

# **Dissensus within dissensus: Odd Nerdrum's Kitsch movement and the aesthetic regime of Jacques Rancière**

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## Keywords

Aesthetics; aesthetic regime; artworld; dissensus; Jacques Rancière; kitsch; Odd Nerdrum; representative regime; The Kitsch Movement

## Abstract

This study aims to contribute towards the ongoing discourse of the politics of art by identifying the Kitsch movement as an instance of dissensus, critically considering the alignment of Nerdrum's work with Rancière's aesthetic regime, and demonstrating the need for further dissensual action against the creation of new aesthetic hierarchies within both the Kitsch movement and Rancière's regimes of art.

This thesis investigates Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum's "Kitsch movement" as an example of what French philosopher Jacques Rancière defines as *dissensus*. Nerdrum is a representational artist who follows the painterly traditions of classical figuration in an artworld that putatively prefers conceptualism over technique. For Nerdrum, his experience of being placed on the outskirts of the artworld reflects, to his mind, the modern-day European artworld's continuous quest for avant-garde ideals: innovation, originality, and what he describes as an open antagonism towards historical art education, specifically classical figurative painting.

I argue that Nerdrum's (2001; 2011) creation of the Kitsch movement suggests an instance of what Rancière (1999; 2004) calls dissensus—where an individual or group identifies themselves as not being included in the structuring of the community as a whole. Rancière calls this an act of "self-identification" and the resulting resistance to an imposed hierarchy, a political action working towards equality (Rancière, 1999:36).

In such a situation, the figurative painter/Kitsch movement fulfils the role of Rancière's *political subject*. The political subject questions the structure of the formal artworld, a community which functions according to certain norms and shared ideas. Such a community reflects Rancière's concept of *the distribution of the sensible*. The authority or hierarchy embedded within the norms and consensus of a community is upheld and perpetuated by those who ascribe to it. Rancière terms this upholding and ascribing *the police*. In this case, the police could be art critics, teachers,

curators of art, as well as art enthusiasts whom they influence. By introducing a re-imagined view of the community, the political subject brings about Rancière's notion of the *redistribution of the sensible*. In suggesting that the similarities between the Kitsch movement and Rancière's ideas identify Nerdrum's position as a form of dissensus, I compare Nerdrum's oeuvre (as creator and ambassador of the Kitsch movement) with Rancière's *regimes of art*.

Rancière argues that only work created within the *aesthetic regime of art* is capable of enacting dissensus. Therefore, I reflect on how Nerdrum's work compares with Rancière's *ethical*, *representative*, and *aesthetic* regimes of art. My critical analysis shows that Nerdrum's work requires individual consideration. The artistic convictions contained within Nerdrum's oeuvre align differently to Rancière's regimes, oscillating between possible affiliation with either the representative regime or the aesthetic regime.

Finally, some advanced insights into possible further criticism are identified, suggesting the need for further dissensus against the new hierarchies within both Nerdrum and Rancière's work.

# **Dissensus binne dissensus: Odd Nerdrum se Kitschbeweging en die estetiese regime van Jacques Rancière**

## Trefwoorde

Estetika; estetiese regime; dissensus; Jacques Rancière; kitsch; kunswêreld; Odd Nerdrum; verteenwoordigende regime; Die Kitschbeweging

## Opsomming

Hierdie studie stel ditself ten doel om 'n bydrae te lewer tot die voortgaande diskoers ten opsigte van die politiese dimensie van kuns deur die Kitschbeweging te identifiseer as 'n geval van dissensus deur 'n kritiese beskouing te bied van hoe Nerdrum se werk funksioneer vis-a-vis Rancière se estetiese regime, en deur die noodsaak van verdere dissensus te toon teen die daarstel van nuwe estetiese hiërargieë – in die Kitschbeweging self, en in Rancière se kunsregimes.

Die proefskrif bied 'n ondersoek na die Noorweegse kunstenaar Odd Nerdrum se “Kitschbeweging” as 'n voorbeeld van wat die Franse filosoof Jacques Rancière definieer as *dissensus*. Nerdrum is bekend as kunstenaar van representatiewe werk wat die skilderkunstige tradisies van klassieke figuratiewe kuns volg in 'n kunswêreld wat kwansuis 'n voorkeur het vir die konseptuele eerder as vir tegniese vaardigheid. Vir Nerdrum is sy ervaring as synde geplaas op die marge van die kunswêreld 'n direkte weerspieëling van die eietydse Europese kunswêreld se sug na avant-garde-ideale: nuutskepping, oorspronklikheid en wat hy beskryf as 'n openlike antagonisme jeens historiese kunsonderrig, spesifiek sover dit klassieke figuratiewe skildering aangaan.

Ek voer aan dat Nerdrum (2001; 2011) se daarstelling van die Kitschbeweging gelees kan word as 'n geval van wat Rancière (1999; 2004) beskryf as dissensus – waar 'n individu of groep hulself identifiseer as nie ingesluit in die struktuur van die gemeenskap as sodanig nie. Rancière noem

dit 'n "self-identifikasiehandeling", en die voortvloeiende teenstand tot 'n hiërargie wat afgedwing word, 'n politiese handeling op weg na gelykheid (Rancière, 1999:36).

In so 'n vergelyking vervul die figuratiewe skilder/Kitschbeweging die rol van Rancière se *politiese subjek*. Die politiese subjek bevraagteken die struktuur van die formele kunswêreld as 'n gemeenskap wat funksioneer aan die hand van seker norme en gedeelde denke. So 'n gemeenskap versinnebeeld Rancière se gedagte van *die verspreiding van die waarneembare (die sg. sensible)*.<sup>1</sup> Die gesag of hiërargie wat in die norme en konsensus van die gemeenskap ingebed is, word gehandhaaf en geperpetueer deur diegene wat aansluiting vind daarby. Rancière se term vir hierdie handhawing en aansluiting is *die polisie*. In hierdie geval kan die polisie bestaan uit kunskritici, onderriggewers, kunskurators en ook kunsentoesiaste wat deur hulle beïnvloed word. Deur die her-verbeelding van die beskouing van die gemeenskap kan die politiese subjek Rancière's se konseptualisering van die *herverspreiding van die waarneembare* bewerkstellig. Om dus voor te hou dat die ooreenkomste tussen die Kitchbeweging en Rancière se gedagtes neerkom op 'n vorm van dissensus, word Nerdrum se oeuvre (as skepper en ambassadeur van die Kitchbeweging) vergelyk met Rancière' se *kunsregimes*.

Rancière voer aan dat slegs werk wat binne die kader van die *estetiese kunsregime* geskep word, daartoe in staat is om dissensus teweeg te bring. Gevolglik reflekteer ek oor die vergelykbaarheid van Nerdrum se werk met Rancière se *etiese, representatiewe, en estetiese kunsregimes*. My kritiese ontleding toon dat Nerdrum se werk individuele oordenking verg, in die lig daarvan dat die kunsoortuigings wat daarin vervat is, op eiesoortige wyse aansluiting vind by Rancière se regimes, sodat dit ossileer tussen moontlike affiliasie met òf die representatiewe regime, òf die estetiese regime.

Uiteindelik word 'n aantal gevorderde insigte aangaande moontlike verdere kritiese ondersoek aan die hand gedoen met die oog daarop om die behoefte aan verdere dissensus teen die daarstel van nuwe hiërargieë in beide Nerdrum en Rancière se werk aan die hand te doen.

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<sup>1</sup> Die kompleksiteit van die dubbele betekenis van die Franse term *sensible* word in die tesis bespreek, spesifiek wat die vertaling daarvan na Engels betref. Met die vertaling na Afrikaans is die gelyktydige verwysing na die *sintuiglike* (die sintuie van die mens) en *sin* (die sinvolheid van 'n idee of die sin wat daaruit gemaak kan word) ook van toepassing. In hierdie geval gebruik ek die term *waarneembare* om die gelyktydige waarneming deur die sintuie, en die denke gekoppel aan die verwerking van enige waarneembare situasie te verwoord.



Figure 1.1. Nerdrum, Odd. *The Saviour of Painting* (self-portrait) (1997)

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction *Voices of dissent*

### 1.1. Introduction

In 1998, at a retrospective exhibition of his work, the contemporary Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum (born 1944) declared that he is not an artist, but prefers to be known as a Kitsch painter (Nerdrum, 2011a:23).<sup>2</sup> With this statement Nerdrum insisted that his work should be considered within what he describes elsewhere as the “standards of Kitsch” (Nerdrum, 2011a:23). Since this declaration, Nerdrum has advocated for the existence of the Kitsch movement in various publications and at academic conferences. The representational artworks of the self-identified members of the Kitsch movement—which include Nerdrum and a number of painters who have exhibited with him, many of whom trained as his students—speak of high technical skill and workmanship in figurative naturalistic depictions. Stylistically, the artistic approach of the Kitsch movement refers back to the technical proficiency of the so-called old “masters” of the seventeenth-century baroque.

Nerdrum's positioning of his work within a framework that he himself defines as Kitsch speaks of a considered and deliberate theorisation of the nature of art creation within Nerdrum's positioning of *contemporary art*,<sup>3</sup> specifically with regard to kitsch as a discursive construct. Reflections on the nature of aesthetics and, in particular, the position of kitsch within aesthetics, have come to the fore in recent years (see Boylan, 2010, Tedman, 2010, Kjellman-Chapin, 2013). Numerous publications over the last decade attest to a new consideration of kitsch. Authors such as Boylan

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the capitalised “K” within the context of Nerdrum's definition of *Kitsch* is conceptually different from *kitsch*. This conscious choice of self-identification reflects Nerdrum's defiant intention in using a word that is usually used as a derogative term, by assigning his own meaning to it. This thesis continues this use in order to differentiate between Nerdrum's work, ideas and ideals (Kitsch) as opposed to a general understanding of kitsch as the outcast within formal art.

<sup>3</sup> I apply the term contemporary art as indicative of Nerdrum's understanding of the term as anything post-avant-garde. In other words, for Nerdrum (2011:23) the term *contemporary art* simultaneously refers to modernist, postmodernist and so-called meta or post-postmodernist art creation. In Nerdrum's self-serving positioning and frame of reference, these periods are all connected within the framework of Kantian-inspired ideas regarding aesthetics (see Nerdrum, 2018).

(2010), Tedman (2010) and Kjellman-Chapin (2013), among others, question the marginalisation of certain artistic practices often regarded as kitsch. Together with Nerdrum, these authors raise the question of the definition of kitsch, as it is often used as a vague and fluid word collectively referring to that which is considered *non-art*. These ideas, along with the emergence of the Kitsch movement, are all indicative of a sense of protest against what is considered normative within the contemporary artworld's understanding of kitsch.<sup>4</sup> Boylan (2010), Tedman (2010) and Kjellman-Chapin (2013), along with Nerdrum, concur that the term kitsch, and its application, is volatile and unspecific. They argue that the application of the term becomes indicative of an *other* in contemporary art creation. This *other* refers to that which falls outside and on the margins of accepted artistic, and specifically "masterly", practice within the European tradition. The schism recalls Wartenberg's (2002:xiii) notion of the "knowledgeable experts" who guide, critique and adjudicate contemporary art creation, separating the acceptable from the unacceptable. This othering ultimately does not clearly define the concept of kitsch, but rather serves as an umbrella term for what it is not. The marginalisation of certain artists and artistic practices as the so-called other appears to indicate, especially to Nerdrum, a type of hierarchical structure within the contemporary artworld. According to Nerdrum, this hierarchy determines which art practices are regarded as worthy. Furthermore, it alludes to the existence of a framework within which art creation must function to be truly regarded as art.

The resistance to hierarchical frameworks that relegate certain individuals or groups to the margins or to the *outside* of a community or collective is central to the thought of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (born 1940). In numerous theoretical publications (cf. Rancière, 1999, 2004, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2014), Rancière presents a perspective on the nature of aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth to twenty-first century. The politics of aesthetics and art are at the core of his philosophy. Central to this philosophy is what Rancière (2004:12) refers to as *le partage du sensible* (the distribution of the sensible).<sup>5</sup> This distribution refers to the way in which certain social conceptions, customs and practices in societies are set

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of the *artworld* is volatile and not considered central to the research's focus. As elaborated upon in Chapter Two, this study acknowledges Nerdrum's simplified and egocentric view that the artworld is a stable construct, guided entirely by a modernist spirit of abstraction, conceptualism and hatred of classical figurative painting. When applying this term, the study references this self-serving concept of the artworld which underpins Nerdrum's further definition of *Art* — as the antagonist to "talent and devotion" (Nerdrum, 2001:7; 2011a:23).

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the original French should be considered here, as the use of the word *sensible* in this case refers to *that which can be made sense of* through perception by the *senses* (Tanke, 2011:73). In order to accentuate Rancière's concepts this thesis reverts to using the French phrasing when referring to the role-players and elements of dissensus.

as norms, which in time become rules (Rancière, 2004:12). It follows that certain ideas come to be considered as the only acceptable ones, and subsequently determine proper behaviour within the group. This *le partage du sensible* is enforced by what Rancière (1999:21) terms *la police* (the police). *La police* upholds the status quo (the accepted social understanding, customs, practices and norms). *La police* is opposed by what Rancière describes as *la politique* (politics), specifically in the form of art questioning *le partage du sensible* (cf. Rancière, 1999). The process of opposing *la police* leads to *la répartition du sensible* (redistribution of the sensible). Rancière calls this resistance and consequent redistribution of the sensible brought about by political uprising against the police, *dissensus* (cf. Rancière, 1999, 2004, 2010). Through this process of dissensus, that which was considered as *the sense of meaning* to be made out of that which the *senses* perceive, is questioned. Dissensus can thus be understood as a revolt and subsequent re-ordering of social and political understanding. Considered within this definition, the Kitsch movement and its revolt against contemporary art appears to align with the motives of dissensus.

For Rancière, the notion of an *aesthetic regime* is fundamental to the philosophical premise of dissensus. He argues (Rancière: 2004:22) that genuine dissensus (that which brings about *la répartition du sensible*) can only take place through art that forms part of the aesthetic regime. Rancière (2004:23) argues that “the aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres.” Tanke (2011:71) explains that Rancière regards the aesthetic regime not as a regime directly connected to certain historical artistic movements, but rather as general attempts within art to innovate over an extended period of time. This change through innovation, connected to the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, is very much connected to Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) influence on the consideration of aesthetic conduct (Rancière, 2004:22). For Rancière (cf. 2004) aesthetic art, flowing from aesthetic conduct (aesthetic thinking), considers the relationship between art and life differently from what Rancière calls the *representative regime of art* (Rancière: 2004:21). In many ways this representative regime is akin to French *classicism*, argues Rancière (2004:21). Within this framework certain forms of representational art are held in higher regard than others, making way for the idea of “high” and “low” subject matter. According to Rancière (2004:22), the aesthetic regime sets itself against these elitist ideas of hierarchy which are central in classicist approaches to painting. Understanding Boylan (2010), Tedman (2010), Kjellman-Chapin (2013) and Nerdrum *et.al.* (2011) argument—that kitsch is used to marginalise certain art creation—as resistance against being excluded, their discourse could be considered as subverting a hierarchy within accepted contemporary art creation. From this perspective, the



Kitsch movement seems to be an example of that which Rancière holds central: democracy, i.e. the revolt against both hierarchy and rules that lead to the exclusion of certain people and their attempts to be considered part of the whole.

However, this seemingly evident relation between the revolt of the Kitsch movement and Rancière's dissensus becomes problematic when the aesthetic regime is considered more closely. To Rancière, the aesthetic regime is liberated from the representative regime. Rancière (2004:22) aligns the representative regime to Aristotle's (c. 384 BCE - 322 BCE) promotion of mimesis. According to Rancière (2004:22), art created within the representative regime is produced from a position where the relationship between art and life is predetermined, because art is a *representation* of life. This distinction creates a divide between what Rancière considers to form part of the aesthetic regime, which *can* act as *la politique* (that which resists a system of oppression) to bring about dissensus. Ironically, we are again confronted with a framework, created by Rancière's philosophy, which defines what can be regarded as art. This, once again, reflects the hierarchal mind-set which Boylan (2010), Tedman (2010), Kjellman-Chapin (2013) and Nerdrum *et.al.* (2011) object to. The existence of a hierarchical frameworks in contemporary art which proclaims certain art practices to be either valid or invalid appears to also be embedded in the concept of the aesthetic regime. As Rancière equates the representative regime with classical art, and the fact that kitsch/Kitsch is easily connected with classical academic art (specifically because of its representational qualities), kitsch/Kitsch is once again positioned as being the other.

In short, although Nerdrum's sedition of contemporary art (because of the exclusionary nature which he perceives therein) through the Kitsch movement seems to concur with Rancière's ideals of dissensus, the two forms of revolt come to an impasse. Rancière (2004:24) argues that only the aesthetic regime (with aesthetic art developed from the ideas of Kant) is capable of true dissensus. Nerdrum's Kitsch movement, however, is possibly rooted in antithesis to the aesthetic regime, i.e. in the representative regime (pre-Kantian classicism). Herein lies the tension which directs this study, as I consider the Kitsch movement within the contemporary art sphere as a possible example of dissensus. This assumed dissensus by the Kitsch movement necessitates a deeper understanding of Rancière's aesthetic regime, as the harbinger of dissensual conduct, and its relatability to the functioning of the Kitsch movement. This awareness, in turn, calls for a dissensus against the Kitsch movement's own ironic exclusion of certain artistic practices from being situated within its own framework of "validated" artworks.

## 1.2. Nerdrum, the Kitsch outcast

Within the Western tradition of figurative painting, Odd Nerdrum is often referred to as a “living master painter” (cf. Malafronte, 2011:80). Although not at the forefront of the present-day artworld, he is nonetheless internationally renowned, widely collected and financially successful (Malafronte, 2012:64). Nearing the age of 80, he has surrounded himself with a collective of active and admiring painters and writers, which further contributes to his persona as *master*. It stands to reason that his creation of the Kitsch movement is a culmination of a lifetime of experiences and learning. The complex relationship between art, aesthetics and the politics of art seems to come to a head within Nerdrum's positioning of the Kitsch movement in opposition to contemporary art creation. In order to gain a deeper understanding of these complexities, I first consider the paradigmatic views of kitsch, as they influence and are understood by Nerdrum.<sup>6</sup> In correlation with these views, Rancière's construction of dissensual political activity can be used as a framework to understand Nerdrum's practice, which addresses the way in which certain practices are marginalised to the position of other. The Kitsch movement, as theorised by Nerdrum, is subsequently set as an example of rebellion against the marginalisation of certain artistic endeavours, which Nerdrum experiences in the artworld. The movement appears to act as dissensus that questions the hierarchy embedded in contemporary art creation and the formal artworld.

The concept of kitsch is seen as a product of the development of industrial society. The word originated in Germany in the 1860s to refer to artistic products that were manufactured to be sold to tourists (Morreall & Loy, 1989:63). The speed of production of these items, partly as a result of industrialisation, was associated with poor workmanship, the use of lower quality materials, and little academic-reflective consideration (Kjellman-Chapin, 2013:xi). Due to these characteristics, the term kitsch is usually linked to ideas of so-called poor taste (Kutnicki, 2013:174). Taste here implies specific judgments about art and aesthetics. As the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) suggested in his theory of aesthetic judgment (1790), such designations not only question the aesthetic quality of the work but also the moral intentions of the artist (cf. Kant, 1911).

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<sup>6</sup> In considering Nerdrum's positioning of himself and his followers as marginalised within contemporary art, I suspend critique of the fact that Nerdrum is 'n white (Scandinavian), European male, working within a historical tradition of figurative painting, which echoes the ideas of a canon within Western art. Nerdrum's transparent Eurocentric point of view is reflected upon in Chapter 6.

This approach to understanding and appreciating art is one which Nerdrum finds problematic in the positioning of his own work, and the work of painters who pursue similar careers because it denigrates technical artistic skill and favours concept over form (cf. Nerdrum, 2018a).

Kjellman-Chapin (2013:xiii) argues that aesthetic judgment, which connects taste with “quality” in art, causes the idea of *poor taste* to be equated with the idea of *poor art*. From this angle, a hierarchical placement of art practices can be identified, where certain art practices are considered as more valuable than others. Art critics Morreall and Loy (1989) and Greenberg (1939) provide further theoretical descriptions of kitsch, especially within art creation. Although they write from different paradigms and historical periods, these authors advocated for the categorisation and innate system of hierarchy of art creation. Within this view, kitsch can be argued to exist as an other. Morreall and Loy (1989:65) argue that so-called true art (or “great” art), challenges the viewer and solicits a reaction. In their opinion, and in agreement with Greenberg (1939), kitsch is the opposite of this so-called true art, as it does not challenge the viewer by confronting them with new ideas and techniques (Morreall & Loy, 1989:65).

Morreall and Loy (1989:64) list further criteria for an object to qualify as kitsch, among which mass production and display value also play an important role. The writer and philosopher Susan Sontag (1964:1) defines the purchase, ownership and appreciation of kitsch to be an uncritical activity. This means that lovers of kitsch do not realise that the object they love or crave is actually kitsch (*kitsch* here as defined by theorists like Greenberg, and Morreall and Loy). Sontag (1964:1), however, suggests that the attachment to a kitsch object from an “informed” view (which takes into account the standards of taste) implies an ironic attachment, which she calls *camp* aesthetics, and not kitsch. The artistically uninformed viewer of kitsch thus appreciates a kitsch work for reasons that differ from those of the informed viewer, who appreciates it ironically (cf. Sontag, 1964). The same can also be said for artist-theorists like Nerdrum who appreciates and contextualises kitsch/Kitsch from an artistically informed position (Nerdrum & Tuv, 2001; Nerdrum *et al.*, 2011).

Theorists like Greenberg (1939), who wrote within the modernist paradigm, found it easy to position kitsch as the opposite of art. Nowadays, art critics find it much more difficult to give a single definition of kitsch as a phenomenon. Kjellman-Chapin (2013: ix) writes:

From its etymological and, one might argue, its ideological, beginnings in the latter half of the nineteenth century, kitsch has steadfastly resisted a single definition [...]

trading on contested notions of taste, vague and shifting notions of beauty, and unstable cultural hierarchies.

Kjellman-Chapin emphasises that although the term kitsch is readily used – mostly as a description of something that does not conform to the standards of contemporary ideas of good taste, it has no definite definition or description. This positioning once again relegates kitsch to the margin. Emanating from this argument authors such as Kjellman-Chapin (2010) and Nerdrum (Nerdrum & Tuv, 2001; Nerdrum *et al.*, 2011) stress the necessity to re-evaluate the concept of kitsch, specifically as something with an autonomous identity rather than being defined by what it is not. When specific focus is placed on Nerdrum's attempts to reposition kitsch within the Kitsch movement, the autonomous identity of kitsch could consequentially, and ironically, be considered as dissensus because of the subversive action and position it assumes.

### 1.3. Rancière, the democratic liberator

Jacques Rancière is a French philosopher, born in 1940 in Algiers. He launched his studies at the École Normale Supérieure in 1960 and found initial inspiration in Louis Althusser's (1918 – 1990) seminars. He soon established himself as influential within the humanities, specifically when his work was published alongside that of Althusser and Etienne Balibar in the book *Reading Capital* in 1968 (cf. Althusser *et al.*). Holm (2010) explains Rancière's philosophical notion of dissensus as the way the so-called other challenges the hierarchical power structures of an existing social institution. This social structure functions on certain ethics and rules which guide proper functioning of that community. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, there sometimes exists (or comes into existence) a group which is not included in the sensible structure of the existing community. This creates a hierarchy of division, which the other attempts to destruct through dissensus. Within dissensus, the other consider themselves as equal to those already included and accepted within the group. This consideration is founded upon the ideas of complete democracy for each individual. As a result of this call to be made equal, the prevailing social order is challenged. Ultimately, it is not only the hierarchical order that is disturbed, but also the perceptual and epistemic foundation that the social order in question represents (Holm, 2010).

