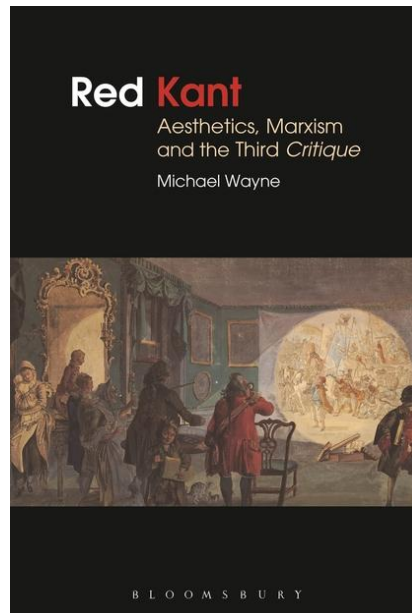


Book Review:
 ‘Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism, and the Third Critique’
 Bakary Diaby



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MICHAEL WAYNE.

Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism, and the Third Critique.

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Screen media scholar Michael Wayne’s new book, *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism, and the Third Critique*, offers a cogent and valiant defense of the necessity for sophisticated thinking about aesthetics in our contemporary moment. As with Wayne’s previous work, particularly on cinema and media, *Red Kant* focuses on the relationship between Marxist social theory and contemporary aesthetics. But unlike his earlier books—*Political Film: the Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2001), *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends* (London; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003), and *Marx’s Das Kapital for Beginners* (Hanover, NH: For Beginners, 2012)—*Red Kant* extends Wayne’s range into eighteenth-century philosophy and its influence on subsequent Marxian thinkers.

In this new book, Wayne illustrates how a turn to Kantian aesthetics “[in] the twilight of reason” can provide novel means of understanding today’s troubled socio-economic landscape (1). While the ever-expanding category of “the aesthetic” has enjoyed a critical resurgence in the last two decades – especially in regards to its political potential – much of the discussion has focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the

work of Isobel Armstrong and Jacques Rancière are influential examples of this trend. [1] Both Armstrong and Rancière consider the political and socio-cultural dimensions of aesthetics, the same connection *Red Kant* attempts to elucidate. Michael Wayne however, reasserts the importance of the eighteenth century in the history of philosophical aesthetics, and forges a link between Immanuel Kant's oeuvre and contemporary aesthetics and politics. As scholars of the Frankfurt school have influentially maintained, Kant is often assumed to shy away or even deny "the material" and "the political" in his aesthetic theory. [2] Wayne, on the other hand, affirms the third *Critique's* social situatedness and tackles some of Kant's most "idealistic" concepts with a historical materialist framework, believing them to be "anticipations of what would later become key concepts in Marxism" (8). Most of the chapters are concerned with either these Kantian/Marxist connections (e.g. "Kant's First *Critique* and the Problem of Reification") or with Marxist explications of Kantian philosophy ("In the Laboratory of Kant's Aesthetic").

While ranging in their degrees of persuasiveness, Wayne's analyses of beauty, the sublime, and Kant's philosophical system as a whole offer important contributions to this rich field of inquiry. The book's large intellectual ambit ensures that *Red Kant* will be a useful text in many fields. Literary theorists, for example, may find an engaging political take on metaphor in the chapter titled "On Marxism and Metaphor." Additionally, scholars of art history may be able to contextualize present day activist art within the history of philosophical aesthetics. Moreover, almost every chapter features a helpful précis of the contemporary critical discourse concerning the aesthetic, disclosing the conceptual relationship among a variety of contemporary thinkers including Kojin Karatani, Jean-François Lyotard, and Steven Shaviro. There are, however, a few factors that cause his argument to appear detrimentally overdetermined. One is Wayne's ostensible expectation of the word "bourgeois" to do a lot more conceptual work than it can. It may refer to a specific historical formation of the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century, and at other times it operates as either a pejorative or only descriptively as "non-Marxist." Assuming this term possesses a self-evident definition may not detract from the book's argument, but it can lead to confusions that may lessen that argument's persuasiveness.

Another issue is Wayne's apparent presupposition that Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* limits its scope to *aesthetic* judgment. In Wayne's reading, "The *Critique of Judgment* investigates the principles by which we can respond in the register of the aesthetic to the world" (8). While Kant does concern himself with "the register of the aesthetic" in the *Critique's* first part, the text culminates in a discourse on the human capacity for teleological judgment in the face of mechanical nature. For Kant, the aesthetic poses an immensely important problem to solve on his way to finish his critical project, but it is not the culmination of the system. To contend that the third *Critique* foreruns key Marxist concepts through its *aesthetic* principles overplays the role of "aesthetics" in the book itself. Kant's ultimate conclusions about nature, theology, and autonomy may be much harder to reconcile with Marxism than his aesthetics.

Regardless, these minor criticisms do not detract from Wayne's project of disclosing, through Kant, the relevance of the aesthetic for a critique of global capital and its injustices. By noting the thorny and often self-contradictory nature of the third *Critique* (and Kant's philosophical system as a whole), Wayne uses its structural aporias to make a compelling case for the political potential of Kantian aesthetics. This book therefore offers a valuable resource on the relationship between Kant's philosophy and Marxist critical theory. *Red Kant* reaffirms the radical political power of the aesthetic; and Wayne's reading of Kant goes a long way towards repairing this "bourgeois" and "idealist" philosopher's reputation. Such a project has been, I think, long overdue.

Endnotes:

[1] Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). Armstrong indeed contends with the reception of Kantian and Hegelian ideas, but her actual "aesthetic" examples are from the nineteenth century and beyond. Further, part of her project is to re-evaluate the "nineteenth century idealist aesthetic" "exposed" by anti-aesthetic criticism and theory. For Rancière, see major works on literature focusing on Flaubert and Mallarmé, written and published throughout his "aesthetic turn." Jacques Rancière, *La parole muette: essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette littératures, 1998) and *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007). See also *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2013) where only one scene (out of fourteen) occurs in the eighteenth century.

[2] For extended background on this trend (and where Wayne got the title of his book), see: Robert Kaufman, "Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third 'Critique' in Adorno and Jameson," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Summer 2000): 682-724.