaps one of the most dangerous aesthetico-ideological features of far-right politics. I interpret Arendt designating this as "thoughtlessness." She applies this designation to Eichmann's role in the Holocaust, "it was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period."¹⁶⁶ However, following my above interpretations of the Storfer and Löwenherz examples, I understand such thoughtlessness as a *way* of thinking, such lack of empathy as a *way* of empathizing, such atrophy of the imagination as a *way* of imagining. Contesting this political style means making the necessary particulars recognizable as particulars (e.g. undocumented

¹⁶⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann and The Holocaust*, 115.

immigrants) as a necessary condition for democratic reflective judgment. Such appreciation of specific particulars is not simply the exercising of atrophied imagination and reflective judgment, but also the qualitative expansion of the entities worthy of being taken up as a particular. It is at once the fostering of new habits as much as an undoing of existing habits. For without these twin moves, it seems the dogmatism of fascistic style, even alongside a cultivated prejudice for reflective judgment, is too fortified against the appeals of democratic tastes, possibilities, and ethics. A chief concern, then, seems to be the evisceration of democratic possibilities from an ascendant far right. Far-right habitual resentment erodes the grounds on which it may be undermined – mainly through the closing-off of the field of particularity and imagination that can sustain democratic practices.

I conclude by revisiting Grossberg's speculation, "Imagination dead: imagine. Is this the fascism of our age?" But what if instead of far-right politics *lacking* imagination, their rhetorical resilience stems from another *way* of imagining? In other words, what if their resilience is made possible by the power of *their sensus communis aestheticus*, e.g. attractiveness to so-called strong men *qua* Adorno and feelings of resentment *qua* Jeremy Engels. Neo-fascists *also* creatively imagine new possibilities and cultivate sympathetic tastes. Fascists dream. This aesthetic power must be confronted if democratic politics are to survive. Whether through the impotence of the rational-deliberative approach, seemingly bulletproof far-right rhetoric, or self-perpetuating resentful desires, the dogmatism and calcification of this taste means it cannot be tackled "head on." Such direct approaches have failed to foster democratic discourse. It is naïve to think they will suddenly start working.

Aesthetics, the sphere traditionally disassociated from politics, is an *indirect* path to encourage different tastes through cultivating a rich habitual way of reflecting in matters of taste.

As Schiller writes, "If [hu]man[s] [are] ever to solve that problem of politics in practice [they] will have to approach it through way of the aesthetic."¹⁶⁷ Cultivated habits of reflective judgment and imagination might foster a desire for democratic politics. The ascendance of far-right aesthetics demonstrates the potential of this sphere for democratic politics; *sensus communis aestheticus* has changed before and therefore can change again. If this is the case, it is all the more important for those who hope to contest such imaginings and possibilities to contest this ground—to cultivate better aesthetic proclivities through creativity that can spark critical-democratic imagination.

¹⁶⁷ Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 90.

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