Jacques Rancière addresses the apparent division through hierarchy within art (but also in society in general) in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004). Rancière's work focuses on the

underlying assumptions in society which leads to what is considered as tolerable or acceptable as well as how to resist these distorted institutions of authority, including those within the arts. Rancière terms this resistance to the distorted institution of authority dissensus, as defined in his reader *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010).

The idea of what is tolerable or acceptable within a society has obvious links with ethics and how moral principles are defined within a specific group. Rancière (2010:28) claims that ethics can be regarded as a general example of “normativity”. Knowledge of this normativity enables one to judge the validity of practices and discourses within a particular sphere and thereby determine actions. From this belief, according to Rancière (2009b:1), the politics of art today are increasingly subject to moral judgment about the validity of principles of art creation. The assumed validity of certain principles of art creation, therefore, leads to the institutionalisation of certain practices within art. Rancière continues by arguing that this points to the reinterpretation of the norm to a fact—meaning that the normative approach steadily becomes so imbedded that it assumes the position as the only approach (Rancière, 2006b; Wolfe, 2006).

This is where the aesthetic regime comes into play. Art created within the aesthetic regime, according to Rancière (2004:23), can question so-called normativity, or that which regulates the positioning of the in-group or out-group. Rancière’s (2004:20) separation of the aesthetic regime from the representative regime does, however, create a notable tension within his claims of being democratic and anti-elitist, as it seems to once again creates a hierarchy of what is acceptable or normative within dissensus. For the purposes of this study this tension highlights the fact that the Kitsch movement, which appears to be in dissensus against the contemporary artworld, is vested within the representative regime. In other words, although the Kitsch movement appears to act according to the definitions of dissensus, it might actually fals within a regime which Rancière does not consider to be part of art that brings about dissensus.

#### 1.4. The Kitsch movement

Nerdrum (2011b:25-32) explains in his manifesto speeches of 1998 and 1999 that he cannot be accepted in what he describes as “modern art” world because he pursues different principles in his work. He repeatedly refers to the development, popularity and prominence of modernist thinking about art and the norms about what should be pursued in art as opposed to that which

he and the members of the Kitsch movement strive to attain (Nerdrum, 2011b:26). This repetition of self-identification as outsider, serves as Nerdrum's point of departure in creating the Kitsch movement.

As mentioned earlier, the members of the Kitsch movement paint in a style that highlights figurative mastery in naturalistic depiction. Nerdrum argues that art development at the beginning of the twentieth century directly reflected the changing social conditions which fuelled and developed along with the European industrial revolution and urbanisation. In these new forms of art creation, to his mind, the central importance and adherence to modern knowledge—scientific and technological development—was emphasised. Nerdrum (2011b:27) argues that this direction of art creation captured a particular form of social truth—a truth that sees humanity as a social being within a world of universal experience. This pursuit of modernist knowledge and experience is reflected within modernist art's revolt against traditional art production, historicism, classicism, the art academy and all other forms of power. Consequently, innovation has become the central characteristic of modernist art rather than following traditional approaches. To produce artistic or cultural work based on an established historical tradition (as in the case of Nerdrum and its students) can therefore not be accepted in the sphere of modernist or contemporary art (which Nerdrum considers to be one and the same) because it does not attempt to innovate (Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011:44).

Nerdrum (2011b:27) argues that, over time, modernism itself has become a tradition. As a result of this tradition art institutions, critics, educators and educated people are expected to be receptive to *the new* in the constant pursuit of the novel and unusual. Nerdrum (2011b:27) explains that his opposition to modernism is not based on the prominence of the movement as dominant order within art creation. His opposition is concerned with the way in which modernism (and by implication, his experience of all contemporary art) marginalises and relegates certain artistic practices to the position of other, as the term kitsch in modernism has become a generic name for everything that is not considered "intellectual" and new.

Seen from this perspective it seems that Nerdrum's positioning of the Kitsch movement assumes a definite stance against "the" artworld. At first glance, it appears that this revolt (by the Kitsch movement) may be an example of what Rancière (2004:9) calls *la répartition du sensible* (the redistribution of the sensible). Such an interpretation would imply that the Kitsch movement is an example of Rancière's *la politique*, rebelling against the contemporary artworld (fulfilling the position of *la police*). Nevertheless, Rancière's theorising of the *aesthetic regime of art* possibly

excludes the Kitsch movement (from art practices that can be regarded as art which can bring dissensus about) because the Kitsch movement simultaneously seems to align with the *representative regime of art*, which Rancière argues cannot bring about dissensus. This supposition leads directly to the problem statement.

## 1.5. Problem statement, research questions and objectives

In light of the contextualisation above, this study is concerned with the ways in which the creation of Odd Nerdrum's Kitsch movement can be regarded as a manifestation of Jacques Rancière's method of dissensus. I question how this possible manifestation of dissensus can be interpreted as a critique of the exclusion inherent within the aesthetic regime of art. I concurrently highlight the ironic exclusion within the Kitsch movement itself of work that does not adhere to the principles of Kitsch.

This study addresses the problems that arise from the way in which Rancière's philosophical beliefs about dissensus in art may be embodied in Nerdrum's Kitsch movement. More specifically, I investigate Nerdrum's theorising and fundamental principles within the Kitsch movement and how these possibly reflect an oppositional attitude towards the nature of aesthetics. This can be suggested in the manner in which he distances the idea of Kitsch (within the Kitsch movement) from what is traditionally regarded as kitsch (as a derogatory umbrella term). This study further elaborates on the problematic definition of Rancière's aesthetic regime (as vehicle for dissensus) which possibly excludes the work of the Kitsch movement because of its continued use of historical techniques that seem to align it to the representational regime. This possible dissensus by the Kitsch movement, in turn, is further problematised in the way it replicates the initial problem of setting up a hierarchy within (Western) artistic expression, when one considers who and what Nerdrum allows to be seen as Kitsch.

The following research questions arise from this problem statement:

1.5.1. How does Nerdrum's conscious creation of the Kitsch movement highlight his experience and conviction of a system of hierarchical norms within the contemporary artworld? The first objective of this study is to critically investigate the contemporary artworld as it is experienced by Nerdrum, and its possible marginalisation of certain artistic endeavours by defining them as kitsch. This question requires an investigation into Nerdrum's experience of the artistic norms of

the contemporary artworld, with specific reference to ideas surrounding the terms kitsch and taste, as well as the hierarchies inherent in these terms.

1.5.2. How does Rancière address the politics of art and a hierarchy of exclusion within the contemporary artworld through his theorisation of dissensus and how can the Kitsch movement be considered as an embodiment of such a dissensus? This study's second objective is the evaluation of Rancièrian method for dissensus and its correlation with the Kitsch movement's aims. In order to address this question, Rancière's definition of the role of dissensus within a group or collective will be interpreted in order to propose a link between his ideas of dissensus and the aims of the Kitsch movement.

1.5.3. How does Rancière's aesthetic regime and Nerdrum's Kitsch movement simultaneously act as *la répartition du sensible* and *le partage du sensible*, ironically creating an environment of dissensus which will elicit further dissensus onto itself? Lastly, this study aims to highlight the intrinsic tension in both Rancière and Nerdrum's attempts at dissensual action, where the revolt against a hierarchy of exclusion is necessarily replaced by another hierarchy of exclusion. This question is addressed by arguing that both Rancière's and Nerdrum's dissensus, while attempting to oppose hierarchies of exclusion, possibly reproduce hierarchical structures which, in turn, will bring about dissensus onto itself.

## 1.6. Central Theoretical Statement

This study contends that Odd Nerdrum's creation and theorisation of the Kitsch movement reflects his experience and attitude within his concept of the artworld as marginalising certain artistic practices as the other. These marginalised artistic practices are often defined under the ambiguous term *kitsch*. The attempt by a so-called other to include itself in a community despite the hierarchal structures which exclude it from operating as part of the group is argued to be a form of dissensus within contemporary art.

Subsequently, Rancière's definition of dissensus in art—where *le partage du sensible* (as enforced by *la police*) is brought into question (by *la politique*) in order to bring about *la répartition du sensible*—is shown to be comparable to the Kitsch movement's proclaimed exclusion from and revolt against the artworld and the supposed rules that govern it. Through this comparison, I



argue that the Kitsch movement can be interpreted as an instance of dissensus, where the structure of hierarchy and so-called proper conduct of the artworld is challenged.

Identifying the Kitsch movement as an example of Rancièrian dissensus highlights a new tension with regards to the politics of art. Rancière propounds that dissensus can only be achieved by art which forms part of the aesthetic regime. The aesthetic regime is specifically set up as different from what Rancière describes as the representative regime. Nerdrum and the other members of the Kitsch movement, with their focus on classical figurative painting, conversely seem to fall within the representative regime. Consequently, I provide a critical reading of selected works from Nerdrum's oeuvre in order to investigate this tension and seeming misalignment between the Kitsch movement and the aesthetic regime. I argue that his critical reading shows the need for individualised consideration of works of art, specifically when discussing Nerdrum's paintings.

In conclusion, I maintain that further dissensus may occur in reaction to the ironic creation of new hierarchies within the Kitsch movement, and possibly within the regimes of art.

## 1.7. Methodological Framework

This study is framed by a textual analysis of the theories regarding the Kitsch movement and Rancièrian dissensus. The thesis is qualitative in nature and consists of two complementary parts: i) a literature review that explores the nature of aesthetics within contemporary art, with a specific focus on Nerdrum and Rancière's theorisations of aesthetics, and ii) a critical interpretation of Nerdrum and Rancière's writing on the subjects of, respectively, the Kitsch movement and dissensus. Within this critical interpretation works created by members of the Kitsch movement, as well as a selection of artworks supporting the notion of art as dissensus, will inform my arguments.

### 1.7.1. Literature review

A Nexus search has indicated that no similar study has been registered. For the literature review I consult relevant publications, anthologies and periodicals, with a specific focus on the prolific writing of Jacques Rancière which acts as primary sources for the investigation into dissensus

and the aesthetic regime in works. The most prominent of Rancière's publications included in this research are: *Disagreement: politics and philosophy* (1999), *The politics of aesthetics* (2004), *The ethical turn of aesthetics and politics* (2006a), *Aesthetics and its discontents* (2009b), and *Dissensus on politics and aesthetics* (2010b). Primary sources on the Kitsch movement focus on the publications and lectures given by Nerdrum (Nerdrum & Tuv, 2001; Nerdrum *et al.*, 2011). Although critical sources on Nerdrum's Kitsch movement appear to be non-existent, the work of Rancière is very much a topic of frequent discourse, and works such as Tanke's *What is the aesthetic regime?* (2011) and Bowman and Stamp's *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus* (2011) form part of the inquiry into understanding Rancièrian dissensus.

Aesthetics is investigated with emphasis on the contributions of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1911 [1790]) and Shiner's *The invention of art* (2001), whereas the questioning of artistic hierarchy and the role of kitsch is largely situated within the publications of Kjellman-Chapin (2010 & 2013).

### 1.7.2. Textual analysis

This thesis is an exploratory, theoretical, and interpretive inquiry into the writings of Jacques Rancière and Odd Nerdrum regarding their approaches to dissensus within contemporary art and aesthetics. The study offers a textual analysis of their theorisation of actions within the artworld that relate, directly or indirectly, to dissensus. This thesis does not use a particular methodology, but is rather guided by a critical, interdisciplinary textual analysis of Nerdrum's writing on the Kitsch movement and Rancière's philosophy of dissensus. This is done in order to understand the underlying intent within these theorists' ideas but also to identify possible contradictions.

The study's primary aim is not to apply both or either of the theorists' philosophies in the analysis of art or art style. Rather, a gradual critical analysis of underlying meanings encapsulated within their writing is undertaken. A theoretical analysis of the works produced by the Kitsch movement is of lesser consequence in this study, as these artefacts are merely an example of many others that could, within the context of other studies, be understood from the ideas of dissensus, which this thesis expounds upon.

Ultimately, through textual analysis, this research aims to uncover the inherent contradictions embedded within both Nerdrum and Rancière's work. Where separate consideration of their work

would not necessarily have made these contradictions apparent, the placement of both in contrast with each other results in the establishment of problematic questions regarding their ideas.

## 1.8. Contribution of the study

This study contributes to the discourse of the politics of art in several ways. First, it produces a critical consideration of Nerdrum's life, work and influence, outside of the sphere of prevailing auto-biographical style publications which are available to the public. Second, it shows that Nerdrum's use of the term *kitsch*, as an appropriation of modernist dualist thinking, to identify his work as *Kitsch*, is part of a larger movement within contemporary thinking regarding the aesthetic hierarchy theorists such as Boylan (2010), Tedman (2010), Kjellman-Chapin (2013) and Nerdrum *et.al.* (2011) believe to be present in contemporary art. Consequently, it aligns this uprising against a hierarchy which engenders inequality, with Rancière's method of dissensus. In defining the participants and elements in dissensual action, Nerdrum's work is compared with Rancière's regimes of art, exposing the need for further dissensus within both the Kitsch movement and the regimes of art.

## 1.9. Chapter outline

After having introduced this study by means of the context, problem statement and motivation for the research in **Chapter One**, **Chapter Two** presents an account of the life and work of Odd Nerdrum. This account serves as a contextual, biographical and critical introduction to the life and oeuvre of the painter. This chapter also considers visual and inspirational influences throughout his life, and presents an overview of his extensive oeuvre. Nerdrum's idea of contemporary art is shown to be defined within a specific and limited understanding of the influence, and importance of modernist thought, which this study positions as the *artworld*. This approach of documenting the artist's life and work in relation to the artworld is done in order to have a better understanding of Nerdrum's background and his subsequent development of the Kitsch movement.

Proceeding from Nerdrum's choice to use the word *kitsch* to describe that which he and his students create, **Chapter Three** presents an exploration of kitsch within the artworld and

aesthetics, as specifically reflective of Nerdrum's point of view. In this exploration, I consider the supposed hierarchy between different artistic endeavours, with specific focus on the simultaneous development of the avant-garde and the concept of kitsch as well as a consideration of kitsch/Kitsch in the artworld.

**Chapter Four** launches an evaluation of Rancière's theorisation of dissensus, its role within the artworld, and the possible manifestation thereof in Nerdrum's Kitsch movement. This chapter includes a comparison of the Kitsch movement and dissensus. The problem of Rancière's positioning of the aesthetic and representative regimes is investigated in **Chapter Five**. This is done to ascertain Nerdrum's positioning as it relates to Rancière's regimes of art, which concurrently influences a work's definition as dissensual or not. Finally, I emphasise the ironic flaws of exclusion embedded within Nerdrum's structuring of the Kitsch movement, as well as the possible problematic hierarchy embedded within Rancière's regimes of art.

Closing remarks as well as a summary of the main arguments and conclusions throughout the research are presented in **Chapter Six**. Along with these concluding thoughts, I highlight some other possible issues, worthy of future research, within the work of Nerdrum and Rancière. These issues centre on the problematic centrality of Western thinking, philosophy and art within the work of both writers. In considering these further problematic issues, I also include suggestions for further research in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The oddness of Nerdrum *Positioning the artist and his work*

#### 2.1. Introduction

Odd Nerdrum is a phenomenon that challenges the consensus and the sheep-minded mentality that pervades the contemporary art world. (Ericsson *in Malafronte*, 2012:59)

Nerdrum, now in his seventies, enters the conference room like someone stepping off a stage or film set, draped in a flowing white artist's toga (see Figure 2.1.). The toga is slightly stained with paint and sufficiently wrinkled to create the impression of an aversion to deliberating his appearance. A mess of white, curly hair surrounds his face and neck, proclaiming what appears to be an absence of physical vanity. Dishevelled as Odd Nerdrum may appear at first sight, you are immediately aware of the gravitas which surrounds this out of place figure within the conference's formal surroundings. He is followed by his two sons, Bork (born 1993, Figure 2.2.) and Öde (born 1995, Figure 2.3.), dressed in linen blouses with billowing sleeves which come together at the wrists in frilly cuffs. Both, too, have unkept hair and are dressed in a style that signifies a different time. The otherworldliness of their attire, however, cannot be associated with a specific era or place. These two young men carry with them high-tech camera equipment, and with ease and effortless speed they set up the microphones and cameras to film the presentation their father is about to give.<sup>7</sup>

I witnessed this captivating scene moments before Odd Nerdrum began his keynote presentation at The Representational Art Conference (TRAC2018) in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Between 2018 and 2020 Odd Nerdrum's son, Öde Nerdrum, released a six-part documentary series on the life, work and inspirations of his father. The original Norwegian title for the series is *Jakten på Nerdrum*, which translates to *The hunt off for Odd Nerdrum*. His other son, Bork Nerdrum, produces the talk show *Cave of Apelles*, an online production focused on reflective discourse closely related to Nerdrum's teachings and theories.

<sup>8</sup> TRAC is an organisation that tasks itself in promoting figurative painting, where many representational painters find themselves unrepresented at academic conferences and international forums on the creation, understanding and direction of contemporary art.

This particular instance is in its exterior appearance and oratory content no different from what the artworld has come to expect from Odd Nerdrum. This I deduce from watching other recordings of his public appearances and reading of the experiences of other people who have encountered him. Nerdrum can be described as an extraordinary and decidedly provocative artist and orator (cf. Pettinger, 2004).

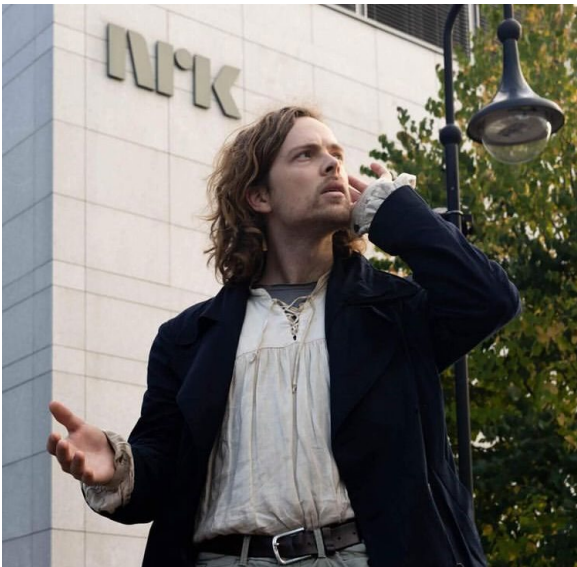
Gormley (2011:26) calls Nerdrum “one of the world’s leading figurative painters”. His renown—not always universally positive—makes Nerdrum a favourite at conferences on representational painting, even if his words are not well-received by everyone. Nerdrum (2011b:27) no longer considers himself to be an *artist*. He prefers to be known as a *painter*. By distancing himself from this generally accepted term, Nerdrum attempts to challenge his followers’ understanding of art and the role of the artist in contemporary society. The combination of Nerdrum’s challenging ideas, idiosyncrasies and unmistakable painting techniques and style prompts Swedish professional painter, academic director of the Mölndal for the Swedish branch of The Florence Academy, Joakim Ericsson (born 1972), to refer to Nerdrum as a phenomenon that challenges the consensus of the contemporary artworld (Malafronte, 2012:59).

Although he is an internationally renowned figure within certain art circles, the life and work of this 76-year-old artist is not necessarily widely recognised and discussed. Notably, publications on his life and oeuvre are mostly produced by those close to him. Only once your path has crossed with his writing, painting or public appearances, do you become aware of an intensity of activity which revolves around him. It is this striking sense of activity, interaction and creation which takes place in the orbit of Odd Nerdrum that guides this chapter.

This chapter serves as a contextualising introduction to the life, education, works and teachings of Odd Nerdrum, the contemporary “master” painter. This positioning reflects on the inseparable experience and feeling of marginalisation which underwrites Nerdrum’s definition of the formal artworld. Section 2.2. traces Nerdrum’s interaction and experience of art—a process in which he sees himself as the constantly “odd” outsider of the formal artworld and its education. This contextualisation flows into a close consideration of selected works by Nerdrum, in section 2.3., which represent the development of thoughts, techniques and periods throughout his oeuvre. This is followed by the direct impact this painter has had on other artists, covering several decades of teaching and inspiration of others, with such influence that I refer to it as cult-like. All this is done in anticipation of Chapter Three, which considers the formation, aims and importance of Nerdrum’s creation of the Kitsch movement.



**Figure 2.1.** Odd Nerdrum in front of one of his works.



**Figure 2.2.** Bork Nerdrum



**Figure 2.3.** Öde Nerdrum

## 2.2. Never paint the sunset

It is beautiful, but remember to never paint anything like this  
if you become a painter because you will not be accepted  
at the Autumn Exhibition.  
(Johan Nerdrum *in* Nerdrum, 2011b:25)

Nerdrum's stepfather Johan (date of birth unknown) pointedly advised a young Odd Nerdrum one afternoon, while on a skiing trip, never to attempt to paint the beauty of a sunset. According to Nerdrum (2011b:25), who was still a child at this time, his love for painting had already manifested. Nerdrum (2011b:25) describes his stepfather as "a cultivated man who collected modern art". Considering the zeitgeist of mid-twentieth century Norway, Johan Nerdrum was a product of his time, being born into modernity within the Norwegian middleclass. He anticipated that art creation in Norway had, belatedly, entered European modernism.<sup>9</sup> Within the modernist paradigm, sensual landscapes of beautiful sunsets would not be the way for emerging artists to get noticed and be regarded as influential or relevant (Nerdrum, 2011b:25). Modernist art in the first half of the twentieth century, as it developed from the avant-garde onwards, gradually departed from representational painting, in some cases becoming completely abstract (cf. sections 3.2. & 3.3.). Nerdrum's stepfather was not denying the beauty of figurative painting, or the technical skill needed to produce such works. He was expressing an awareness that the Norwegian art scene did not regard such works very highly.

This section scrutinises the art education and interaction with the artworld that Nerdrum has had throughout his life. This overview focuses on the undercurrent of exclusion which Nerdrum has perceived throughout his career. He ascribes his experience of exclusion to the influence of modernist ideas on twentieth-century art production. With modernism as constant, ever present antagonist in his own writing, and in texts discussing his work and position within contemporary art, I highlight the fact that Nerdrum's definition of contemporary art practices (as supposedly primarily founded in avant-garde ideals of rejecting historical art practices) is built on the near universal rejection of representational art throughout the twentieth century. Through this limited

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<sup>9</sup> The aesthetic and cultural concept of Modernism started during The First World War and made its breakthrough as a canonised norm during the Second World War. European Modernism included a range of artistic movements such as Cubism, Post-Impressionism, Constructivism, Futurism and De Stijl. Modernism only made its *début* in the Nordic countries of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, with prolific Norwegian writers and artists such as the writer Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) and the artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) (Arnason & Mansfield, 2012:3).



and strategically self-serving definition of art, I argue that Nerdrum positions himself as a singular genius, fighting against exclusion on behalf of everyone who also experiences it.

As a boy Odd Nerdrum was sent to a Rudolf Steiner school. These experimental schools encouraged a child's interaction with nature as well as progress at the child's own pace.<sup>10</sup> According to a letter sent to his parents, his teacher, the anarchist writer Jens Bjørneboe (1920 – 1976) identified the young Nerdrum as an exceptional and gifted child. He writes (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018):

I cannot imagine that any of our teachers have ever witnessed children's drawings akin to those Odd produced this semester. Odd is very self-disciplined and has a hard time understanding that this does not apply to everybody else.

Considering the regard in which Nerdrum's family and teachers held his talent and capabilities, it is possible to imagine that Nerdrum had an awareness of being exceptional from a young age. His focus on this apparent talent is reflected in the fact that he started exhibiting his work while still in his teens (see Figure 2.16.) (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018)

Upon acceptance into *The Academy of Art* in Oslo at the age of 18 he attests to being disappointed with the new approaches with which art was understood and taught to young artists (Nerdrum, 2018b). At the academy he did not find live models or instruction on the knowledge of human anatomy. He found that painting techniques which were developed over centuries of experimenting with pigment and bonding liquid had been removed from the curriculum. Students no longer utilised or assembled handmade canvasses of Belgian linen, with surfaces gradually and painstakingly prepared to have a character of their own (Kristensen, 2010). Instead, Nerdrum was being taught about found objects and experimental expressionist abstractions, conceptual assemblage and ironic cultural commentary—the Academy of Art had aligned itself with what was at the forefront of modernist Western art creation (Nerdrum, 2018 & Nerdrum, 2018b).

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<sup>10</sup> The first Rudolf Steiner school opened in Stuttgart in 1919. Dr Rudolf Steiner was assigned to found and lead the school in its early stages. The priority of the Steiner ethos is to provide an unhurried and creative learning environment where children can find the joy in learning and experience the richness of childhood rather than early specialisation or academic hot-housing. The curriculum itself is a flexible set of pedagogical guidelines, founded on Steiner's principles that take account of the whole child. It gives equal attention to the physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs of each pupil and is designed to work in harmony with the different phases of the child's development (Edmunds, 2004).



**Figure 2.4.** Odd Nerdrum (back, right) and his class at the Steiner School



**Figure 2.5.** Odd Nerdrum (front) and his teacher Jens Bjørneboe



Figure 2.6. Van Rijn, Rembrandt. *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (1661-62)

Visiting the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm as part of a group of students from the Academy, Nerdrum left the group of fellow students in the Pop art section and wandered into the Rembrandt Hall of the National Museum (The Nerdrum Institute, 2012). He stopped in front of Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (Figure 2.6.). According to Nerdrum himself, the importance of this first face-to-face encounter with the work of the old master cannot be underestimated (Kristensen, 2010). Nerdrum interpreted what he saw as a work created with utter technical mastery yet with immense empathy and understanding for the human condition (Nerdrum, 2018). Nerdrum says that seeing the painting was:

a shock...pervasive. Like finding home. I can say I found a home in this picture, ...  
The wonderful thing with Rembrandt is the confidence he inspires—like when you warm your hands on a stove. Without Rembrandt I would have been so poor.  
(Kristensen, 2010)

He felt that this was not what he was being taught at The Academy of Art (Nerdrum, 2018b). Nerdrum was inspired by the level of painting that had already been mastered, and wanted to be taught how to apply the knowledge which these painters had already mastered three centuries ago (The Nerdrum Institute, 2012). According to Nerdrum (2011c:31) his teachers were not interested in teaching these “outdated” forms of art. Considering the course of twentieth-century art education, his teachers would most likely not have been able to teach these techniques, as they too would have been taught within the modernist paradigm of the first half of the twentieth century. It would simply be almost impossible to find a “master painter” to apprentice to and learn from.

The concept of a “master painter” dates back several centuries (Belkin, 1998:23). During the Renaissance, art apprentices studied under the guidance of a master artist. This was often also the case for artists of the baroque period. This apprenticeship often included copying earlier works of artists. Rubens, for instance, started his artistic apprenticeship with Tobias Verhaeght (Held, 1987:63) and finished his apprenticeship in 1598 to become an independent master himself, teaching and running one of the largest and most prolific studios in classical art history (Belkin, 1998:23). Any student of the twentieth century who hungered after the knowledge and wisdom of baroque figurative painting, would not find it at the Academy.



**Figure 2.7.** Nerdrum, Odd.  
*Self-Portrait* (date unknown)



**Figure 2.8.** Van Rijn, Rembrandt.  
*Self-Portrait, wearing a ruff and black hat*  
(1632)

Nerdrum relays (2011c:31) how his passionate love for the works of the baroque masters soon brought him into conflict with his teachers and fellow students. To his teachers at the Academy, says Nerdrum (2011c:31), the awe in which he held these artists and their work spoke of a “backward” way of thinking—a longing for that which was in the past, and therefore outside of the scope of the twentieth century artworld’s aims of renewal, novelty and dismissal of historic teaching. Finally, Nerdrum left the Academy of Art without completing his degree.

I had to make an important choice. I could hide in the background and work quietly, but no! I would guaranteed fall apart somehow. That is why I chose the raw and rowdy way — like Goya. The time I lived in was not for a Leonardo walking around and producing pretty studies. I have seen too many examples of our time’s distaste for the sensibly profane. That is why I chose the uninhibited. I wanted to do it in a grandiose way and stand on! I would rather take the chance and commit mistakes, with the risk of breaking my neck (Nerdrum, 2018c).



The Academy of Art did not place Nerdrum in the surroundings of a master painter, training and teaching students in an *atelier*, gradually and intensively refining and perfecting painting techniques, as was once the manner of art education, or artist apprenticeship. From here he moved from studying under the modernist artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) in Germany in 1965 to studying the old masters independently, finding his primary motivation for painting in the work of Rembrandt and Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1571-1610) (The Nerdrum Institute, 2012). He found in these baroque painters the inspiration needed to devote countless hours to experimenting with techniques and themes, practicing and improving on observational and applied techniques, and studying centuries of philosophy in an attempt to comprehend and capture on canvas what it is “to be human” (See, for instance, his self-portrait in Figure 2.7. as it relates to the work of Rembrandt in Figure 2.8.). Nerdrum (2011a:24) contends that the question of being human, or the human condition, is one which is central to his art creation. This idea of universal experience of *being*, underwrites much of his indifference to the art which is accepted by the artworld of his time. This would go toward explaining his comment in a 1967 interview when he said (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018):

I have no compassion with poor people, but I have compassion with poor souls. I am therefore the Norwegian art critics’ very best friend.

In his documentary about his father, Öde Nerdrum (2018) describes Odd—in the early years of being an independent, young artist—as steadfast and stubborn in refusing to take on the mediums, themes and techniques of his artistic contemporaries. The critics and media accused him of “disobeying his own time” (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018). He set forth by working with classical themes, ranging from history paintings, portraits, self-portraits, genre scenes, and still-lives—always done in a highly naturalistic style with an unmissable baroque influence. According to the website for *The Nerdrum Institute* (2012), which has since been replaced by [worldwidekitsch.com](http://worldwidekitsch.com), Nerdrum’s early works display the influence of Caravaggio’s work by taking up a similar realism and dramatic temperament. Rembrandt’s influence is to be seen in Nerdrum’s emulation of the quietly beautiful and patient depiction of the individual.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Nerdrum worked on themes concerned with social realism. During this phase, critics apparently relented with their abuse of Nerdrum’s work, as his depiction of current affairs made him seem more modern (Nerdrum, 2018c). Consider, for instance, his work of 1977-78, *The Murder of Andreas Baader* (Figure 2.9.). The baroque influence of Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (Figure 2.10.) is unmistakable, yet the scene is

obviously set in the twentieth century. In this work Nerdrum takes up a current affair regarding the speculative murder of the terrorist Andreas Baader in 1977. Nerdrum, in his signature approach of provocateur, does not merely intend to depict a moment talked about in the media, but takes the opportunity to question the truth which is relayed to the public.

An earlier example of Nerdrum's depiction of contemporary issues is his 1968 work *Auschwitz* (Figure 2.11.). Still in his early 20s, the appalling reality of the holocaust provides the young Nerdrum with the opportunity to depict a contentious subject, but also provides a platform to visually shock the viewer. The shock at the reality of the holocaust is entirely justified, but we see in this work the early stages of Nerdrum's use of death and gore to attract the onlooker's attention.

This dabbling in contemporary subject matter led to the Norwegian National Gallery purchasing some of his work. Supposedly, critics hoped that Nerdrum would gradually become more abstract in his depictions, but these hopes were quickly subdued when Nerdrum's work proved to move in an entirely different direction—one where the themes are so far removed from contemporary life, that they become, in his words, "timeless". According to his son Öde and his friend and former student Jan-Ove Tuv (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018), Nerdrum's work developed to a level of such "utter mastery" that they "cease to be artworks"—a comment made with no further explanation, but with self-assured confidence (as is often the case when in the company of Nerdrum and his devotees).

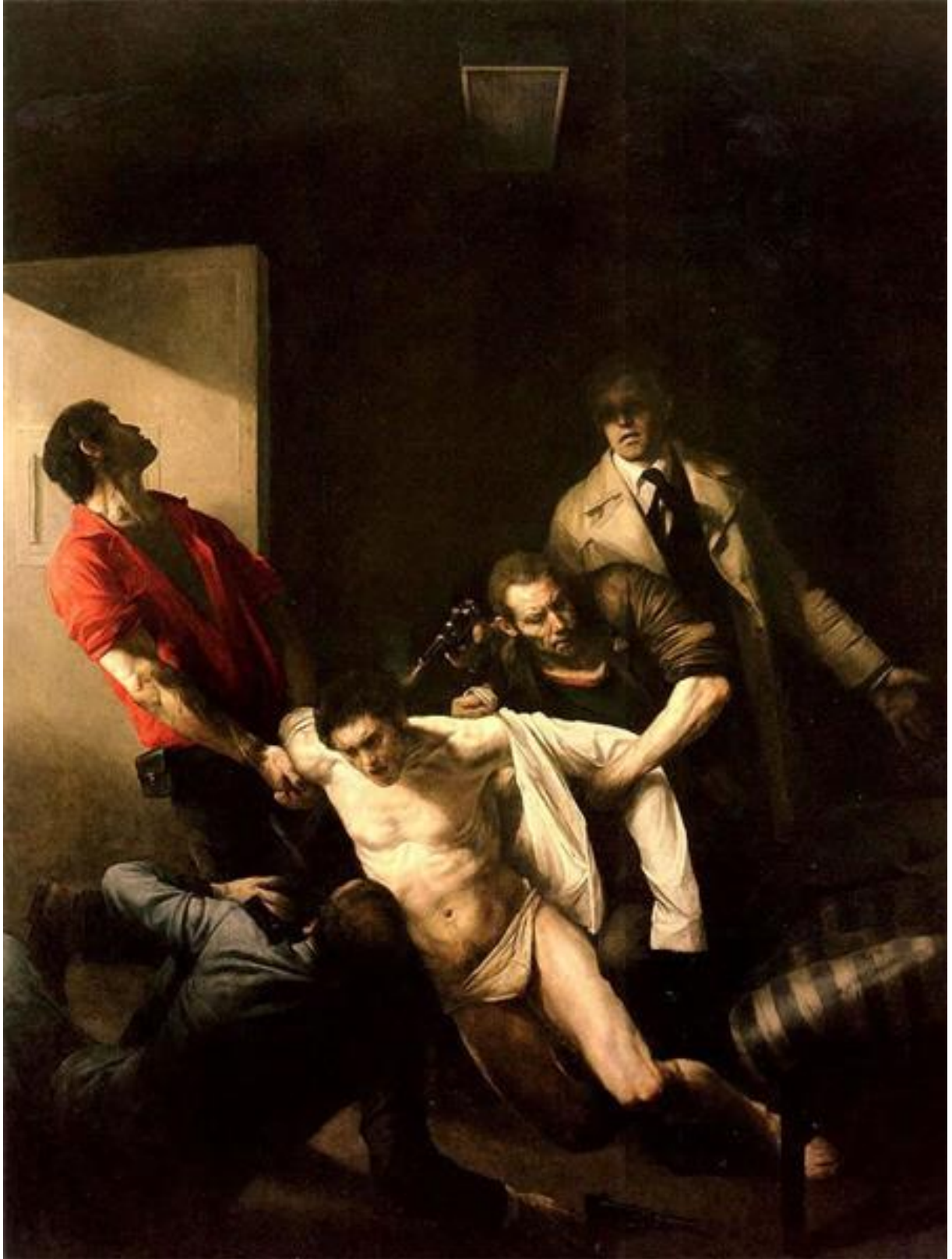


Figure 2.9. Nerdrum, Odd. *The Murder of Andreas Baader* (1977-78)





**Figure 2.10.** Caravaggio, Da Michelangelo.  
*The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599-1600)



Figure 2.11. Nerdrum, Odd. *Auschwitz* (1968)



Figure 2.12. Odd Nerdrum in front of *Auschwitz* (1968)



Throughout his career, and in self-proclaimed constant conflict with the artworld, Nerdrum has produced a large number of works, progressing through different themes and styles. These works have, at different times, brought him both public notoriety and financial success. Yet, he feels that he never found a true master painter to learn from. In the documentary series on his life and work (*The hunt for Odd Nerdrum*, 2018) the producers trace the influences on Nerdrum's work and thinking to several famous (as well as some lesser famous) artists and philosophers from history. The influences are not only discussed as inspiration for the artist, but seem to act as measuring stick for Nerdrum himself—in most cases positioning Nerdrum as equal to these historic and influential figures. Nerdrum himself has published a compilation of artworks by other painters, called *Odd Nerdrum's Canon: Masterworks, Pupils of Apelles: 1340-1967* (this compilation has no official date of publication as it is ordered and printed on demand from Nerdrum himself), where he identifies some of his most important influences. He presents to the reader short discussions of his impressions of the works, and the ways in which they influence his work—ultimately hinting at a school of thought he defines as the *Pupils of Apelles*. The title of this book, also implicated in website called *Cave of Apelles* (see [caveofapelles.com](http://caveofapelles.com))—were Nerdrum's sons and followers discuss topics which fall within their spectrum of interest—hints at the legend of the Hellenistic Greek painter Apelles of Kos (Flourished: c.400 BCE - c.301 BCE). This historic painter of legend is said to have been the greatest painter of antiquity, and although none of his work survives many still regard him as such (Britannica, 2021). The reference to this almost mythical artist suits Nerdrum well, as it echoes much of his self-assured but unsubstantiated comments and beliefs about art, history and philosophy. As so little of Apelles is known, he can become, within the Cave of Apelles, whatever Nerdrum and his followers need him to be.

Nerdrum's thinking centres around the ostracising of figurative painting by modernist ideals, demoting and marginalising the figurative painter, no matter the level of technical skill they possess. The warning of a stepfather telling him not to paint the sunset was not an attempt at undermining a young boy's talent, but projected onto young Nerdrum a consensus of the mid-twentieth-century artworld.

This ethos is captured in the American art critic, philosopher and pedagogue, Arthur Danto's (1924-2013) (1964:581), comment:

...since the achievement of Kandinsky, mimetic features have been relegated to the periphery of critical concern, so much so that some works survive in spite of

possessing those virtues, excellence in which was once celebrated as the essence of art, narrowly escaping demotion to mere illustrations.

This consciousness of the regard within which figurative painting is held has become the mantra of Nerdrum's position towards modernism: he does not deny modernist artistic thought its place, but fights for that which modernist art education has allegedly pushed to the side, i.e. for the importance and power of representational art in a contemporary world (Nerdrum, 2011b:27).

Johan Nerdrum's comment to his stepson is a brick in the wall of exclusion which Nerdrum attests to have been facing his entire career. He phrases this sentiment as follows:

Modernism itself has become a tradition that has conquered the entire Western world. Institutions, critic, artists and educated people are obliged to be "open to the new". What is important in this context is Modernism's all-embracing legitimization of the existing order. My concern is what Modernism has pushed out as the "other."  
(Nerdrum, 2011b:27)

Here, Nerdrum clearly identifies himself as the "other", seeing himself (and those like him) as the *out-group*, as opposed to modernism's *in-group*.<sup>11</sup> Reiterating this point of view in 2011, Nerdrum's use of the term "Modernism" as an all-encompassing concept which defines everything which Nerdrum finds negative in his experience of art practice and education, reflects a very narrow and homogenized mentality; Nerdrum started exhibiting in the 1960s, a phase of decisive change in Western art theory, as modernism was beginning to be questioned by postmodernism. Norway, possibly a few years behind in its adaption of avant-garde thinking, might well have been very modernistically inclined in its art education and appreciation at the time when Nerdrum started his career. However, Nerdrum has been a professional artist for several decades, yet his use of the idea of *modernism* does not seem to reflect any progress or adjustments in critical thinking surrounding contemporary art production. This point of view serves as the basis for Nerdrum's positioning of himself (and later of the Kitsch movement) as an outcast. His position seems, one-sided and purposefully ignorant of the more complex nuances of contemporary art

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<sup>11</sup> The classification of an *out-group* and *in-group* refers to the research on Social Identity Theory done by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (cf. Trepte, 2006, Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In their research they consider the social implications of belonging, or seeming to belong to a specific social group. The comparison made between groups' positions within the community, and with regard to each other, attests to having different levels of positive feelings of belonging. The final step in their process of social identification implicates the self-esteem of the individual, based on the group with which they are ultimately associated.

practices, yet need to be acknowledged in order to understand his creation of the Kitsch movement.

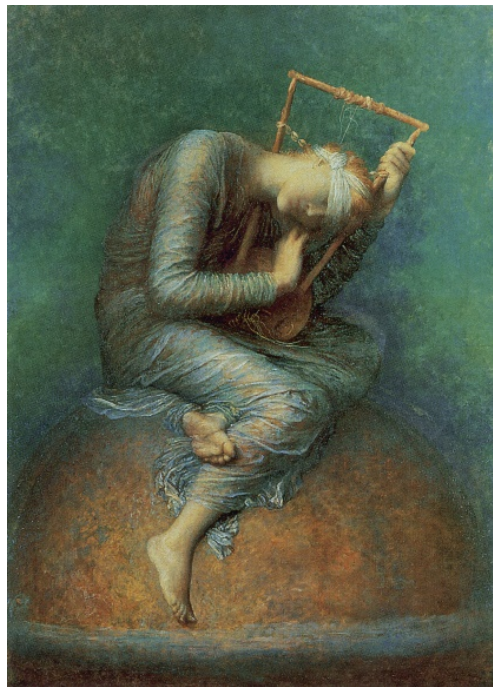
Indeed, attempts at defining what and who are legitimate participants of art has produced research, filling thousands of volumes on library aisles, over several centuries. From Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), through Kant's writing at the end of the eighteenth century on aesthetics, Greenberg's definition of the avant-garde and kitsch, Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (1974), and Vermeulen and Van den Akker's *Notes on metamodernism* (2010), this question has encouraged research and induced argument. For the sake of this research, I choose to align the reference to an all-encompassing artworld (adapted to reflect Nerdrum's arguments) with Arthur Danto's term, *artworld*.

The concept of the artworld, as opposed to the *art world*, was introduced by Danto in his eponymous landmark article of 1964. He writes: "It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible" (Danto, 1964:581). Danto explains, in detail which will not be expounded upon here, that the artworld, as an idea of the combination of everything which is, has been and will be considered "art", is a complex sphere of opposing thinkers and theories.<sup>1</sup> To define the artworld within a stable definition, would be to deny the ever-changing nature that defines it. He offers an "institutional definition of art", where he defines art as whatever is considered to be art by art schools, museums, and artists, suspending further formal definition. Danto's concept of the artworld inspired many writers on the subject in the twentieth century, including his colleague George Dickie (1926-2020). Dickie includes the idea of the artworld in his institutional theory of art where he defines an art work as an artefact "which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting in behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)" (1974:43). In Danto's institutional definition of art, I find the connection to Nerdrum's definition of (and feelings toward) his idea of the world of art which surrounds him. Nerdrum, however, has created a stagnant artworld which has but one, modernist, side. The term artworld, for the purpose of this thesis, thus finds its origins in Danto's definition, but incorporates Nerdrum's subjective experience.

According to his own writing, repeated by his admirers, Nerdrum has been aware of *an* artworld from a very young age (Nerdrum, 2011d:14). He describes himself being drawn to beautiful and sensual paintings, acknowledging the sentimental feelings which they evoked in him. He writes with great love and appreciation of the painted replica of George Frederic Watts's (1817-1904)

*Hope* (Figure 2.13.) which hung in his grandfather's house (Nerdrum, 2011d:14-21). He describes it as akin to an altar, always present at the top of the stairs, bringing comfort and serenity—until the day it was no longer there. The importance Nerdrum attaches to this painting is reflected in the tale he tells when writing of the constant place the work has held in his mind and its constant reappearance in his life (see Nerdrum, 2011d:14-21). Within this work, Nerdrum identifies a theme of the suffering and hope of the individual, which he often refers to when talking about the place and importance of figurative painting in contemporary life.

These sentimental ideas on the influence and importance of figurative painting resurface frequently in Nerdrum's depictions of humanity. He often cloaks himself in the suffering and hope of the individual, desperately suggesting the idea of the depth of human experience as portrayed in representational painting. Nerdrum could not find a master painter to teach, shelter and support him in the cold and lonely vacuum of a modernist artworld which he experienced, but soldiered on, teaching himself the techniques of painters from previous centuries, and admittedly attaining impressive painterly skills. To my mind, Nerdrum's understanding and positioning of himself reflects the idea that he has become to younger generations that which he could not find for himself: the suffering genius and master painter—aptly reflected in his self-portrait in the style of Rembrandt (see Figure 2.7.).



**Figure 2.13.** Watts, George Frederic. *Hope* (1886)



Figure 2.14. Nerdrum, Odd. *Woman Kills Injured Man* (1994)



Figure 2.15. Nerdrum, Odd. *Drifting* (2006)

### 2.3. Becoming the master painter

To see Nerdrum's half-naked figures wandering in a desolate landscape of perpetual twilight is to sense immediately that he is in touch with the deepest truths of the human condition....  
(Vine, 2013:2)

Naked human figures drift, weightlessly, in a landscape so enormous it seems endless, yet set so far in the background, it seems unreal (compare Figures 2.14. and 2.15.). This is the mood we have come to know in the works of Nerdrum from the late 1980s onward. Vine (2013) calls the setting of Nerdrum's "mature" style a "desolate landscape". Others, like his son Bork (Nerdrum, 2018a) refer to it as "post-apocalyptic". When considering the 1994 work *Woman Kills Injured Man* (Figure 2.14.), whatever, wherever and whenever the setting is to which Nerdrum takes us, he does not aim for us to recognise it as a specific place, but rather as a universal surrounding—one which every human supposedly recognises and understands, although they have not been there physically. These sometimes dark and ominous worlds, with people dwelling in conditions of uncertainty—as in his 2006 painting *Drifting* (Figure 2.15.)—are the creations of a painter who has reached a technical and intellectual level only achieved by decades of devotion to his art.<sup>12</sup>

This section looks at the development of Nerdrum's work and his rise to prominence. This career spans over several decades which now affords him international recognition but also places him in high demand as a teacher of classical figurative painting. Nerdrum, as a young man, could not find a master painter to whom he could act as an apprentice in order to learn from the more seasoned artist. It might well be that the influence of modernist thinking created the artworld in which the young Odd attempted to start a career without the help and support of the *atelier* tradition.<sup>13</sup> This setback notwithstanding, Nerdrum has achieved a notable level of technical

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<sup>12</sup> As stated at the outset of Chapter One, Nerdrum (2011:27) contends that he is not an *artist* but a painter. This positioning reflects the meaning of the word "art" itself, and the way it is understood. Shiner (2001:5) explains that the term has its origins in the Latin *ars* and the Greek *techne*, which refers to any human skill that requires development and a certain level of knowledge. He (Shiner, 2001:5) suggests that our contemporary understanding of the word has its roots in the Enlightenment's term, *fine art* (with the "fine" falling away over time). This concept focusses more on the aesthetic thought connected with an artefact, rather than the physical skill required to make it. Understanding this differentiation might explain Nerdrum's choice of nomenclature. In this case, however, referring to Nerdrum's art, not as the physical paintings, but as the physical technique that had to be learnt over time, Nerdrum might agree with the use of the term *art*.

<sup>13</sup> The *atelier* tradition, now making a comeback, specifically in the USA, refers to working in the studio of an accomplished artist, initially working for the artist, but all the while learning from them (Cecil, 2021).



painterly skill. Even those who do not see a place for Nerdrum (or painters like him) in the artworld cannot deny the skilfulness of his works.

Nerdrum's approach to painting is based on classical figurative painting methods that include mixing and grinding his own pigments, working on canvas stretched by himself or his students, and working from live models (and often himself).<sup>14</sup> His style of painting leads to his work often being labelled as “Neo-baroque”. Whatever the label given to his style of painting, the work is unmistakably disassociated from leading trends in the artworld which are more conceptually driven than founded in technical specialisation. Nerdrum points to this disassociation from the artworld when he notes that the term art “protects all kinds of intellectual scribble, while a beautifully drawn nude can be criticised to pieces...” (Nerdrum, 2011c:31). Yet, the nude—as a notable genre within classical painting—has always attracted Nerdrum. The difficulties Nerdrum experienced within the artworld because of his perpetuation of “outdated” painting—albeit a narrowly focused cause and effect on Nerdrum’s part—has been shown, in the previous section, to be a significant influence on Nerdrum’s own definition of the artworld. While having to “battle” against the artworld to find his place as a painter, Nerdrum progressed both in technical skill and painting styles.

By generalising the finer nuances of the technical development, intellectual attitude and physical appearance of his painting style, I divide Nerdrum’s oeuvre into three broad phases. The beginnings of the first of these phases is present in the loose and sentimental style of Nerdrum’s painting in his teens and early twenties. This is followed by his role in Norwegian Romanticism of the 1970s which includes his works of social realism. The 1980s show a decisive turn away from the contemporary themes of social realism, and sees Nerdrum’s figures become less time-bound and moving increasingly out into the open landscape. Throughout this development Nerdrum gradually amasses a following, which might become (and is already producing) his legacy.

In *The hunt for Odd Nerdrum* (2018) the presenters recall Nerdrum making a strong impression on the art scene in his teens, which led to him being noticed by the Norwegian public (see Figure 2.16.). His first exhibitions to the public earned him praise for the “sincere, old-fashioned manner

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Nerdrum is not exclusively a painter. He also produces works of drawing and printmaking. His prints are based on his paintings. Nerdrum refers to his highly finished, charcoal drawings as “paintings.” Often his drawings are large in scale and are works in their own right, as well as being studies for future paintings (Nerdrum, 2018b).

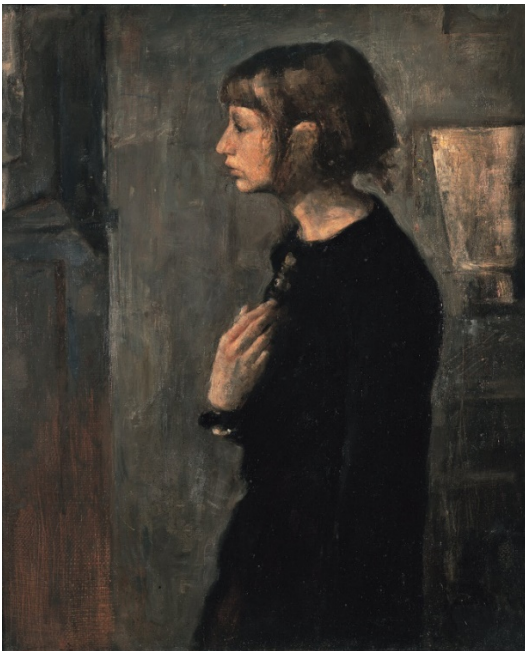
of his technique” (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018). One newspaper article written by Øistein Parmann calls him a “young old master” (Nerdrum, 2018a).

His first solo exhibition in 1967, at the age of 23, took place in Norway at the Art Union. According to the presenters of *The Hunt for Odd Nerdrum* (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018) Nerdrum’s work drew some of the largest crowds for a contemporary artist in many years, yet critics were not impressed. They called his work pastiche, with deficient knowledge of human anatomy. Nerdrum was accused of “disobeying his time” (Nerdrum, 2018a). The work, obviously influenced by the drama of Caravaggio, was dismissed as a mishmash of grand theatrical scenes. To these accusations of being both outdated but also defiant of his own time, Nerdrum (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018) replied: “I am equally as old as I am new. Time doesn’t exist in my life; I am timeless.” To me, Nerdrum’s idea of himself as expressed in this comment, speaks simultaneously of self-assurance and also of purposeful meditation on his own position, work, identity, and importance—not to mention his feigned intentional disregard for public opinion.

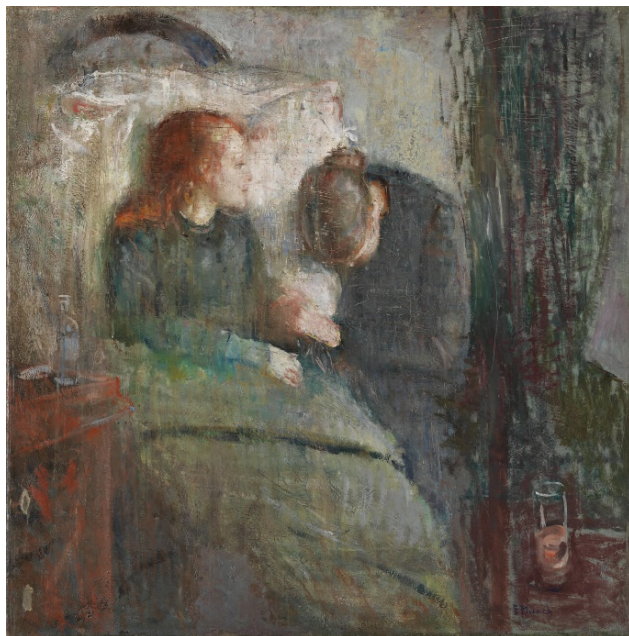


**Figure 2.16.** Odd Nerdrum in his late teens posing beside a self-portrait

In considering this identity, followers of Nerdrum are eager and committed to highlight the comparisons between Odd and his fellow countryman, Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Munch is regarded as the greatest international artist to emerge from Norway, and is held in high regard by the Norwegian public and art society. Nerdrum himself expressed at the age of 8 that he wanted to become “the next Edvard Munch” (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018). In *The hunt of Odd Nerdrum* (2018), Öde Nerdrum and Jan-Ove Tuv go to great lengths to highlight not only the similarities in the works of these artists, but also the parallels between their lives. They spend quite some, for instance, in comparing Munch’s *The Sick Child* of 1886 (Figure 2.18.) to Nerdrum’s *Portrait Study* of 1963 (Figure 1.17.), going so far to imply Nerdrum’s superior technique (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018).



**Figure 2.17.** Nerdrum, Odd. *Portrait Study* (1963)



**Figure 2.18.** Munch, Edvard. *The Sick Child* (1886)

Although Munch is considered as a forerunner and signifier of the development of modernist art within a changing Western society, there are still some obvious associations to be made between the work of these two figurative painters, specifically in their capturing of the horrors of the 20th century (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018). Jan-Ove Tuv (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018) describes Nerdrum's painting form this time as "dissolved portraits", a description observed in the work *Portrait Study* and notably comparable with the hazy and almost transparent outlines of Munch's *The Sick Child*. Looking at the work of both artists, made in their late teens and early twenties, there is a similarity in style that could perhaps test one's knowledge in trying to distinguish between the two artists. Per T. Lundgren, one of Nerdrum's earliest students argues in an interview for *The Hunt of Odd Nerdrum* that "if the portraits of young girls Nerdrum painted during this early phase of his career were to be discovered from obscurity centuries from now, with a lack of historical precision, they would be indistinguishable from the work of Munch, as Nerdrum's work resemble the portraits of Munch in its rough and subdued style of painting" (Nerdrum, 2018a). Throughout these discussions the presenters and interviewee seem desperate to prove Nerdrum's importance and relevance.

In the 1970s Nerdrum's portraits which resembled the work of Munch gradually became more conscious and reflective of current events. In contrast to his earlier works, these paintings display sharper contour lines, and mark the beginning of a period of social-realism, where Nerdrum brought classical expression together with scenes from contemporary life, as discussed earlier with reference to *The Murder of Andreas Baader*. A few years earlier, in 1964, Nerdrum had become acquainted with the well-established sculptor, Joseph Grimeland, who had seen his younger colleague's work in a group-exhibition at the Art Union. A meeting between the two at Theatercaféen in Oslo marked the start of a long-lasting friendship and together they discussed the idea of merging the classical tradition and contemporary motifs (Nerdrum, 2018b). Though Nerdrum's work was still highly figurative, with an unmistakable baroque influence, the themes and content of his painting portrayed very specific current events. A recurring theme in Nerdrum's body of work is the union between the beautiful and the grotesque. This theme possibly reflects other baroque influences. In Francisco Goya's (1746–1828) work Nerdrum fell in love with the horror and brutality while still in his teens —see for instance *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819-1823), Figure 2.19. (Nerdrum, 2018b). The raw emotion and brutal theme can be observed in much of the artist's work throughout his career.





Figure 2.19. Goya, Francisco. *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819-1823)



Figure 2.20. Nerdrum, Odd. *Amputation* (1968)

By his mid-twenties, this aspect took the shape of people run over by cars (Figure 2.20.) or shovelled away with heavy machinery, as seen in *Auschwitz* (Figure 2.11.) (Nerdrum, 2018b). With his painting entitled “Amputation” Nerdrum put himself in the driver’s seat of the romantic movement in Norway. This confrontation with human suffering in current affairs shook the foundation of Nerdrum’s painting method and his ability to convey stories (Nerdrum, 2018a).

The up-to-date imagery prompted the National Gallery to purchase several works, and for the first time, the critics’ reception was balanced. The exhibition reviews that stem from this period, however, reveal a hope among critics that Nerdrum was developing into a “modern” painter. But Nerdrum had little to spare for his own time and he subsequently published several articles, attempting to diagnose the cultural paradigm of the West. In his essay, “Rationality and Art” from 1972, he points to science, technology, and the invention of photography as the causes for the decline of classical painting (Nerdrum, 2018a).



**Figure 2.21.** Nerdrum, Odd. *Liberation* (1974)





**Figure 2.22.** Nerdrum, Odd. *The Arrest*.

At this point, Nerdrum had already been taking in students for several years. These students lived and worked alongside him. This informal group of students would later come to be known as *The Nerdrum School* (Vine, 2013). One of his earliest students, the practicing artist Per T. Lundgren describes this time with earnest reflection (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018):

The opportunity Odd gave us back then was the reason why we survived. I'm not talking about basic means of survival; I'm talking about developing young people into carrying through for what others had broken their necks for.

By the mid '70s, Nerdrum narrowed his focus down to what he calls pure skin-painting, reflecting his love for the *nude* from classical painting and placing the focus on the body and specifically the depiction of the skin (see Figures 2.14. and 2.15.). Works from this period display faces which are caught in the emotional climax of the scene. Among other topics, he addresses contemporary issues related to sexuality, often taking central figures directly from Caravaggio's postures—as seen in *Liberation* (1974) (Figure 2.21). The major works from this period no longer concerned everyday events, but people's conflict with modern society, and the position of the individual within the collective (Nerdrum, 2018c). *Liberation* and *The Arrest* (1975) form part of the works from this



era. Both works are set in contemporary situations, but both have the unmistakable drama and dramatic use of colour of Nerdrum's baroque heroes Rembrandt and Caravaggio, as there is obvious homage to Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642) in *The Arrest*, and Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1600-1601) in *Liberation*.



**Figure 2.23.** Nerdrum, Odd. *Refugees at Sea* (1979)

At this stage Nerdrum's work, with its critical reflection of society of the day, was generally polemic in nature, and served to refute accepted social or economic viewpoints. The work from this period was highly representational and detailed in nature with careful attention paid to contemporary references, such as clothing, or in the model of a bicycle as in *The Arrest*. A work of massive scale, questioning society's treatment of those without power, is *Refugees at Sea* from 1979 (Figure 2.23.). This is perhaps one of the best examples of Nerdrum's work within the Norwegian romantic movement of the 1970s. In the painting Nerdrum endows the refugees, 27 Vietnamese boat people, with heroic stature, but in a highly sentimentalised manner that Nerdrum (Nerdrum, 2018c) later described as "cloying". In 1976 Nerdrum (2018c) stated:

In my work I attempt—with the abilities that I have been granted—to make fundamental depictions of human beings from their everyday-lives. That is to say the parts of life that go unnoticed by the present time, which are nonetheless present.



**Figure 2.24.** Nerdrum, Odd. *Twilight* (1981)

In 1981 Nerdrum created a seminal work called *Twilight* (Figure 2.24.) that would serve to indicate a change in direction from the sentimentalised view of *Refugees at Sea* to a starker, unadorned view of reality. *Twilight*, a painting of a rear view of a young woman defecating alone in a wooded landscape offers nothing sentimental or ideal in its betrayal, but instead offers a stripped away view of life and reality. This painting marks the end of Nerdrum's more contemporary scene-like work, and the movement towards more Rembrandt-like painting elements. Nerdrum, according to Vine, later considered *Refugees at Sea* to be naive in the sense that Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) defines the word, in which mankind is seen as innocent and innately good.

.... I will never make another picture like [Refugees by the Sea], because not a single individual on board the fleet can guarantee for the quality I gave them. I transformed all of them to heroes, to beautiful saints seeking the good. But I have now come to a different conclusion. I do not think that man is good, but that he can become good. I cannot continue to sanctify one crook after another through my way of painting. The idea was naive.

Like his idol Munch (who was not initially accepted within the artworld of his own country), Nerdrum had to find somewhere else for his art to be accepted and praised, and he achieved fame abroad before gaining greater acceptance in his own country. The centre for the continued survival of the atelier approach to figurative painting at this time was the United States. American painters were the forerunners in classical figuration, and it is here that Nerdrum first found the acceptance he had worked for with continuous dedication. He had his breakthrough in the 1980s in Manhattan, at the Martina Hamilton gallery (Martina Hamilton Fine Art Inc, 2020).<sup>15</sup> His time in the US, however, afforded him exposure to the life and suffering of people removed from his Scandinavian and European reference. These experiences drove him to no longer want to link the stories of his works to a certain place (as with his social-realist work that referenced specific events, times and/or places from the 19070s). Nerdrum wanted to create works with themes that were timeless and placeless (Nerdrum, Ö., 2018).

Around this time there was a re-emergence of schools and institutions for classical teaching, partly brought about by the more pluralistic mind-set of postmodernism (a mind-set seldom mentioned by Nerdrum himself, as it would impede his definition of the artworld). Though Nerdrum himself started taking in students in his early 20s, the method of studio training under the hand and eye of a master painter was still unheard of in the Norwegian artworld. Students who had studied under Nerdrum seemingly found themselves specifically passed over for acceptance to the National Academy of Art, purportedly because of their association with Nerdrum and his style (Per Lundgren *in* Nerdrum, Ö., 2018). Nevertheless, Nerdrum gained ever more recognition, especially when his work *Dawn* (1989, Figure 2.25.) was bought by David Bowie. The “trouble” which he

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<sup>15</sup> During the 1980s Nerdrum experimented with new painting techniques, in his ongoing efforts to perfect his work. Some of these techniques later proved not to have stood the test of time, and some works started disintegrating (because of the techniques used to mix paint and to dry the works). Nerdrum’s awareness of the fallout from having paintings decay on the walls of their owners presumably incited him to deposit a large amount of money in a foreign bank account, in order to reimburse dissatisfied clients. This financial issue later led to several years of court cases against Nerdrum, for tax evasion. Finally, Nerdrum was sentenced to jail, which provoked an outcry from the art community, specifically because Nerdrum would not have been allowed to paint while in captivity (Malafronte, 2012:64).

and his students faced only seemed to encourage their determined continuation of fighting for the place of figurative painting in an artworld which ostensibly rejected them.



**Figure 2.25.** Nerdrum, Odd. *Dawn* (1989)

In his new minimalistic compositions, as seen in *Dawn*, his subjects are cast out into a barren landscape and mythologised by archetypal storytelling. These figures, as types rather than endowed with features or apparent stories that might distinguish them as individuals, are costumed in garments that seems timeless: furs, skins, leather caps, rather than in clothing that would link the viewer to a specific time and place. Archetypal-like, these beings inhabit pre-social circumstances that includes stark, severe landscapes, a reference to some time and place beyond our own (Nerdrum, 2018c).

Looking at the majority of his painting over the last three decades, there is no denying the strangeness of the scenes he presents. His figures occupy an almost empty land. Mostly, the era appears deprived of mechanical and industrial technology, but does not necessarily aim to portray a time *before* technological advancement and industrial revolution. There is an overwhelming awareness that these retched beings find themselves in an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic world.

These are the type of works the world has come to know from Odd Nerdrum, the mature painter. But this is also the work that typifies the approach of most of his students. Their use of theme, colour, technique and philosophical justification for considering art show a striking similarity to that of Nerdrum himself, to such an extent that the involvement of these painters in each other's lives begin to seem cult-like.

## 2.4. The cult of Nerdrum

We should remember that Odd worked tirelessly for many years to rediscover the secrets of making beautiful pictures. He did this against the current of the accepted artistic expression of our time and without the benefit of academies or teachers who could help him.  
(Kralik *in* Malafronte, 2012:62)

Professional painter Brandon Kralik (born 1966), one of many former pupils of Odd Nerdrum, not only highlights Nerdrum's followers' respect for their teacher but also offers a glimpse into the persona that surrounds him. In this section I reflect on the impact of the persona of Odd Nerdrum. Having become a sought-after teacher of figurative painting, Nerdrum now has the opportunity to convey his life's learning to younger generations—providing the guidance and knowledge he did not have access to when he was young. I argue, however, that the position of master painter he has achieved (or created) affords him the opportunity to convey more than technical knowledge to his students and supporters; the influence he has on his followers seems almost cult-like in its intensity.

The Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (Turnbull, *et.al.*, 2010:356) offers this definition of a cult: "a small group of people who have extreme religious beliefs and who are not part of any established religion." Another definition describes it as: "great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work..." (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2021). The term has, however over the last decades, been tainted with a negative air, specifically because of cult-related atrocities and deaths throughout the last century (Lalich & McLaren, 2018). This negative interpretation or definition of a cult overshadows the origins of the word and concept. Sociologist, Reza Aslan, explains that the concept of a cult has become a value judgement more than a functional word (2013). The word developed from the Latin *cultus*, meaning to *till* or *cultivate*. During Roman antiquity it was used to describe the sacrifices and offering—even the building of monuments—to cultivate favour with the gods. As time progressed it started to refer to any unorthodox religion (Aslan, 2013). In times of Roman rule, for example Judaism was referred to as a cult, and later the followers of Jesus of Nazareth and the beginnings of Christianity would also be referred to as a cult (Aslan, 2013).

Professor Janja Lalich, co-author of *Escaping Utopia* (2018) defines three general trademarks of contemporary cults: i) it is a group or a social movement that's led by a charismatic leader, ii) who

is authoritarian and iii) who demands to be revered as a godlike figure. She continues to state that the group has some form of indoctrination program, sometimes called “thought reform”. Here, the new members of the group are separated from everyday society and introduced to the unique thinking of the group and its leader. Furthermore, many cults display some form of exploitation of its members, which is often sexual or financial in nature (Lalich & McLaren, 2018).

Aslan (2013) explains that exploitation was not always the goal or outcome of many cults. Cults often develop in times of extreme social upheaval and uncertainty:

Many rose not to exploit their followers, but to help them survive in the face of an external threat. The collective’s very sense of self is under attack by the world and the only way to salvage one’s identity is to come together under the leadership of this charismatic authority and rebuild from scratch.

Flowing from such an understanding of a cult, Aslan explains (2013) that the creation of the group is not really about the belief system *per se*, but is based on the shared behaviour of the group. These definitions notwithstanding, Aslan, Lalich and McLaren argue that it is mostly still difficult to identify a cult and its followers, as most cults insist that they are not cults, and nobody in a cult realises that they are in one.

This brings us back to Nerdrum and his students and followers. As reflected in Kralik’s (Malafronte, 2012:62) testimony of Nerdrum, the artist holds a place of awe and importance to those who feel indebted to him. Their narrative of his life and achievements reflects the one he himself tells. Looking at it from a certain perspective, it could read like an origin myth for a religion:

The genius youth, searching for a place where his talent can be accepted and honed into something greater; he finds himself alone in a world that rejects his beliefs as laughable and naïve. There are others like him, scattered around the world, but downtrodden by the enemy who does not allow them to live out their destiny. He alone stands up against this oppression, fighting all odds to achieve greatness. It does not come easily, and even late in his life, he is not fully accepted. However, his own triumph now allows him to act as guide and caretaker for those who still long and hope for a world where they, and their beliefs, will be accepted, and restored to their rightful place.

It may seem oversimplified, but there is much that aligns with such an understanding of Nerdrum’s role in the artworld (an artworld which he defines in alignment with his experience, or origin myth).

Take the blatant (and possibly purposefully provocative) depiction of himself as some sort of prophet in his self portrait of 1997, *The Saviour of Painting* (Fig. 1.1). Nerdrum's reputation of making claims which invoke argument aside, some very specific ideas and beliefs are encapsulated in this work.

The portrait was completed the year before Nerdrum announced the existence of the Kitsch movement. He has had students working and learning under him for years, but here he provides a "superstructure" (Nerdrum, 2011c:31), a framework which solidifies the goal and position of what he and his students aim for. They have a common enemy, a power intent on wiping them and their beliefs out of existence; this enemy is Art, as Nerdrum defines it (Nerdrum, 2011a:23): "Because Modernism and Art are the same, Kitsch is the saviour of talent and devotion."

In order not to fall under the destructive power of Art, the believers in talent and devotion must come together under the new definition of Kitsch. And who better to lead this group of oppressed figurative painters than the "Saviour of painting", Odd Nerdrum? Nerdrum has steadfastly opposed the "enemy", to his own detriment at times, but he arose triumphant and has regained the "lost knowledge" of classical painting. He is definitely charismatic, and not willing to back down or cower under "malicious" modernists.

His *doctrine*, already discussed in this chapter, provides a very specific (and limited) definition of the artworld as the enemy of figurative painting (see Nerdrum, 2011a:23). In laying out his manifesto for the Kitsch movement, even more specific ideas and sentiments regarding figurative painting crystallise—as Chapter 3 will highlight. But there are other notions which form part of his doctrine which the publications available to the public do not yet reflect. Nerdrum's initial inspiration and adoration of baroque painters has been taken back further into history. His latest summoning of figurative painters is encapsulated under the idea of "the pupils of Apelles" (Pressman, 2014). Reported to be the greatest painter of ancient Greece, Apelles's painting of Alexander the Great was particularly admired for its mastery. None of Apelles's works have survived, however. His reputation, which installed him as one of the "inspirations" for Renaissance artists, was entirely constructed on written accounts but no visual examples remain, even in the form of copies of his works (Britannica, 2021). Nerdrum, however, has taken up the "palette of Apelles" as now central to his teaching and painting philosophy. Nerdrum's students and followers place great emphasis on the steps, application of paint, mixing of pigment and strict use of a limited pallet (presumably the palette of Apelles).



In 2014 Nerdrum and some of his students exhibited in an exhibition called *The Pupils of Apelles* (Pressman, 2014). In the provocative style that is Nerdrum's way, he did not shy away from comments which might enrage some and baffle others, but saw no need to substantiate his claims. In Pressman (2014), his student, Luke Hillestad (born 1985) asked him: "Apelles said 'I paint for eternity' and yet all of his works were destroyed by the iconoclasts. Is there anything we painters can learn from this?" Nerdrum's reply: "We cannot care about Arabic religions, as for example Christianity. They are enemies of the human body." Bizarre as this comment may sound, it was said with an air of those who remain unquestioned—or who ignore all challenges as unworthy of serious thought. To another student's question, "Will you discuss the value of striving, is this what you believe life is or should be comprised of?", Nerdrum replies: "Yes, because to strive can result in revealing things in one's own work that one did not know about. That is the great happiness"; an answer given in the nature of the wise man teaching devoted followers, patiently leading them toward the enlightenment which he has already achieved. As a final example, here is the answer Nerdrum gives to the question "How do the qualities of Apelles migrate across the borders of time and arrive to the dedicated painter, despite there only being a few shreds of evidence that he even existed?":

I have penetrated many ages of man, but there is no age I feel more home in than in the age of Apelles. Aristotle was probably a close friend of his. They had related theories on colour, that nature is its own mixer of colour for you lucky painter. Rembrandt was Titian's greatest apprentice, even though he lived a hundred years later. But after having studied Plinius the elder, I understood that Titian was just as much a student of Apelles as was Rembrandt and Velasquez. We are not alone. Perhaps art historians now should start studying Aristotle once more and forget Kant and Hegel for a while.

Nerdrum's arsenal of answers are supported by deep seated need to display his knowledge of history and philosophy, but tainted with subjective conclusions that leave most people dumbstruck when they receive them. This I experienced in a conversation I witnessed in Leeuwarden, in 2018. Upon answering a conference-goer's question with a remark referencing a pre-Greek civilisation, which influenced the Greeks' art and aesthetic thinking, but then vanished into the ocean, leaving no trace of their existence, the person asking the question could barely blink at trying to process all this information, relayed as fact. The belief in this lost civilisation, and its influence on the Greeks, and therefore on all of Western history, is repeated by his sons and communicated as fact.



These are some of the more extreme narratives enclosed within the “dogma” of Nerdrum. Others are more practically inclined, like the importance of working from live models—a practical choice when planning a painting, which is lifted to the level of religious sacrament within the studio of this master.

Nerdrum has implemented his persona to position himself as not only a master, not only a leader or spokesperson; he has identified himself as a saviour (see. fig 1.1). This identification is supported by the epic tales of his struggle against the artworld, his brilliance which was apparent from a young age, and the captivating paintings he has produced over several decades. He fleshes all these attributes out further by creating a unique narrative surrounding the importance of figurative painting as well as those who paint them, by employing his knowledge of history and philosophy. But how does he transfer this dogma onto others? As noted earlier, not all attendees at a conference in support of figurative painting are prepared to take Nerdrum on his word and follow him to walk on the waves of a stormy sea. The answer to this important step in the process of expanding a cult, is Nerdrum’s school, or to be more specific, Nerdrum’s private studios at his private home in Norway.

I wanted to paint like the old masters. But every art school I went to taught you how to be creative, not how to paint. ... The old masters were dead; nobody could paint like them anymore.

These are the words of the young painter Andrew Aviste, a recent student of Nerdrum (Brock, 2020), and it tells the tale of his struggle in trying to learn how to become a figurative painter. Aviste later came across Nerdrum on the internet and learnt of Nerdrum’s school. Nerdrum does not charge school fees. To apply, you need to send Nerdrum a self-portrait, which Aviste did, and was accepted.

After many years Nerdrum has become able to accept students from all over the world to come and learn from him. He opens his house and studio to them, and many stay for several months. They come from all over the world, even from South Africa. South Africa has only produced one student of Nerdrum, in Rinus van Niekerk (born 1993), a young painter from Pretoria. Van Niekerk, after having spent several months at Nerdrum’s school in 2017, planned to return to Nerdrum’s home in 2020 for further instruction—a plan foiled by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nerdrum now runs an *atelier* in the manner of the classical masters. Students spend hours in the presence of the master, observing, listening, taking in whatever they are offered. Sometimes they

model for him (Figure 2.27., 2.29. and 2.30.), sometimes they stretch his canvasses or do the underdrawings for his immense works (Figure 2.26.). They eat at his table, interact with his wife and children, and generally become part of the energy which surrounds the master. Most importantly, they are introduced to his ideas. Here, secluded in the Norwegian countryside, next to a lake, in a wooden home, smelling of paint and chemicals, they isolate themselves in an effort to reach the plains which Nerdrum has reached.

I see no exploitation in Nerdrum's interaction with his students. The work they do in and for the production of paintings from Nerdrum's studio offer exactly the experience one seeks when learning from a master. Nerdrum is also not interested in their money, as he offers his instruction free of charge. All things considered, it appears that Nerdrum is creating a space for painters to improve their knowledge and technique. The results also speak of true inspiration and technical development of the younger generation of painters. Their gratefulness is expressed in their loyalty and praise of Nerdrum. This loyalty did not even falter when Nerdrum was incarcerated for tax evasion—a charge and jail sentence which withstood an appeal in the courts before he was pardoned by King Harald V. of Norway (Berglund, 2011).

Nerdrum's legacy will live on in the great number of painters he has taught, inspired and guided to success. Considering the direct influence, he has had on these painters, as well as reflecting on the published information about him (mostly under his own name and those of his closest followers), time will tell if his influence is situated in his charismatic presence and cult-like school, rather than in the works of art he leaves for posterity.



**Figure 2.26.** A student of Odd Nerdrum preparing the underdrawing for the master's painting at Nerdrum's school in Norway (2017).

Photo credit: Rinus van Niekerk



**Figure 2.27.** A student of Odd Nerdrum standing as live model for the master in his studio at Nerdrum's school in Norway (2017).

Photo credit: Rinus van Niekerk



**Figure 2.28.** The South African painter, Rinus van Niekerk, in the students' studio at Nerdrum's school in Norway (2017).

Photo credit: Rinus van Niekerk





**Figure 2.29.** A student of Odd Nerdrum sitting as live model for the master and his students at Nerdrum's school in Norway (2017).

Photo credit: Rinus van Niekerk



**Figure 2.30.** Rinus van Niekerk sitting as live model for the master and his students at Nerdrum's school in Norway (2017).

Photo credit: Rinus van Niekerk

## 2.5. Conclusion

Over the course of a career spanning more than six decades, Odd Nerdrum has achieved not only international notoriety but also great financial success. In fact, his financial wealth has garnered national scrutiny, and irregularities therein have gained him a prison sentence. Admittedly, his professional success and personal wealth did not come easy, and his path was, as enthusiastically relayed by himself, not one of welcoming, open doors.

To this day Nerdrum experiences his artistic aims at odds with trending thinking in the artworld. His sustained efforts in continuing old traditions of painting and atelier instruction, although less frowned upon now than in his youth, have not gained the position he, and many like him, feels it deserves within the artworld. And although there is an increasing diversity in art production and openness to traditional practices in the twenty-first century, educational programs as well as gallery and museum curatorial practices still favour work that has a conceptual focus and modern tendencies (Gormley, 2011:29). Nerdrum's ongoing work, whether his painting, writing or teaching, can thus be seen as an allegorical exploration and questioning of modernist hegemony within the artworld. At this point in his career, already in his late seventies, Nerdrum has not let personal success or even fatigue from constant, assertive opposition to the artworld's reign, prevent him from supporting those painters who still struggle to find the recognition they desire for their figurative work. On the contrary, Nerdrum has taken up the task of being the master to those who experience marginalisation to such an extent that it seems cult-like. His students and FANS become invested in his life, work and ideas to such an extent that the continuation of his ways of thinking and doing seem to become central in their aims as painters.

When speaking at TRAC2018 to a crowd of artists and academics who would be most suited to align themselves with Nerdrum's quest, his concepts and attitude still managed to shake the ideas of many attendees. Nerdrum does not beat around the bush. His speech is not measured with diplomatic correctness. He feels very strongly about representational painting and has a strong aversion for what the artworld has become (an artworld which for him has remained unchanged since his youth). Whether you agree with his outspoken ideas or not, it is difficult not to be drawn in by the discourse he elicits.

At the conference, between sessions, anyone can approach him, and many do. Within minutes, large groups form around him—some willing to engage in conversation, others only brave enough to stand close enough to follow the debates (myself being one of the latter). He would be happy

to converse, but do not expect him to take a neutral position, and be prepared to be confronted with ideas which stand in such contrast with ideas of art that they seem to be, simultaneously, ahead of their time, outdated, if not a little looney.

His life-long feeling of otherness to what is acceptable within the artworld—the evil protagonist or devil within his origin myth—has strengthened his resolve to not be silenced or subdued. This attitude is most clearly visible in his philosophical teaching, writing and creation of the Kitsch movement. As the name in itself indicates, the movement does not align with contemporary ideas of aesthetics and taste. Even this outright clue does not prepare most art enthusiasts for the position which Nerdrum takes when he appropriates the derogatory term *kitsch* to assemble the work of some hugely influential artists, along with his own, under a newly-conceptualised concept of *Kitsch*.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Kitsch is not kitsch *Questioning taste and aesthetics*

#### 3.1. Introduction

Kitsch is the Anti-Christ, stagnation and death.  
(Herman Broch, 2002 [1939])

Garden gnomes, pink flamingos, flashing casino lights and commemorative porcelain plates of royal weddings; is this *kitsch*? How is kitsch determined and who is in the position to define it? Kitsch eludes clear definition. It would seem that while most people recognise kitsch immediately, they are less certain as to the reasons for their classification. This echoes the complaint of many writers on this subject at the beginning of the twenty-first century: that the term kitsch is used to demote certain works of art and artistic endeavours but is not demarcated within a stable description.

Continuing on the argument laid out in the introductory chapter of this thesis, this chapter scrutinises and positions the development of the concept of kitsch within the Western artworld.<sup>16</sup> Through this investigation I argue that through marginalisation, certain artistic works from the artworld are being taxonomised as kitsch, a term which is subsequently seen as an umbrella term for that which is not accepted as so-called high or fine art (cf. Greenberg, 1939 & 1961). I link this division in art to the existence of a hierarchy of taste, residing in contemporary aesthetic judgement, specifically in reflection of Nerdrum's definition of the artworld. Additionally, I argue that this marginalisation sheds light on Odd Nerdrum's founding of the Kitsch movement, which endeavours to be a destabilising force within contemporary aesthetics.

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<sup>16</sup> This issue of identity and application of the term kitsch is problematic within the Western framework of art, which defines the parameters of this study. Further consideration of the Eurocentric notions of defining art, and kitsch's place within it identifies further discourse on the idea of kitsch as a derogative term and idea (cf. Nyong'o, 2002 & section 6.3).

In order to comprehend the Kitsch movement's crucial differentiation between *Kitsch* (capitalisation noted) and kitsch, I trace a genealogy of kitsch from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, with a specific focus on the modernist definition of kitsch as the antithesis of the avant-garde (cf. Greenberg, 1939). This approach is determined by Nerdrum's selective view of the artworld and its consideration of figurative painting. The emergence of the concept of kitsch is considered as a result of broader developments in aesthetics. Aesthetics, as a relatively recent Western philosophy, is deliberated upon, with specific focus on the judgement of taste as it developed from the Enlightenment onwards; a point of departure also taken by Nerdrum. This is done since the Western discourse on taste is closely related to the development of art over the last two centuries and thus established the development of a hierarchy of taste. Finally, this hierarchy of taste is shown to enforce Nerdrum's experience of being excluded from formal art discourses because his work does not conform to the status quo of contemporary taste. I argue that Nerdrum created the Kitsch movement as a space of belonging for those artists (mostly figurative painters) who find themselves on the outside of the artworld. Furthermore, I posit that the creation of the Kitsch movement serves a purpose greater than merely fulfilling the need for belonging and self-justification of the marginalised. It functions on a higher (meta) level as protest against a hierarchy present within the artworld—a hierarchy where the taste of the artistic elite forms a consensus which determines acceptable forms of art creation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Large sections of this chapter on kitsch, Odd Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement stems from my article of 2015: *The in-group/out-group dynamics of Nerdrum's positioning of Kitsch as a reflection of situatedness within contemporary art* published in the South African Journal of Art History (see Venter, 2015).

## 3.2. The genealogy of kitsch

Kitsch, according to Greenberg, attempts to say something profound, but can utter only clichés.  
(Nyong'o, 2002:371)

For some the term kitsch refers to cheaply-made products produced for mass consumption. For others the question of price and quantity is irrelevant but the question of originality is central. Often the question (and judgement) of taste is the principal consideration. As Nyong'o (2002:371) notes above, kitsch is considered to rely upon repeated, unoriginal ideas which attempt to seem new and unique, but somehow fail to be innovative. Still, no clear answer to the parameters of kitsch seems to exist. Ultimately an awareness remains that the term denotes banishment—banishment from that which can be considered worthy of the attention of the artworld and its “legitimate” participants.

In this section I explore the development of the idea of kitsch as well as the production of objects and ideas which are often grouped under this concept. I situate the genealogy of kitsch, as well as the understanding of kitsch, within the development of Western philosophy of art. This is done to encapsulate the wide range of definitions associated with the concept. Ultimately I aim to show the tension of power relations within art creation and criticism—with specific emphasis on how the term kitsch allows for certain artistic works to be marginalised. This is done to support my argument that the artworld functions on a consensus of what constitutes *art*—i.e. a consensus which creates a hierarchy where kitsch is marginalised as the *other* to art.

The word kitsch is generally understood to have developed in Germany, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is associated with the surge of cheaply made products that came into the market with the expansion of industrial mass production, better wage earning by the working and middle class and the ensuing purchasing power that came along with it (Morreall & Loy, 1989: 63).<sup>18</sup> From these beginnings as a word associated with the German *verkitschen*—which means

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<sup>18</sup> This thesis refers to the working class as those members of early industrial society as well as contemporary capitalist society who rely on wage earning through their labour and includes blue-collar, pink-collar, and some white collar workers. The middle class is seen as different to the working class in mostly being more educated, working in white-collar jobs and earning permanent salaries.

to “make cheap”—the idea of kitsch has always been tainted with derogatory connotations.<sup>19</sup> These mass produced objects, made and sold cheaply, in nineteenth-century Germany (but also elsewhere in the industrialising world) can easily be brought into correlation with today’s understanding of kitsch as pertaining to objects that serve to decorate and do not require large monetary investment.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, mass production of art supplies meant that amateur artists could afford to dabble in creating art, capitalising on the wealth—and eagerness to display that wealth—of the emerging, artistically uneducated, working and middle class. These pseudo artworks did not need to prove their value or position within the formalised artworld, as they were not made to function as critical works for contemplation but rather as decoration and apparent signs of status. The emerging classes associated the importance of visual decoration by means of art to a reflection of high status (as art had up until then mostly been associated with the power of the church, aristocracy and the extraordinarily wealthy). Thus, the working and middle class started purchasing artistic products, be they cheap and mass produced, as a way of displaying wealth and sophistication. These items ranged from silver plated metal objects (Figure 3.1.) and small porcelain figurines to postcards or lithographic prints (Figures 3.2. and 3.3.), all of which could be made in mass and sold cheaply. Colour lithographic printing was merely one of the technological and industrial advances which altered the ownership, understanding and production of artistic paraphernalia. Developing technology sparked new forms of visual expressions, like photography. The camera in itself contributed not only to a greater variety of image production, but cultivated new ideas of looking at “old” art genres—rethinking the importance of portrait painting, when a camera could produce a truer likeness, for example.

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<sup>19</sup> Two other possibilities have also been suggested for the origin of the term. One is connected to the German term meaning “to smear”, the other argues for an inversion of the French word “chic” as a possible origin (Kjellman-Chapin, 2013:xi).

<sup>20</sup> Although the term kitsch is applied to instances other than artistic objects (such as music, architecture, design, etc.) the focus of this study will be aimed at fine art, and painting in particular, with references to other areas where deemed necessary.

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Figure 3.1. Sheffield Silver Plate.



Figure 3.2. Baker, J.E. Winter (1874)



Figure 3.3. 19th-century book, **Illustrated Book of the Dog**, published in 1881.



From its low birth among the working and middle class of industrialised cities in the nineteenth century, kitsch was not initially afforded any noteworthy academic consideration. It is only in the early decades of the twentieth century that we find serious academic reflection on the subject. Notably, early considerations of kitsch came from the art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) in his seminal article *Avant-garde and kitsch*, published in 1939 in the journal *Partisan Review*. Although written from a decidedly modernist perspective, Greenberg’s positioning, definition and consideration of kitsch still form the basis for understanding kitsch (as a term used with deprecating intent) within the artworld today. A contemporary of Greenberg, the modernist Austrian writer Hermann Broch (1886–1951), also deliberated on the role of kitsch in twentieth century society in a collection of essays written between 1933–1948 called *Geist and Zeitgeist*.

When considering the presence of art throughout the development of Western civilisation, Greenberg (1939:40) argues that before the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, there was a definite distinction between the creation of art and the creation of artistic cultural products (a Eurocentric point of departure which notably has sparked much debate (cf. Nyong’o, 2002)). According to Greenberg, pre-industrial art creation is strongly aligned with pre-industrial society’s class division. The creation, appreciation, theorisation and development of formal art were confined to the elite class, mostly consisting of members from the church, state and the aristocracy. The lower class, or the group Greenberg refers to as “peasants”, did not have the social standing or financial means to act as patrons of the arts. The artistic products made and owned by this group did not reflect financial prosperity, artistic education or aspirations to exhibit taste. Rather, these items reflected a local aesthetic awareness and a focus on creative pastimes or the decoration of functional objects.

Of central importance in Greenberg’s article (1939) is the obvious way in which he positions kitsch as the antithesis of the avant-garde. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the development of art movements that would be the forerunners to modernism. These art movements include Impressionism, Postimpressionism and Art Nouveau at the turn into the twentieth century, flowing into the development of Cubism, Dada, and many more. The new ideas which drove these movements stemmed from another important change in this era: an increase in literacy and along with it an increase in visual literacy, or semi-visual literacy, of the mass consumer. This new mass literacy, in part, created the consumer of mass produced aesthetic items born from little knowledge of artistic traditions, i.e. kitsch (Greenberg, 1939:37). Within this society another new



social class was born: the bourgeoisie.<sup>21</sup> The power, influence and knowledge gained through a growing capitalist industrial society allowed the members of the bourgeoisie to immerse themselves in fields of expertise—one of which was the arts. Where the working and middle classes were earning more money which gave them increased purchasing power the bourgeoisie had (through structures of inheritance and business) long since attained these capabilities. In other words, while the developing working and middle classes started to become aware of visual images as a reflection of status (and thus started purchasing kitsch products because they were not educated in the arts) the bourgeoisie built on their social privilege to further develop their understanding, creation and appreciation of art. This ever-tightening spiral of elite education and understanding of the arts lead to the birth of the so called avant-garde at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. The rapidly changing Western world of industrialisation, urbanisation and colonial exploration suddenly confronted society, and artists with an ever-renewing world. Artists, reflecting on these extreme changes in the way of life, gradually strove more and more to create *new* art, reflective of this modern, fast-moving machine age. This art became the avant-garde. The motto of the avant-garde was to “make it new” and, importantly, to break away from historical art traditions. One might argue that the avant-garde (as the hallmark of modernism) mirrors the aim of art creation since the late nineteenth century as primarily focused on innovation, intellectual challenge and breaking with the norms of classical art education. Gormley (2011:29) puts it another way by saying that the modernist movement was “in a sense, an expression of cultural patricide—symbolic of the collapse of Europe’s ruling aristocracy and the rapid rise of industrialisation and a new mercantile class, all culminating in a tumultuous break from the past”.

Within the sphere of the bourgeoisie resided the artists, critics, collectors, writers and makers of new and challenging creations within art. These so-called knowledgeable experts became the group which determined what would be accepted as “high art”. The avant-garde became the arena where “taste”, and specifically “good taste”, would be decided and determined. Such judgements on taste regarding art and aesthetics at the turn of the nineteenth century can be traced to Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement (1790), in which he suggested the aesthetic quality of the work resided not only in itself but also in the moral intention of the artist and the response

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<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this thesis the bourgeoisie is defined as a social class which developed along with the industrialising, capitalist Western society, and although part of the middle class, is seen as different in definition and social standing. The bourgeoisie makes up the very top of the middle class (i.e. upper middle class), earning extremely large incomes and having access to a wider array of education (formally and informally).

of the viewer (cf. Kant, 1911)—a line of investigation taken up in the following section of this thesis. These developments led Broch to define kitsch as follows: “Kitsch tends to wallow in beauty—its shortcoming is not aesthetic, but ethical (Broch, 2002).” To Broch the lack of *quality* in kitsch does not necessarily reside in its appearance but in the conviction behind choosing to take on a certain appearance. The ethical problem which Broch identifies here is that kitsch takes whatever it believes will appeal to greatest amount of people, irrespective of the true context and conviction of the original’s aesthetic ideals.

The aesthetic judgement of the avant-garde and early modernist art, as outlined by Greenberg (1939) emphasised a break with traditional art practices, gradually creating art that would, in some cases, systematically lead to abstraction and in general, a tendency to theorise about art as never before. This ever-intensifying academic and elitist inward spiralling regarding artistic practices ironically contributed to the surge of the public’s love of kitsch products (cf. Olalquiaga, 1999). The reason for this surge in appreciation of kitsch resides in the fact that the avant-garde made it gradually more difficult for the uninitiated art lover to understand the aims of modern art. Consequently, certain products stepped in to fill the aesthetic void left in the lives of ordinary (artistically uneducated) citizens. These products did not confront the viewer with new or challenging ideas regarding art—it reflected (easily assimilated) subjects and styles that had already been proven to appeal to the general public’s taste. The creation of works that did not follow the new aims set by the avant-garde, made these works the antithesis of that which was seen as being at the forefront of high art and good taste, and thus was labelled as kitsch.

Consequently, the avant-garde’s central aims—constant renewal, intellectual challenge and revolt against historical approaches to art—caused another break in defining art (Shiner, 2001:5-10). Suddenly kitsch did not only describe mass produced, unoriginal, cheap and unintellectual items; it started to include some forms of original fine art too, especially representational art. The avant-garde’s disdain for representational art (as outlined by Greenberg, 1939:36), as central to the instruction of the classic art academies, began to dismiss artistic practises founded on historical models of art creation (Shiner, 2001:6). This opinion by the experts of modernism did not only bring about a complete turn in art creation and education in the twentieth century but also encouraged the re-evaluation of artworks preceding that century. A notable example is that of French artist William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905). Apart from displaying remarkable talent in figurative painting (Figure 3.4.) Bouguereau is often used as an example of nineteenth-century kitsch. In his own time Bouguereau was highly regarded and widely popular as a prominent salon painter (Shiner, 2001:8). For the modernists, and particularly the Impressionists, Bouguereau

came to stand for everything which modernism opposed (Jacolbe, 2019). As the regard for representational painting steadily declined, so too did the stature of representational artists within the artworld at the beginning of the twentieth century, and artists from the previous century were re-evaluated according to modernist taste. Even though Bouguereau did not produce cheap, mass produced items displaying little talent or quality, to the modernist eye his works presented an approach that went against modern tastes. This points to a division between “art” and “kitsch” that still seems to apply today (Bartoli & Ross, 2014:121-122). I suggest that this feeling of uncertainty, when appreciating the work of artists such as Bouguereau, is founded in the current consensus of the artworld—in this case specifically its disregard for representational painting in a classical style. Bouguereau is by no means disregarded or forgotten by the world’s museums and art historians. Purposefully curated international exhibitions over the last four decades have helped to restore some of this artist’s prestige but have not succeeded in shaking off the modernist disdain that still clings to his work (WilliamBouguereau.org, 2018).

Even though Bouguereau did not mass produce his work, he did capitalise on the emerging bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, specifically the business tycoons of the North American gilded age. Other artists, producing work in the twentieth century, took up the idea of mechanical mass production more readily, with varying intent and differing results and popularity.

Within the South African context one artist and his work has become synonymous with the idea of mass produced kitsch. This is the Russian-born artist Vladimir Tretchikoff (1913–2006), who spent most of his life in South Africa. In the middle of the twentieth century, Tretchikoff produced a range of now iconic images. One of these images (Figure 3.5.) is *Chinese Girl* (1952–1953). This painting depicts a portrait of a woman of Asian descent. The obviously unnatural use of colour on her face, which is distinctly blue-green, immediately draws the attention of the viewer. In 2000 this work was sold at Bonhams auction house in England for almost £1 000 000.00 (Gorelik, 2013:7-8). The painting seems to be nothing more than a portrait—though a critical eye would note the exoticisms present in the use of an unknown Asian woman, dressed in a cultural costume and painted in a colour which is unnatural. Why do we connect this image so readily with the concept of kitsch? Would all painted images of women from various cultures, dressed in cultural costume and depicted in eye-catching colours automatically be labelled as kitsch?



Figure 3.4. Bouguereau, William-Adolphe. *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873)



Figure 3.5. Tretchikoff, Vladimir. *Chinese Girl* (1952–1953)

There is a specific reason why this particular image has become known in the South African, and international, visual lexicon as personifying kitsch. In Tretchikoff's case the label came along with a specific choice made by the artist; not one encapsulated within the painting itself, but rather a decision made after completion of the original work. That decision refers to Tretchikoff's deliberate mechanical reproduction of his own works. He did not reproduce only a few copies, but thousands. These he sold not as original artworks but as acknowledged printed copies of the original (sometimes signed by the artist himself). Tretchikoff understood and committed to the power of mass producing a striking image to scale that he is sometimes referred to as "the king of kitsch" (Bell, 2013). Although his original paintings gained international popularity (even if they were not considered high art) his international notoriety is born from his mass preproduction of his own works. For this reason, homes—specifically in South Africa—were filled with images by Vladimir Tretchikoff. Although an image such as *Chinese Girl* could denote the racial insensitivity of the Western public of the mid-twentieth century, to the 1950s consumer this image did not call the viewer to action or force them to reflect on a particular issue. To them (and to the artist) it was simply an image, easily processed as pleasant, pretty and mildly interesting. Apart from its obvious mass production, this image (and others by the artist) meets the negative criteria set by kitsch's critics: it is mass produced, sold cheaply, not meant to inspire critical thought, and is based on aesthetic taste which has already been proven to be popular.

The superficial response that an artwork such as this elicits also corresponds with another common definition of kitsch, i.e. that it appeals by evoking "easy" emotional reactions in the viewer. Solomon (2004:36) lists these emotions as: sentimentality, nostalgia and patriotism.

When considering this concept of superficial emotional appeal, the work of another South African artist often associated with kitsch, the Afrikaans painter Johannes Hendrik Pierneef (1886–1957), comes to mind. Like Tretchikoff, Pierneef was extremely popular and is still well known in South Africa. His work was also reproduced as affordable decorative pieces that filled South African homes in the twentieth century. Similarities between these two artists stop here, though. Tretchikoff's colourful and seemingly light hearted figurative painting often included people and hardly ever referenced the time in which they were created. Pierneef's work, in contrast, is strongly linked to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa (Foster, 2003: 657-658).



Figure 3.6. Pierneef, Hendrik Jacobus. *Louis Trichardt* (1932)



Although Pierneef's oeuvre consists mostly of landscape paintings, his work is very much connected to a specific time in the political history of South Africa. Pierneef, as a supporter of the National Party, was often commissioned to create works for public consumption. Most notable among his commissioned work is the series of landscapes he painted for the 1932 upgrade of Park station in Johannesburg (Figure 3.6.). As with Tretchikoff, the critical eye can link certain "innocent" images from the past to depiction of highly problematic social issues. The themes of white land ownership and political dominance by a white minority in Pierneef's works might be obvious today, but might not have been so to his 1930s audience. At first glance, Pierneef's landscapes seem pleasant. They portray a certain calmness (which only after deeper consideration becomes an eerie stagnation of an ideology captured on canvas). The colours are often bright, although not exclusively so. Ferreira (1990:30) describes the imagery as simple, to the point where it almost looks like an illustration for a children's book or film. Wittingly or unwittingly, however Pierneef was capturing the Afrikaner's perceived (and actual) ownership over the African landscape, but to the general consumer of decorative kitsch, he was providing a simple, understandable image of a beloved country and its varying landscapes. These seemingly innocent emotional responses of patriotism and sentimentality typify the kitsch work's reliance on predictable and proven reactions to visual depictions (Boylan, 2010:43).

This study does not aim to establish Tretchikoff or Pierneef's position as twentieth-century artists within the hierarchy of formal art. Their works do, however, highlight another interesting aspect connected with the idea of kitsch. That is the idea that kitsch could be original works of art, copies of original works of art, or even items created specifically to be mass produced, with no original as reference (Greenberg, 1939:40). Mass production may have made Tretchikoff and Pierneef (as well as other artists and artistic items) widely accessible to the general public at an affordable price, but it would be a mistake to assume that availability and low cost are the only criteria that fuel the dissemination of so-called kitsch. Producing an item *en masse* may lower the price of the final individual item, but that does not mean that a large financial investment is not required to get the wheels of the production line going. The aim of profit from mass production would then dictate that a financial investment in an item should be based on the idea that it has universal appeal, thus the producer takes no chances in appealing to the taste of the masses. This is where Greenberg (1939), Sontag (1964), Morreall and Loy (1989) and Kulka (1988, 1996) bring another criteria of kitsch into the spotlight: that of "playing it safe", of following and using that which has already proven popular with the general public rather than following the tastes of exclusive cultural circles.

This implies that the general public would not only appreciate a work because it is affordable, but also because they are able to understand or relate to it, or merely are familiar with the visual language to such an extent that they derive uncritical satisfaction from it. *Mona Lisa* (Figure 3.7.) by Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) is a common example for this argument. The painting was made within the context of the Renaissance as an exclusive portrait commissioned for a specific owner by a professional artist. Neither the idea of mass reproduction or even the concept of public accessibility was plausible at the time of creating this artwork. It is only in the twentieth century that mass reproduction of *La Gioconda* (as the painting is often called), along with its popularity in the mass media, propelled the artwork to a level of recognition unequalled by any other work of art. Growing public awareness of the work continuously fuels reproductions thereof, whether these are painted oil copies or cheap gift shop postcards reproductions (Berger, 1994:258-259).

Notwithstanding Da Vinci's mastery and the importance of this work as a paradigmatic example of Renaissance painting, the work has proven to appeal to the taste of the general public—for reasons many writers have explored tirelessly. Consequently, reproductions of the work have been added to the personal display of art in many people's homes, not being passed off as an original but as an indicator of supposed taste and sophistication. This "application" or "appropriation" of an original, highly regarded and historically significant work is not unique to *Mona Lisa* (Figure 3.7.) but does illustrate how an artwork, which is in itself not defined as kitsch, can still be applied in reflecting, or exposing, a kitsch aesthetic. This corresponds with Greenberg's (1939:119) explanation that the user or lover of kitsch does not know or realise that the kitsch object reflects an aesthetically uniform taste.



**Figure 3.7.** Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Mona Lisa* (c.1503–1517)

Morreall and Loy, in agreement with Greenberg and Broch, considers kitsch as the opposite to so called great art because of the absence of thought-provoking substance in such works. Even though kitsch is generally thought of as “bad” art, Sontag (1964) and Morreall and Loy (1989) go further by stating that purchasing, owning or admiring kitsch is a non-critical action. Such a non-critical action implies that admirers of kitsch do not realise that the object of their admiration is actually kitsch (as defined by theorists such as Greenberg (1939) and Morreall and Loy (1989)). Referring back to the example of a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, displayed as a reflection of the owner’s artistic knowledge, a differentiation can be seen between displaying a reproduction as an indication of wealth, status of knowledge and perhaps merely admiring a reproduction as a representation of the love and quality of the original. In such an instance we move away from the uninformed kitsch appreciation to an informed appreciation which is implied by ownership of something mass produced. Sontag (1964) takes this into consideration for another understanding of kitsch by arguing that the regard for a kitsch product from an informed point of view implies an ironic appreciation of such objects. What she means is that those who understand the standards of taste may purchase, display and enjoy so-called kitsch artefacts exactly because of their kitsch nature. Sontag refers to this as a *camp* aesthetic. The belief that a certain (kitsch) object bestows on the owner an aura of wealth, elegance or sophistication would not be made by those who admire kitsch for its ironic properties (see Sontag, 1964). To them it would imply a knowledge of the parameters of kitsch, and appreciating an object or artwork exactly for those qualities.

The second half of the twentieth century brought with it postmodern thought. As the term postmodernism is problematic in itself, so too is a simple definition of postmodernist art. The shifts in zeitgeist central to postmodernism included a re-evaluation of kitsch. Specifically, Sontag’s definition of the camp aesthetic found expression in postmodernist irony and its embrace of popular culture. Within Pop art, for instance, artists opposed modernism’s strict separation of “high art” and “low art” by creating works with an obviously kitsch aesthetic based on display value, superficial sophistication and faux materials which allude to wealth. A clear example of this approach is seen in Jeff Koons’s (born 1955) porcelain statue *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988)—a work deliberately created around kitsch hallmarks. It is an object which is reproduced (there are three official copies in existence) and reproducible because the porcelain is moulded in a cast. It catches the eye using garish, unsophisticated, bright colour, which enhances its prominence when it is displayed. Its form alludes to a nostalgia for Christian figurines made in the same style. The main figure, Michael Jackson, was at this point an international pop-superstar and was thus known (and obviously admired) by millions of people. Koons stated that he wanted

the work to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. All these elements coincide with the Western cultural mind-set of the 1980s, with its extreme focus on consumption, media, celebrity, and flashy, decadent lifestyles (Smit, 2017:89).

One might argue that Greenberg's (1939) obvious dualism of modernist thought should not be presented as the main consideration in defining kitsch, and that postmodernism allows for more inclusive and pluralistic considerations of the varieties present in art production. Morreall and Loy (1989:65), late in the twentieth century, however, seem to echo Greenberg's sentiments when they state that what they call "great art", should "challenge the audience to interpret it and react to it". Where Greenberg (cf. 1939) and Morreall and Loy (cf. 1989) found it possible to identify, define and outline kitsch, art critics at the turn of the second millennium find it decidedly less straightforward to define kitsch as a phenomenon. Kjellman-Chapin (2013: ix) writes:

From its etymological and, one might argue, its ideological, beginnings in the latter half of the nineteenth century, kitsch has steadfastly resisted a single definition. [...] trading on contested notions of taste, vague and shifting notions of beauty, and unstable cultural hierarchies.

Writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Kutnicki (2013: 174), like many contemporary writers on the subject, indicates that kitsch is mostly connected to the idea of so-called bad taste. Linking ideas of taste to quality in art consequently creates the impression that bad taste is synonymous with bad art (Kjellman-Chapin, 2013: xii). This perception illustrates how not conforming to the status quo (the consensus of the artworld) almost automatically creates the perception of being *wrong* or *illegitimate*. The artworld uses the word kitsch as a collective term for that which the informed participants in the artworld considers to be non-art, as retrospectively applied to the Russian artist Ilya Repin's (1844-1930) work by Greenberg (1939:42-43). The hierarchy of art is maintained by returning to the judgement of taste, separating that which follows the consensus of taste and marginalising that which does not. The origin of the conceptualisation of this hierarchy of taste is not superficial, as it appears to present itself in a century of critical contemplation in a Western post-industrial, capitalist society. This critical contemplation takes on the form of the philosophy of aesthetics and the judgement of taste which directs it.



Figure 3.8. Koons, Jeff. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988)

### 3.3. The hierarchy of taste

Since the Enlightenment the term kitsch has been  
nearly interchangeable with the term trash.  
(Pettinger, 2004)

Greenberg (1939) and Morreall and Loy (1989) place at the centre of their descriptions of kitsch the idea of bad, questionable or uninformed taste. Like kitsch, *taste* is a problematic concept and eludes stable definition. A definition of *art* is in itself a task which has occupied the life work of many scholars and philosophers. Dickie (1974:43), for instance, defines an artwork in alignment with Danto's (1964:581) artworld, and the ability of those *within* the artworld to define an artefact as art (see section 2.2.). Graham (2005:3) states: "...a concern with what is art is not just a matter of classification, but a matter of cultural esteem." In attempting to achieve the esteem of being classified as "art", artists, critics and art lovers must consider a wide array of ideas regarding artistic representation within a specific time and place. The knowledge needed to attempt such an understanding of the role players in the artworld is referred to as *taste*. Kant (1790) defines taste as "universal communicability" of the pleasure and that this subjective sense of enjoyment by more than one individual signals taste. Taste is applied in the philosophy of art to signal a certain intelligence and understanding of art rather than referring to the physical senses of the human body (Shelley, 2017). This concept of taste is intertwined with the development of the Western philosophy of aesthetics. This development is furthermore directly involved in notable changes in Western art creation over the last two centuries (Shelley, 2017). Graham (2005:3) posits that there are two fundamental sets of questions in aesthetics: questions about the essential nature of art and questions about its social importance or lack thereof. In this section I argue that the centrality of taste within contemporary aesthetic understanding of art creation serves as a foundation for a hierarchy within the artworld. By identifying the existence of a hierarchy I align the artworld with Nerdrum's experience with the fact that certain artistic expressions are marginalised within the artworld through aesthetic philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

Although *aesthetics* is sometimes used as a word which refers to art practice in general, aesthetics proper refers to the philosophical study of beauty and taste and does not necessarily need to be focused on art (Kristeller, 1951:498). While the aforementioned link with art is not

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<sup>22</sup> Although this research focusses on Western philosophy and art primarily, the applicability of the argument of marginalisation on a global level, can be sustained and is reflected upon in Chapter Six.



entirely incorrect—as the philosophy of art forms one of the branches of aesthetics—one should guard against seeing these two disciplines as synonymous. Aesthetics, as a sub-field of philosophy, does indeed reflect upon art, art creation and the appreciation of art but its philosophical areas of enquiry are much broader than that. Aesthetics often reflects on expanded planes of thinking about individual understanding and experience of the world and, as such, also borrows from the philosophical domains of epistemology, phenomenology and the like. Simultaneously, art, and art philosophy, has numerous links with aesthetic philosophy but also considers and investigates issues that do not always link with aesthetics proper.<sup>23</sup> Zangwill (2019) formulates the nature of aesthetics as examining subjective and sensori-emotional values—sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste. Taste is one aspect of philosophical valuation which often normatively aligns art with aesthetics—this is also the way in which the term is used in this thesis. Where aesthetics encompasses a broad consideration of the functioning of the mind when we experience the sensible world (reality as experienced through the senses), art philosophy looks more specifically at how the artists portrays or relays this experience, as well as how people criticise, enjoy, and use art.<sup>24</sup> This direct relation between the two disciplines necessitates a basic understanding of aesthetics and its continuing influence on art in order to identify the existence of a hierarchy of taste (Tanke, 2011:78-79).

The field of aesthetics within Western philosophy, although rooted in ancient Greek knowledge, is still a fairly young development. Etymologically it stems from the Greek word *aisthētikos*, which refers to sense perception. The current understanding and use of the term finds its origin in Alexander Baumgarten's (1714–1762) dissertation on poetry published in 1735, called *Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining the poem (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*. Here Baumgarten applies the word to designate the science of knowledge acquired through the senses (Shelley, 2017). This is later followed by Kant's seminal work in 1790, *Critique of the Power of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*. Kant employs the term aesthetics to refer to judgments that “concern the beautiful and the sublime in nature or

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<sup>23</sup> Although this is not the final word on the differences and similarities of these subjects, within this thesis I acknowledge the difference between art philosophy and aesthetics. For the purpose of this research, the latter is seen to concern both the experience and judgement of art as well as wider consideration and reflection on individual experience and judgement of the world which we find ourselves in. This separation of disciplines assists in understanding the possibility of aesthetic experience and judgement outside of the framework of art proper. This approach links with Jacques Rancière's understanding and application of aesthetic thought as concerning society in general and particularly politics, which will be considered in the following chapters.

<sup>24</sup> Because of this understanding of aesthetic enquiry it is possible to refer, retrospectively, to the aesthetics of previous eras, before the term was in use. One could thus talk of a Norse aesthetic awareness when researching ancient Norse art.

art”.<sup>25</sup> In both Kant and Baumgarten’s use of aesthetics, the centrality of one’s understanding or *judgement* of any subjective experience of the world is emphasised, even before it is applied to the understanding of art. This led to the initial use of aesthetic enquiry being applied to a wide variety of natural and social occurrences, and the understanding thereof, during the Western Enlightenment (Shelley, 2017, Shiner, 2001:5-10). Aesthetic judgement focuses, first, on the individual’s emotional response to the world that is experienced, be it the individual’s responses to art, objects or other phenomena. These emotions are not only ignited by sensory experience of the body—like experiencing anger when one is physically hurt—but is very much linked to the cognitive processing of experiences (anger could be exacerbated by the mental processing of how and why we were physically harmed, or even the ethical questions of deserving to be physically harmed). Our physical senses, and the experience they produce, are therefore not the exclusive informants to the critical understanding of our surroundings—a phenomenological understanding which I will not attempt to lay bare in this research. Things such as education, social and cultural awareness and upbringing are involved in the processes of cognitive processing to arrive at a certain judgement. When it comes to the aesthetic judgement of art, Kant provides this definition for what *fine art* is: “[It is] a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (Kant, 1911 [1790]). Within Kant’s reasoning, art is merely a subsection of aesthetic judgement. Aesthetic judgement, for Kant, incorporates judgments of the beautiful, judgments of the sublime, and teleological judgments of nature.

In these initial concepts of taste, I find the first signs of hierarchal thinking within the understanding and appreciation of art (cf. Menninghaus, 2009). If, as Beardsley (1966) states, our physical senses and reactions to our surroundings provide a limited range of possible emotional outcomes, they need to be supplemented by cognitive understanding of our surroundings in order to deepen the intensity and variety of emotional reactions we can experience—this constitutes the aesthetic experience. As the cognitive understanding of the world is often learnt and not instinctively known, it follows that learning and exposure to certain ideas could amplify and expand one’s emotions.

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<sup>25</sup> The definition and differentiation between *beauty* and *sublime* is of central importance in Kant’s understanding of the aesthetic experience. Not only Kant explored these ideas but several other thinkers as well, notably the Brit Edmund Burke (1729 – 1779) in his publication *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Ryan (2001:265) explains how this discourse in the eighteenth century was not so much concerned with painting and art, but rather with a specific experience that impacts the self. Furthermore, Ryan (2001:266) argues that Burke’s version of the sublime focuses on the subject’s growing awareness of their own sense of limitation—and the ultimate value of this perception within social and ethical contexts. Where beauty (and by implication ugliness) implies physical attributes, the sublime makes up for those experiences which cannot be defined by beauty or ugliness.

Here Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) argument regarding taste and class takes a central position. A defining trademark of class difference is the dissimilarity in exposure and education (formal or informal) people receive. Consequently, each individual's understanding (and emotional responses) to the world will differ according to their accumulated knowledge. Emotional knowledge, as situated within the affective domain of mental capacity is therefore subject to a hierarchy of knowledge which not everyone is privy to. When applying this argument to the general public in the Western world's appreciation and understanding of art, a link materialises to, for example, Greenberg's argument for the polarisation of kitsch and avant-garde art. As Greenberg notes (cf. Greenberg, 1939), the avant-garde developed out of the growing bourgeois society of the industrialising and urbanising world. The members of this social class had access to knowledge and experiences which the general working and middle class could not attain or equal. Thus, avant-garde art appealed to an educated class whose affective domain had been educated to a wider variety of emotional responses to visual stimulation, for example, according to the expanded knowledge and understanding of the world which they lived in. Conversely, the member of the working and middle class remained a layman regarding certain activities and experiences (such as art), not being equipped with the cognitive or emotional knowledge to give rise to fulfilling, varied and substantial emotional responses when confronted with avant-garde art.

As Solomon (2004) argues, kitsch is seen to capitalise on predetermined emotional responses. Although avant-garde or *high art* also aims to elicit a response from the viewer, the appeal to the affective domain requires more than basic understanding and immediate emotional response. The educated, informed viewer is meant to reflect upon a variety of aspects, both internal and external to the artwork, comparing and questioning the possible meanings or aims and measuring these to their own thought and emotions. This is the plane on which *good* taste operates. In contrast, kitsch is said to evoke "simple" emotions such as sentimentality, nostalgia and patriotism (Morreall & Loy, 1989:66). Kitsch does not challenge the viewer (beyond visual or intellectual provocation), but sets forth to repeat an emotion which is easily predicted and easily conjured up. A forerunner to the predictability of the emotional response of the viewer can be observed in the pre-modernist art academies' regard for different subjects in painting. Certain subjects in painting were seen to possess the ability to engender certain reactions. Themes, ranging from historical painting to genre painting, were attributed different levels of importance within art creation, with corresponding canvas sizes denoting the importance of certain ideas. This approach should, however, not be equated with kitsch's appeal to certain emotions, as pre-industrial art and post-industrial kitsch have entirely different aims and origins. The limited ability to own, view or interact

with art in a pre-industrial Western world meant that the common citizen had little opportunity to engage with artistic discourse. This limited interaction also excluded the opportunity to exhibit one's taste in art, for the general public did not own artworks or partake in the focus and aims of art (in as much as they were not patrons of the arts). In a post-industrial Western society, the ownership of artistic products casts a completely different light on the emotional response which an artistic work aims to bring forth. Mass production and commercialisation meant that the "consumption" of artistic products moved out of the exclusive space of patronage by aristocracy, the state or the church. Along with this move in the domain of production, the emotional responses called upon also changed. Pre-industrial art, commissioned by educated privileged patrons, was either made for personal use and reflection of wealth and power, or for conveying certain ideas and ideals (in the case of the state or church) to the general public. Mass education and higher earning power in the industrial West allowed an artistically uncritical population to purchase artistic works for visual enjoyment and exhibition of burgeoning wealth. Because these simple needs did not require original artistic experiments or a complicated emotional response from the purchaser or viewer, art production started to polarise, as discussed in the previous section.

One could argue that the question of taste became more central to understanding and interacting with art in the industrial urbanised West, precisely because more people had access to art than before this era of travel, greater exposure and reproduction. Where the exclusivity of art ownership kept art at an elusive distance to the general public in earlier centuries, the lustre and awe of art ownership started to take on a new meaning in the nineteenth century. The new-rich customer base's attempt to display their wealth and social progress through purchasing art may have had a negative influence on the position that art previously held. Despite mass produced (or original) artistic objects flooding the market, the elite class' appreciation for art did not dwindle. Thus, amidst the difference in aims of art created for the mass market, the elite still strived to maintain exclusivity when it came to the consumption of art even if that required a change in the definition of art. One should guard against separating this subjective aim from the complex development of art in the nineteenth century, positioning it as a definitive objective of art creation since the industrial era (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Still, this consideration of maintaining exclusivity does collate very well with the development of the avant-garde, as being focused on building on exclusive knowledge of the artistically educated in order to create works which retain the former exclusivity of art, now lost in a capitalist world.

Greenberg's (1939) definition of kitsch being the opposite of avant-garde art should perhaps rather be considered as that which was left behind in the ruling class's continuous attempts to

retain a certain inimitability in art, thus employing aesthetic taste as a means to preserve hierarchy. Taste's call for emotional responses which are enriched by education and exposure will therefore continue to develop along with developing social knowledge and exclusive education, ultimately supporting the maintenance of a hierarchy of taste in general, but also within art. This is, arguably, done in order to keep an exclusivity to "high" art, not because of social status and financial power alone, but because of a level of taste which is valuable, albeit elusive in itself.

The value judgement which flows from the cognitive processing of the sensible world brings us to an understanding; this understanding constitutes aesthetic judgement. The pleasure one can attain from sensory experience is thus directly linked to, and completed by, the mind's ability to process that which we come upon, i.e. reflective contemplation. Kant's division of aesthetic experience, as it is split between the beautiful and the sublime, is made up of sensory, emotional and intellectual experience functioning simultaneously. Aesthetic experience is all these things combined (Wenzel, 2005:44). Kant was of the opinion that certain aesthetic experiences could elicit a standard emotion, i.e. the appreciation of the beautiful, for something which is universally agreed to be beautiful, whereas other objects or experiences would rely on an individual's personal taste. Beauty, to him, is made up of aesthetics (the philosophical notion of beauty) and taste (cultural values learned through exposure). According to this understanding, declaring something to be beautiful is directly related to one's cultural knowledge and is therefore dependent on a hierarchy of knowledge and access (Wenzel, 2005:44).

Looking back at the development of art and aesthetic consciousness over the last century and a half, Vermeulen and Van den Akker, in their article *Notes on metamodernism* (2010:1), argue that society has progressed beyond modernist and postmodernist thought. Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010:4) characterise modernity (which gave rise to modernism) as a discourse and inherently a product of the white, European male gaze. This is characterised by ideas of utopianism, (linear) progress, grand narratives, reason, functionalism and formal purism. As part of the development of modernist thought in art's relentless push forward during the first half of the twentieth century, figurative depiction was eventually left behind, and with it the artistically uninformed viewer. Through this, art become mainly accessible to what Wartenberg (2002:xiii) calls the knowledgeable experts, a fraction of society made up of artists, academics, curators, art historians, art theoreticians, gallery owners and the visually literate public. This also aligns with Danto (1964) and Dickie (1974) understanding of the classification of art and the artworld. Therefore, as the avant-garde and modernism gradually became increasingly abstract, so kitsch

came to be identified not only with what was cheap and mass produced in the nineteenth century, but also as that which did not reflect modernism's ideal of order through abstraction.

The aesthetic hierarchy of deepened emotional perception, based on knowledge and exposure, is precisely the hierarchy which allows Greenberg (1939) to draw a line between *bad art* (kitsch) and *good art* (avant-garde). In Nerdrum's understanding, and definition, of the artworld, this is the continued structure and functioning of the artworld. Modernism's focus on avant-garde art creation, and the knowledge needed to understand the reasoning behind the new forms of art that developed at the dawn of the twentieth century, continues in the mind of Nerdrum, as a barrier in the artworld. In this way, those who do not obtain the same knowledge, and share the same emotional responses which this knowledge brings about, are left, alienated from art production and the meaning it attempts to portray. Furthermore, the artist who does not subscribe to this ideology of constant renewal, like the figurative painter, but continues to produce art in a traditional way, is also pushed to the margins of the artworld, often referred to as being kitsch.

All these aspects considered, I find in the judgement of art and taste the presence of a hierarchy which promotes exclusion. Firstly, the critical thinkers of the Enlightenment theorise about the nature, value and meaning of art to such an extent that those who are not educated in the same manner cannot hope to become part of the discourse. The art production which does flow from these new ideas gradually becomes so alien to the common viewer that *fine art* becomes a practice and appreciation of the few, and kitsch steps in to quench the thirst for artistic interaction by the general public.

### 3.4. A Kitsch superstructure

When Odd Nerdrum (2011b:25) declared that he is not an artist but a Kitsch painter in 1998, he was introducing the manifesto of the Kitsch movement. This moment served as more than the identification of and introduction to an art collective; it was a clear case of taking up a position against the artworld and its implicit hierarchies. I argue that Odd Nerdrum, apart from experiencing that his work is considered non-art, exemplifies a discourse of questioning the artworld and the application of the term kitsch therein. Furthermore, I contend that he uses the term kitsch to highlight the Kitsch movement's deviation from common understandings and academic views of kitsch.

By self-identifying his works and those of his students with the idea of kitsch, Nerdrum also forces the onlooker to contemplate the place, importance and prominence (or rather the exclusion) of representational paintings done in the style of the old masters, within the contemporary art scene. Though few would deny the obvious virtuosity of Nerdrum's technique and expansive oeuvre, an air of uncertainty still lingers around the presence of works of this nature in a post-industrial society which has inspired movements such as Dada, Pop art and performance art. This feeling of unease underwrites Nerdrum's lament when he proclaims that his work does not belong to the world of Art (Nerdrum, 2011c:41). This experience of appearing to be at odds with the artworld is brought to a head in the aforementioned speech Nerdrum gave in Oslo in 1998 at The Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art. In this speech Nerdrum explained how he had gradually become used to the fact that the work which he and his students produced do not fit into the expectations of contemporary art production. He chose to apply the word Kitsch to his own style of work and so confronted the artworld with having to reconsider their ideas and definition of kitsch (Nerdrum, 2011a:23). Pettinger (2004) describes this incident as moment of resistance "in the face of convention ... in front of Norway's cultural cream."

Nerdrum's positioning of Kitsch can be seen as an attempt not only to re-situate the meaning and significance of kitsch, but also reassess the identity and contributions of those who have been branded as makers of kitsch. As part of this ongoing debate on the nature of kitsch/Kitsch, Nerdrum has published several volumes that explore—philosophically, theoretically and visually—his understanding of the stakeholder without a voice in the artworld. In two of these publications Nerdrum includes a shortened manifesto for the Kitsch movement called Kitsch – the difficult path (Nerdrum, 2001:7; 2011a:23):



The Kitsch Painter should not be judged on national, rational or religious ground in his depiction of life—but on the basis of timeless qualities.

The Kitsch Painter is not protected by the time in which he lives. He strives to represent history's most sublime qualities, and should be judged in accordance with these.

A work of Kitsch is either good or bad, and good Kitsch must not be classified as Art. This would be an error in judgement. Kitsch is not Art. Kitsch refers to the sensual and the timeless.

The Kitsch Painter is committed to the eternal: Love, death and the sunrise.

Innovation is of no importance, nor is originality. Going in depth is the goal, for in the depiction of nature itself lies the individual expression.

Because Modernism and Art are the same, Kitsch is the saviour of talent and devotion.

As a summary of the manifesto of the Kitsch movement, this list illustrates a number of things not only about Nerdrum's definition of Kitsch, but also about what Kitsch is not. Nerdrum starts off by detaching Kitsch from nationality, rationality and religion. He then states that Kitsch's importance does not lie in its assimilation with these structures, but in its focus on timeless qualities—in technique and message.

Here his comment could be interpreted with regards to the type of artistic techniques that he and his students strive to master. This style of the Kitsch movement, as mentioned earlier, relies on emulating the mastery of Classical painters, developed in previous centuries. Nerdrum bemoans the fact that, although he and his students have studied and matured their workmanship to a level which is comparable to that of the old masters, they are not, within their own time, considered to be masters of art. This, he argues, stems from contemporary art's focus on renewal and protest against the historical academic institution.

When Nerdrum says that the Kitsch painter should not be judged on national, rational or religious grounds in his depiction of life, but on the basis of timeless qualities, he is not just attempting to define the focus of his own painting but also comments, to my mind, indirectly, on the hierarchy within artistic production.

In this statement Nerdrum makes use of the phrase “depiction of life”. The exact meaning and application of this phrase is as unclear as his meaning or description of the hierarchical categories which he contests, so an attempt to comprehend his objections can only be concluded from placing Kitsch in opposition to the aims of the national, rational and religious. One could understand this element of Nerdrum’s manifesto as referring to the hierarchy which certain institutions set in place within a group or society, which in turn determines the focus (and legitimacy) of art production. *National* could refer to a nation’s priorities at any given time (be it war, post-war recovery, etc.).

Secondly, he states that Kitsch (or the Kitsch painter) is not “protected” by the time in which it is created. Here the idea of art progressing and changing through constant innovation to keep up with “modern” ideas is set as something that Kitsch does not strive for. Kitsch aims to remain the same in its depiction of the sublime and is therefore part of a continuous process of artistic creation that has existed for centuries. The reader is not informed as to what is implied by the use of the term *sublime*, however. Being very outspoken about Kant’s (1790) influence on the development of aesthetic thinking in art, it seems strange that Nerdrum would employ a term so specifically linked to Kant’s theories of beauty and the sublime (also central to Kant’s contemporary Edmund Burke’s writing on the beautiful and the sublime (1757)). Still, the master continues, self-assured in the weight and universally understood meaning (and importance) of his manifesto. Nerdrum argues that the Kitsch movement does not follow the same idea of linear “development” (but notably ignores postmodern ideas on the subject), as they do not see modernist approaches as building on the foundation set out by the old masters, but rather as a rebellion and exiling that which is of historical value. To this end, a work which reflects an approach rooted in centuries of development and learning in representational depiction (mimesis) is degraded within the contemporary appreciation of art for its lack of originality. This is taken up in Nerdrum’s second element of his manifesto when he states that “the Kitsch Painter is not protected by the time in which he lives. He strives to represent history’s most sublime qualities, and should be judged in accordance with these”.

This statement raises two issues which form the bases for the creation of the Kitsch movement. Firstly, it indicates that artists (like those of the Nerdrum school/Kitsch movement), who create works of art in a historical tradition, belong nowhere and are protected and nurtured by no-one. Secondly, his call for judgement to be made based upon history’s most sublime qualities, accentuates the understanding that these artists stand alone in their aims, and are not being included in contemporary ideas of high art. Apart from the marginalising effect that this has on

Nerdrum and his followers, as already mentioned, it emphasises the absence of a place to belong for these artists and their works. They may continue to produce these highly masterful works, in the style of centuries gone by, but the contemporary art world does not acknowledge their mastery, contribution or importance. This leaves the Kitsch painter without a place to belong within the contemporary art scene and with no part to play in what the artworld deems to be valuable contributions.

Additionally, Nerdrum states that works of Kitsch can be considered as either good or bad—a judgement made in accordance to a Kitsch painting’s manifestation of what Nerdrum considers a product that reflects the timeless qualities of Kitsch, as well as the technical skill of the painter. This, Nerdrum also calls *high Kitsch* (Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011:47-48). Notably, he does not provide an explanation, set of values or guidelines as to what high Kitsch entails. As with many other comments made by him and his followers, the existence of high Kitsch is accepted as fact, with the master being the final judge on whether it has been attained. No matter where a work of Kitsch is placed on the scale of good or bad, Nerdrum holds that it is not to be called *art*. He emphasises the idea that Kitsch is committed to the eternal ideas of love, death and the sunrise. This comment could be understood as reflecting the existential deliberation which is ever-present in Nerdrum’s work—reflecting on and allowing the viewer to reflect on what it is to *be*. These concepts are ideas that Nerdrum considers to be deeply personal (to himself but also to all human beings) and thus not the aims of art, but the focus of Kitsch.

Furthermore, Nerdrum reasons that Kitsch is not innovative or original, but focuses on the depiction of nature in the name of individual expression. This “individual expression” is arguably not aligned with the idea of the modernist artistic genius, but rather, again, with the existential experience of the individual. Finally, Nerdrum implies that art, through modernism, no longer seeks to redeem talent or devotion, and that Kitsch now fulfils this role. In this final point Nerdrum identifies the Kitsch movement as a place where art which is created from masterful talent and devotion to a tradition (of painting for instance), and the artists who create these work, are welcomed and valued. When Nerdrum states that “Kitsch is the saviour of talent and devotion” he not only redefined Kitsch but also sought to raise the status of those who associate with his beliefs and artistic approaches (Nerdrum, 2011a:23).

Nerdrum states that in time modernism itself has become a tradition (2011b:27). Institutions, critics, teachers and educated people are expected to be open to the new because of the constant pursuit of novelty within this tradition. He argues that his opposition to modernism is not based in

the movement's prominence as the prevailing order within the arts. He explains that the term kitsch within modernism has become a generic name for all that is not regarded as intellectual and new. Kitsch is seen to be all that is old-fashioned, sentimental, melodramatic and subsequently pathetic (Nerdrum, 2011b:27). From this, one would be able to conclude that Nerdrum sets himself against what modernism marginalised as the other. That which does not follow modernism's pursuit of the depiction of the universal experience of new approaches is pushed aside and derogatively referred to as kitsch – notwithstanding the vagueness of this classification.

Nerdrum's revolt against modernism seems to hold for postmodernism too. Although postmodernism does not seek universal truth as modernism does, and attempts to break down the hierarchy between different approaches to artistic creation, there is still a marginalising of that which does not strive for new and unique ways of expression, very often focusing on the conceptual rather than technical mastery. Again, the generic term kitsch is applied to that which is not sufficiently daring, challenging and new. In response to this Nerdrum seeks to create an arena where those artists who feel the need to work within an established tradition of painterly excellence, for example, can function without having to commit to the ideas of contemporary art. For this reason, he refuses the derogatory associations of the word kitsch and uses the idea of Kitsch to describe that which he creates, as well as his reason for creating it.

It is worth noting that some problematic issues do arise when reading Nerdrum's manifesto as well as other detailed comments on his conceptualisation on Kitsch (cf. Nerdrum, 2001 & 2011). It becomes evident throughout this research that Nerdrum is reacting against the general vagueness of what the term kitsch implies (mostly due to his own figurative painting style), but Nerdrum's deliberation on Kitsch fails to clearly outline what Kitsch entails. Apart from a few vague self-supporting aims, Nerdrum's manifesto does not outline what Kitsch is or does, but continuously opposes Kitsch as a binary to [concepts of] contemporary art. It is my opinion that Nerdrum, ironically, positions Kitsch as that which it is not, as not being contemporary art, or in his own words: "Kitsch must be separated from art (Nerdrum, 2011c:32)." Moreover, Nerdrum endorses a hierarchy regarding work created within the Kitsch movement by referring to low Kitsch that needs to develop into high Kitsch—the latter being the preferred and ultimate embodiment of Kitsch.

Although Nerdrum refers to artists outside of the figurative painting tradition, such as composers, in his defence of kitsch he pays little attention to the multitude of other objects that are also

considered to be kitsch. His musings on Kitsch ultimately focus on the aims of his own work and that of his students. Nerdrum (Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011:48) argues that Kitsch seeks to generate emotion within the individual; it is about the individual. Here the existentialist experience is recalled. He argues that Kitsch should bring to the fore the gravity of life (although he is not clear on what this would be), in the best cases bringing “exuberance to silence through the depiction of sublime nature.” In his description of Kitsch, he defines it as being in contrast with contemporary art's “sense of irony and emotionlessness, because Kitsch serves life and the individual’s search for meaning” (Nerdrum, 2011b:26). Kitsch does not seek to convey feelings and emotions through abstraction or ideas set outside of the painting. It seeks to depict that which haunts the individual through skilful figurative portrayal. It does not seek new ways to depict human turmoil, but attempts to master artistic skills within a set tradition of figurative artistic creation. In these aims, Nerdrum (Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011:48) argues, lie the potential of achieving high Kitsch. He (Nerdrum) explains that low Kitsch is a stage that one needs to go through in order to be able to attain high Kitsch, because high Kitsch understands the gravity of life, whereas low Kitsch is still learning (Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011:47-48).<sup>26</sup>

It is through this positioning that Nerdrum seeks to change the way in which figurative painting is regarded. In 2011, Michael Gormley, then the editor of *American Artist Magazine*, remarked that Nerdrum has done for the word kitsch what the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement has done for the word queer by adopting it to describe that which drives the artist to create instead of serving as a slighting term (Malafronte, 2012:62). In doing so, it can be argued that Nerdrum has attempted to change the regard for those who create outside of the tradition of contemporary art by questioning the very nature and idea of contemporary aesthetic taste and the hierarchy which is spawned from it.

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<sup>26</sup> Section 5.4. offers a reading of Nerdrum’s own paintings and how this development from low Kitsch to high Kitsch might be interpreted in the development of his style and choice of content.

### 3.5. Concluding remarks

The criteria of kitsch (as the outcast within modernist art) is repeatedly defined during the course of the twentieth century but arguably remains linked to the dualistic interpretation put forth by Greenberg. When an artist such as Odd Nerdrum decides to apply this obviously derogative term to a whole active movement of art creation, the defiant air of this choice is not subtle. Nerdrum's choice emphasises the uncertain meaning of the word, and indicates the necessity of considering anew the type of work often assembled under the notorious umbrella-term kitsch as well as the hierarchy which instigates this division.

This chapter provided a synopsis of the genealogy of kitsch. Through this inquest the historic understanding and development of both the term and the original objects which carried the name were identified. Writing within the modernist milieu of 1939, Greenberg found it easy to oppose kitsch to the concept of art, specifically as the antithesis of avant-garde art creation. The manner in which kitsch is marginalised implies a process of categorisation, where (artistic) objects and their creators are considered to be outside the framework of contemporary art and are categorised as being different in their aims, objectives and value. Through this process contemporary art and its practitioners become the whole, while kitsch, as the outsider, becomes the part without a place. These objects are considered to be kitsch and their creators identified as being of lesser value by a group that considers kitsch and its makers to be an out-group of lower standing.

This apparent division of high and low (or in and out) within the artworld, I argue, is linked to an hierarchy of taste which guides creation and appreciation of contemporary art (with its roots in modernist ideas). In support of this argument, an overview into the development of aesthetic philosophy, with particular focus on the idea and centrality of *taste* was conducted. I argued that the split in aesthetic appreciation, strongly linked to class privilege and exclusivity of taste, stands as an identifier of a hierarchy within the artworld, where a privileged few direct and maintain the exclusivity of art, as well as its creation and appreciation.

In maintaining that contemporary art has an underlying hierarchy I have further put forward the argument that Nerdrum simultaneously identifies himself as one of the marginalised outsiders to art, but also that he employs the derogative understanding of kitsch to question art and position the Kitsch movement therein. This positioning, questioning and appropriation of the idea of kitsch, I argue, reflects a larger discourse within contemporary art, that of a general questioning and revolt against the presumed consensus of the artworld. Nerdrum and his movement may not be

alone in this endeavour, but I argue that he typifies an encapsulating attitude toward the artworld. Nerdrum's antagonistic feelings toward the contemporary artworld speaks of an air of dissent against the consensus which most practitioners of art accept to be the stable and immovable nature of art at the turn of the twentieth to twenty-first century. For this reason, my argument continues into the identification of the Kitsch movement as an instance, or act, of dissensus.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Subverting the consensual *Rancièrian dissensus and the Kitsch movement*

#### 4.1. Introduction

The scandal of the plebs, ultimately, is that they took part in a mode of action to which they were not entitled; that is, by talking they enacted an improper partaking acting as if they had a name, as if they had the right to speak, the right to make promises, to express themselves.  
(Panagia, 2018:33)

In its most basic sense, to be seen as “plebs” implies a social hierarchy where those considered to be plebeian—and therefore at the bottom of social hierarchy—are looked down upon, along with that which they create or contribute.<sup>27</sup> The Kitsch movement, their art, and Odd Nerdrum’s public vindication for these “creations” by the outcasts (or lowest social order) of the artworld, raise questions about the right to participate in and contribute to the formal artworld. By revolting against the artworld because of their experience of exclusion, the Kitsch movement provokes an evaluation of the artworld’s presumed inclusivity. Questioning the functioning and parameters of what the artworld “allows” to be included in the definition and expression of art, becomes an act of defiance. This act of defiance destabilises the accepted norms within art because it introduces a participant (the Kitsch painter) who is not recognised as part of the whole, or as part of the artworld. These *outsiders* (Kitsch painters) recognise that they have no part or position in the functioning of the whole (Nerdrum’s concept of the artworld) but seek to make this exclusion and denial of participation known, in order to eradicate (delegitimise) the hierarchy which creates this division.

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<sup>27</sup> The concept of the *plebeian* derives from the ancient Roman division of social classes, where the plebeian refers to the lower or commoner class and patrician refers to the elite or aristocratic class. Although the social position and significance of these classes shifted in status over the centuries of ancient Roman society, the distinction remained connected to the differentiation between higher and lower class. Today the use of the word plebeian, apart from referring to social crassness or lacking in cultural refinement, is still connected to the idea of being a commoner or member of the lower class (Panagia, 2018:33).

Their self-identification, through the creation of the Kitsch movement, as outsiders who do not have a place in a group or community, simultaneously voices an appeal to be given a place—to not remain outsiders. In seeking a place within the group (i.e. equality) the rules and norms which set up this hierarchy of exclusion are necessarily brought to light, and subsequently into question. To Jacques Rancière (cf. 1999), this questioning of the hierarchal nature of a community's inclusivity is the act of dissensus.<sup>28</sup> Dissensus is, in its many forms, interventions which repeatedly assess the boundaries of social consensus. This social consensus implies a mutual agreement on who is allotted which place in society; to which degree this allotted place allows one to partake and speak; and the ideas and regulations which keep this *status quo* in place. By questioning the status quo, the consensus within a group is subverted and forced to be reconsidered, specifically regarding its inclusivity or marginalisation (i.e. its “boundaries”). Rancière forms his argument for dissensus on the basis of complete democracy, which constantly seeks equality and emancipation from oppression in every human endeavour.

This chapter aims to identify the role-players in Rancière's conceptualisation of dissensus. These role-players are simultaneously connected to the role-players within the Kitsch movement and the artworld. This is done in support of my argument that the Kitsch movement represents an act of dissensus within the artworld. In *The political importance of the improper* (section 4.2) I give an overview of Rancière's thinking as it develops into his conceptualisation of dissensus. I focus specifically on the primacy of politics and democracy in his work. This section acts as groundwork for an investigation into the main elements and role-players within dissensual thinking, which occurs in section 3.3 and section 3.4. *The power of the Art Police* (section 4.3) explores Rancière's concepts of *le partage du sensible* and *la police* within the context of the artworld. Continuing in this vein, *The saviour of talent* (section 4.4), argues that his conceptualisation of *la répartition du sensible* and *le politique* are equivocal to the Kitsch movement and its aims.

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<sup>28</sup> A metaphor which has guided Rancière's writing from an early stage is that of *the ignorant schoolmaster*. Although the idea of the ignorant schoolmaster is echoed in Rancière's conceptualisation of dissensus, the pedagogical implications falls outside the scope of this research. However, the central argument pertaining to the ignorant schoolmaster does guide my engagement with Rancière himself. Tanke explains: “Rancière is quite critical of explication and the assumptions it makes regarding the intelligences of students, readers, and, in artistic contexts, spectators” (2011:1). In keeping with Rancière's aversion of condescending (patronising) attempts of teaching I also strive to convey my understanding of Rancièrean dissensus as it relates to the Kitsch movement and the artworld, rather than presenting an explanatory text of Rancière's thinking (cf. Rancière, 1987).

## 4.2. The political importance of the improper

Thesis 1. Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined in its own terms as a specific mode of action that is enacted by a specific subject and that has its own proper rationality. It is the political relationship that makes it possible to conceive of the subject of politics, not the other way round.  
(Jacques Rancière, 2010:27)

In this first thesis from his *Ten Theses of Politics* (2010:27) Rancière immediately makes it plain that his understanding of politics does not align simply with the general understanding of the political. It is clear from the start that in order to understand Rancière's arguments on political action, one must first understand his definition of the political. After the French civil unrest of 1968 the twenty-eight-year-old Jacques Rancière fell into disagreement with his former teacher, the French philosopher Louis Althusser (Bowman & Stamp, 2011:xii). From this point on, Rancière's writing took on a specific direction, engaging extensively in what is still the backbone of his expansive work: politics and democracy. From this *improper* act of questioning his teacher's ideas, Rancière's work of the past 50 years has, according to Bowman and Stamp (2011:xii) "never ceased to call into question the status, rhetoric and authority of mastery". In considering classical politics, Rancière (1999:7) highlights Aristotle's exclusion of certain members of the population in the governing of the city. Notably, the position (or lack thereof) of slaves and free slaves is recounted, with specific reference to the importance and position of the "master". This concept of mastery, even a contemporary understanding which implies governance, of one group over another is constantly questioned by Rancière's writing. This interrogation of authority and mastery he has applied across many fields of study, always presenting readers with the question of the nature of politics, who is allowed to partake in it and how these parameters define our sensible world. Bowman and Stamp (2011:xii) argue that Rancière's various inquests do not add up to a "system" or a "theory" of politics but rather to a "method" of intervention into specific instances of the political.

Olivier (2015:1) explains that in Rancière's work we find a return to the question of the political, or politics proper. With this comment Olivier implies that the understanding and functioning of politics has evolved to indicate certain practices that Rancière does not accept within his definition of politics. A contemporary understanding of politics as being guided by political leaders and parties who represent groups within a country is thus supplanted by a definition which precedes such an understanding (and essentially does not prescribe to the concepts, ideas, norms or goals

of any contemporary political program, cf. Panagia, 2018: 5). Olivier (2015:1) continues by stating that Rancière's consideration of politics refers to the fundamental equality of all human subjects—therefore, complete democracy in as much as every member of society has the right to take part at any level of that society.<sup>29</sup>

To Rancière (cf. 1999), the constant questioning (or revisiting) of the position of the political subject (the individual or group), within specific instances (the construction of the community), constitutes *politics*. He states (Ranciere,1999:6):

What the "classics" teach us first and foremost is that politics is not a matter of ties between individuals or of relationships between individuals and the community. Politics arises from a count of community "parts," which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount.

Thus, for Rancière the classical understanding of politics is not truly democratic, because not all members are “counted” when the whole of the community is considered (Rancière, 1999:1-19). For him politics occur when the accepted norms of how everyone “fits” fails to account for certain individuals or groups, and their place in the whole (Panagia, 2018:2). Those who are not counted, are not recognised, and if you are not recognised, it is impossible to partake in the structuring of the community. The result of this, is that politics addresses emergent collective formations from the active participation of those unauthorised to partake in the very activities that constitute the community's collectivity (Panagia, 2018:2).

Customary politics (as commonly understood when referring to contemporary political activity) is taken apart in Rancière's seminal book on politics and philosophy, *Disagreement* (1999). The implication of Rancière's dismantling of our understanding of politics further necessitates certain adjustments to understanding the “function” of politics. To Rancière (cf. 1999), the political actions of “politicians” do not reflect the equality which democracy strives to achieve. By naming someone a politician, there would automatically form a group who would be non-politicians. Continuing this

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<sup>29</sup> The differentiation between the French *le politique* and *la politique* is significant within Rancière's work, as it refers to two different concepts. This somewhat confusing differentiation in terminology is central to Rancière's concept of political action, as this chapter aims to illuminate. Panagia (2018:4) puts it as follows: “...the reader is compelled to have to come to terms with a radically alternate sensibility of what political thinking is.” “*Le politique (the political)* is this third space of contestation, an indeterminate and always shifting meeting point of *la police* and *la politique (politics)* (Tanke, 2011:50).” Following these comments on Rancière's use of the terms, I employ *le politique* to refer to the political plane of social structure and interaction. *La politique* is used to refer to specific instances of questioning this social structure and functioning.

line of argument, politics and political action would become the exclusive occupation of politicians, but non-politicians would not qualify to partake. Through this hierarchy of “who is allowed to partake in politics” the true equality of the citizens is corrupted.

Yet, this division of political power or the “power to act politically” is a common occurrence in our understanding of political activity—a hierarchy of politicians and non-politicians describes that which we have accepted to be a necessity in the functioning of a society. This hierarchical societal construct is justified by the norms and ethics which it propagates. We therefore accept the role of the politician because our understanding of the functioning of a society is built around the division of roles and functions of certain members (e.g. politicians) of the society. Rancière disavows politics’ “obscene supplement”, i.e. the idea that only those who are allotted a place where they can partake in politics have the right to speak and act in a political way (Bowman & Stamp, 2011:xiv).

Rancière incites the defiant reconsideration of these norms and ethics by calling for “improper” conduct, or “abnormal” communication (Rancière, 1999:56). Through this incitement Rancière implies that perceived “proper” or “normal” conduct exists within a group or community, and the true questioning of the structure and functioning of that collective would require conduct which opposes the proper; i.e. improper conduct. Only by subverting the status quo of proper conduct, or *consensus* of social structure, can complete democracy be obtained (cf. Vihalem, 2018).<sup>30</sup> Rancière defines this improper action of questioning the structure, functioning and hierarchy of society as *dissensus*. For Rancière, the act of dissensus constitutes true politics (*la politique*) as it provides an opportunity for those who have no status within a community to dispute the very structure or norms which dictates their exclusion. Where consensus focuses on the demonstration of the perceived *proper*, dissensus demonstrates the perceived *improper* (Corcoran, 2010:2), subverting the values established by the former hierarchy and calling into question the accepted relationships between *poesis* (“a way of doing”) and *aisthesis* (“horizon of affects”) (McQuillan, 2011:11-27).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> As with most of Rancière’s definitions, *democracy* to him differs from our contemporary understanding of a system of governmental rule. To Rancière true democracy implies absolute egalitarianism on every level of a community’s functioning. Panagia (2018:4) explains by stating: “Solidarity, emancipation, and equality aren’t concepts, in other words; they’re practices [...] we can’t speak of a general concept of solidarity or equality or emancipation.” Understood this way, it appears that Rancière seeks democracy in every human interaction.

<sup>31</sup> The understanding of *poesis* and *aisthesis*, specifically as it relates to Rancière’s theorisation of dissensus and aesthetics within politics, is scrutinised in Chapter 5.

Another aspect of the subversion of the status quo, is the work of arranging and adapting (sometimes to the point of complete transformation) the sensibilities and perceptibilities that, for Rancière, play a leading role in one's disposition to the world and to others (Panagia, 2018:1). The centrality of that which is sensed (*sensibilities*) and perceived (*perceptibilities*), and the manner in which this knowledge shapes our understanding of our surroundings, is in Rancière's definition (Rancière, 2004:13), the *aesthetics of politics*, which the next chapter expounds upon. "In short," writes Davide Panagia, author of *Rancière's Sentiments* (2018:2), "Rancière's aesthetics and politics offer us an affective pragmatics for a politics of equality and emancipation."

The constant search for complete democracy (specifically the notion of equality and egalitarianism which underwrites it) is the foundation on which Rancière builds a contemporary theory of aesthetics (cf. Rancière, 1999). His theoretical publications over the last decades reflect a process where he addresses the political aspects of aesthetics and art as the core of his philosophy (cf. Rancière, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2014). Many of these ideas culminate in his theory on dissensus as an act which undermines and questions the consensus within any given community, which Rancière calls the art of aesthetics (cf. Rancière, 2004 & 2010b).

According to Rancière (2004:43-60), the consensus of a community or society determines what is acceptable, either in behaviour or speech, within that collective. These acceptable practices, knowingly or unknowingly, put into place a hierarchy which enables the "proper" functioning of the community's consensus. As the consensus, or idea of the proper, within the community becomes imbedded in the fabric of that community, the norm (of the proper) gradually becomes the rule (of the proper). Based on this gradual transformation, the ideas which support the consensus come to be seen as the ethics of the community, and so determines supposed ethical conduct. Rancière states that ethics within a given system or society amounts to the dissolution of the norm into the fact (Rancière, 2004:56)." Therefore, that which is considered to be the ethics which guide a society, are in fact habits and ideas which gradually came to take on the place of the only acceptable way of doing.

When transposing this idea of conventions (norms and ethics) within a society to an understanding of contemporary art, a link materialises to the ideas of Odd Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement. To Nerdrum and members of the Kitsch movement it is claimed that the type of art which they create (representational painting in a classical style) is not accepted within the artworld as noteworthy. Nerdrum voices this othering of representational painting as follows: "...the

professor said that brown pictures were what they were fighting against. Art follows the time... (Nerdrum, 2011c:39)". In other words, Nerdrum identified the consensus at The Academy of Art in Oslo, which looks down on "brown pictures." The implied type of art described by Nerdrum's professor's use of the word brown can easily be connected to Nerdrum's work, and specifically his use of the Apelles palate and its limited use of colour (cf. section 2.4). Along with this negative consideration of the representational, that which is praised as true art, does not load mimesis, but prefers critical and ironic thought.

I argue that Nerdrum's interpretation of the marginalisation or neglect of certain artistic practices as *other* points to a hierarchical structure within art creation. This hierarchy presumably determines which art practices are regarded as worthy by the artistic cognoscenti. This potential marginalisation also points to the possibility of the existence of a framework within which art creation must function to be truly regarded as art—a point discussed in the previous chapter. The existence of such a framework would, in my opinion, reflect Rancière's (1999:55-56) views on consensus within a certain group or community. This consensus implicates "ethical conduct" which has come into being in order to uphold the hierarchy within a society, in this case the art society. Nerdrum's professor reflects an ethic of art creation at the Academy. This ethic predetermines certain "normal" and "proper" (cf. Rancière, 1999:56) activities, which excludes the painting of "brown pictures".

When an individual or group, like Odd Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement, steps forward and proclaims that they are being excluded by the hierarchy or ethics of a society, they destabilise the consensus of that society by highlighting that *all* are not included (i.e. that there is not "consensus" by all). The excluded is a participant which clashes with the ethics of a society, and subsequently include themselves as a marginalised entity. So, the Kitsch movement then creates a space where those who do not belong to the whole can assimilate themselves. This "safe environment" does not come into existence without disruption to the consensus of the community. By creating the Kitsch movement, Nerdrum forces members of the artworld, like his professor, to take note of a group who does not follow the normal or proper ethics which the consensus follows. Said community may not value or care for the plight or existence of this group who has no place, but the placeless group's very existence changes the "truth" which underwrites the consensus—i.e. that the community functions in a way that includes all and gives a voice to all (Rancière, 1999:58). The artworld cannot maintain that it offers a place for all artists, as there is now a group who counters such a claim. The outsider's complaints of marginalisation or exclusion, as presented in Nerdrum's manifestos, are founded on that which Rancière roots his work: democracy and the



equality of all (cf. Rancière, 2009c). To proclaim one's marginalisation therefore implies one's call for equality and the destruction of the hierarchy which creates this inequality. I argue that this bid for equality is central to the case of Nerdrum's self-identified Kitsch movement. The excluded (Kitsch movement) does not necessarily strive to eliminate the society's (artworld) functioning as a whole but stresses a reconsideration of the consensus and its presumed democracy. Nerdrum states: "My concern is what Modernism has pushed out as its 'other' (Nerdrum, 2011:27)." I argue that this reconsideration of the consensus (of the artworld) is a political (*la politique*) act of dissensus, as it aims to understand and expose the politics (*le politique*) which underwrites the ethics of the society.

Within dissensus Rancière (1999 & 2004) identifies certain key role-players and elements that represent the different sides or aspects of the structuring of a community. These role-players, or elements which form part of the discourse of politics and aesthetics revolve around *le partage du sensible* (the distribution of the sensible), *la police* (the police), *la répartition du sensible* (the redistribution of the sensible) and *le politique* (politics). To further my argument of identifying the Kitsch movement as an instance of dissensus within the artworld, these role-players and elements are systematically introduced and investigated. I do this to show the similarities in Nerdrum's actions and Rancière's convictions regarding dissensus.

### 4.3. The power of the Art Police

To be contemporary actually means to be an artist. I do not feel contemporary in my work. I perceive my work as old-fashioned. It does not have a frame of actuality in our time or locality. (Odd Nerdrum, 2011c:42)

Nerdrum's (2011:42) lament for the inferior position which has been awarded to representational painting within the artworld is accompanied with his own admittance that his work does not strive to be new. He openly favours artistic techniques and approaches from artist of previous centuries. Greenberg's (cf.1939) argument that representational art came to signify a kitsch aesthetic in the twentieth century is taken up by Nerdrum (see section 2.2), but only as an opportunity to reject the generalisation of this view towards art which is founded in historic principles. Thus, Nerdrum's uses the term kitsch ironically to relate both a need for creators of certain artistic products to have a place of belonging, and a questioning of the definition and parameters of what kitsch is. I argue that this subversive act represents an instance of dissensual thinking. If there is dissensus, however, it follows that there must be consensus for it to act against (Corcoran, 2010:2). This implies that Nerdrum's revolt is set against certain consensual ideas and actions.

What, then, are the preconditions of consensus? For Rancière (1999:58), consensus rests on a notion of "the idea of the proper", i.e. that which is acceptable within a collective. The result is a presupposed "proper function" for such practices as speech, as well as a "proper place" for these functions to be exercised (Corcoran, 2010:2). As already mentioned, Rancière defines ethics as the norms within society which eventually become the rules. He calls this understanding of one's community, everyone's place therein and the "proper" function of the collective *le partage du sensible* or *the distribution of the sensible*. Rancière states (1999:28):

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution.

Tanke (2011:10) analyses this concept in terms of French lexicography, which allows for a more in-depth understanding of the significance of the chosen phrasing. He posits that the French formulation *partage* has two senses which are crucial to understanding Rancière's concept (Tanke, 2011:1). Firstly, *partage* delineates partitions or divisions within a (social) structure; what

can occur and who can participate at what times within a community. Secondly, it implies that the distribution (understanding) is shared by all who form part of the whole. Tanke puts it as follows: “To *partage* the sensible is thus to parcel out spaces and times, so as to create a shared or common world containing different allotments (2011:10).” *Sensible*, Tanke explains, should not be understood as meaning *common sense* but rather refers to *what is perceivable* (as through the body’s senses). The *partage* (structures set up to uphold the consensual) thus allows for certain things to be sensed or conceived, discussed and disputed.

The logic of consensus is a central aspect of the functioning of contemporary politics and government (Rancière, 1999:43-60). In such a political conceptualisation (*le politique*), the individuals of a society are reduced to a population in which politics as a profession is carried out by a select few. For Rancière this is not true politics, for true politics is based on complete democracy, which would allow all members of a society to take part in the understanding, shaping and questioning of that society. Here one can identify a reason for someone to be opposed to an individual or group which questions the consensus, as such a questioning may bring about a questioning of the very hierarchy which underwrites the consensus, or structure and order, of a society.

Considering Rancière’s (2004:12-45) fervent call to subvert the consensual one might think of consensus as an obviously evil and menacing, dominating or suppressive force in any community. The existence of such a system of structuring and maintaining a community of any kind might even call up instances of dictatorship and autocratic rule. However, such an understanding of consensus would be an oversimplification. In its basic form, the function of *le partage du sensible* allows a member of any group or society to navigate their way through that which is acceptable within the framework of that collective. This understanding of the function and parameters of a group does not necessarily aim to suppress the participation of everyone who presides within a society—although this may sometimes be the overt aim. *Le partage du sensible* can have innocent and inclusive intentions in the ethics it puts in place for the functioning or consensus of the community. It may in essence strive to include all and create opportunities for all to be part of the collective, and thus be committed to complete democracy.

Rancière explains (1999:65-122) that even with the best intentions of the consensus, there could still be those who are left out of or marginalised from the proper functioning of the consensus. This excluded part without part could develop over time (having not been present as the consensus came into being), necessitating the need to re-evaluate the consensus by an act of

dissensus. Considering these sometimes non-antagonistic aims of *le partage du sensible*, the consensus could easily be left unchallenged because there is no outright or clear hierarchy which suppresses or excludes anyone. In these cases, dissensus may be more jarring than in cases of opposition against outright tyranny, precisely because the consensus appears to be inclusive and supportive to all, when in fact it is internally incoherent.

In order for a consensus to be maintained within a community there must be members of that community who follow and uphold it. In identifying this action, Rancière (1999:28) writes: “I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimisation another name. I propose to call it the police [*la police*].” We should not conceive of *la police* as uniformed soldiers patrolling the community *per se*—although it may sometimes take this form—but rather as any force that strives to uphold the consensus, for instance those who would stand to lose the most should the consensus be abolished. Alain Badiou (in Tanke, 2011:43) has noted the play of the phrase *la police* on the Greek word *polis*, which refers to the city (i.e. community or perceived whole) in its most ideal form. This Greek philosophical concept of the *polis* should be noted as Rancière’s ironic view of the *polis*, as an *ideal* form. The ideal implies completeness or perfection. Considering that an ideal society is a truly democratic one (specifically for Rancière), the fact that there are those who are neglected, ignored or forgotten by the structure of the *polis* signifies its ironic non-ideal nature. Rancière (1999: 65-122) continues that within the ethical community, this group which exists outside of that which is part of the consensus is no longer supposed to exist since everyone is meant to be included. The excluded, therefore, has no status in the stratification of the community. On the one hand, they are simply the one who accidentally falls outside the society’s perceived equality. On the other hand, they become the radical other, the one who is separated from the community for the simple fact that they are alien to it, that they do not share the identity that binds together the perceived whole, and they inevitably threaten the community to which they are the other. Nevertheless, knowingly or unknowingly, *la police* strives to uphold *le partage du sensible* as a means to maintain the order on which a society functions.

*La police* maintains the fiction that no one of any significance has been prevented from taking part in the determination of common life. Furthermore, *la police* is not inevitably a formal group or part of the society who take it upon themselves to uphold the consensus (Rancière, 1999:21-42). *La police* could be any member of said community who follows, upholds and propounds the continued existence of the consensus. “For Rancière,” writes Tanke (2011:43), “politics (*la politique*) is the process by which the part of those without part counter all such counts based upon their exclusion.”

When linking modernist thought within art creation to the phrase *le partage du sensible* one could argue that certain beliefs regarding the creation of art within a modernist paradigm have become so institutionalised that they have developed from being the norm to being the rule. Here I simultaneously refer to Greenberg's (cf. 1939) theorisation of the avant-garde and its aims as well as the development of aesthetics and the hierarchy of taste (cf. Chapter 3). For example, the change in aesthetic thinking which developed in the late eighteenth century bloomed into a complete revolution in art by the end of the nineteenth century. From this point on the perpetual challenging of the norms, function and appearance of art has continually strove for constant renewal, and this *norm* of renewal developed into the *rule* of renewal (i.e. from a prescription, developed a description). This focus on constant renewal and departure from historic approaches is arguably still the focus of contemporary art, more than a century later. Nerdrum (2011:27), for instance, sees it the following way: "Modernism has become a tradition that has conquered the entire Western world." The formal and informal understanding of contemporary art becomes visibly guided by certain beliefs—beliefs which outline the proper. The idea of the shared understanding of the function and form of art discussed in the previous chapter can be connected to this partitioning and common understanding of all stakeholders' roles in the functioning of the artworld. Take Greenberg's (1939) clear differentiation between the avant-garde and kitsch. He is very specific in the attributes of either side, and maintains that the one does not cross over to the other. It assumes that everyone not only has a specific function within the contemporary idea of art creation but also that all are implicitly or explicitly in agreement thereof. It is through this *le partage du sensible* that a functioning consensus retains its place, or power. The presumed "whole" of the artworld fails to fathom the existence of a group of artists who do not follow the ideology of renewal and constant change within art. In the modern art society art has this basic ideology in common, placing the conceptual above technical ability. Sharing this understanding of the meaning and purpose of art creates norms and ethics which neglect to consider a group such as the Kitsch movement, because their aims are so radically different that they are not even counted as part of the whole. Since the out-group (other) does not follow the prescriptions for proper art, they concomitantly fail to be part of the basic description of the whole (i.e. of art itself). For Rancière, the existence of this *other* shows how a community is not democratic, even when it considers itself to be so.

I argue, as does Nerdrum, that the proper form, message and participants regarding the creation of art within a modernist paradigm have become so institutionalised that they have developed innovation from being the norm to being the only ethically valid approach within contemporary art.

This is exactly the experience which Nerdrum describes in his writing on Kitsch (cf. Nerdrum, 2001 & 2011). He does not deny modernist art its existence but bemoans that which modernism has dismissed as non-art; specifically, in as far as his own work is concerned. He states: “Today the superstructure “Art” has become an overwhelming force, unparalleled in history” (Nerdrum, 201:30).

Some might argue that postmodern thinking has eradicated these strict divisions in the hierarchy of art. Nerdrum, however, does not experience this to be the case. In his manifesto-speech *Kitsch serves life* (2011b:28) he states:

Looking at the conditions for Kitsch at the end of the Modernist era, you might think that its opportunities to exist would increase after postmodernism’s rebellion against “the one and single truth”, but it continues to surprise me that there is so little room for “the human voice”.

Arguments for the absolute inclusivity of the postmodern (or post-postmodern) artworld notwithstanding, Nerdrum voices a decisive experience of exclusion. The police who enforce this exclusion that Nerdrum identifies could then be argued to be the critics, curators, teachers, artists and other so called knowledgeable experts within contemporary art. Presumably, they place the principle constant renewal not only at the centre of art creation, but also at the hierarchal top—dismissing and marginalising that which does not follow their consensus. To this effect, Nerdrum (2011b:27) states: institutions, critics, artists and educated people are obliged to be ‘open to the new’.”

Incidentally, Nerdrum has of late started to employ the concept of the *Art Police* in his lectures and public discourse on the Kitsch movement, as I witnessed at TRAC2018 (as illustrated in Figure 4.1.). He connects the idea of the Art Police to the dominating modernist ideas within contemporary art—placing the conceptual before technical ability and talent with regard to a specific medium. He roots these ideas in the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831), and the dramatic change which their theories on aesthetics brought about within art creation over the last two centuries (cf. Nerdrum, 2018)

The cognoscenti active in the artworld, as mentioned above, could be identified as forming part of *la police*, underwriting and continuing the consensus of the modern art scene. Nerdrum obviously does so when presenting his ideas on the Art Police. These formal participants are not the only members of *la police*, as their *partage du sensible* influences those with whom they come

in contact. Hereby art enthusiasts, students of art and the public in general are lead to buy into the consensus of this art society. Nerdrum writes (2011c:27):

The process of exclusion that began to occur at the breakthrough of Modernism—this terrible moment—brought immediate consequences.

To show one of these consequences Nerdrum projects, as part of his presentation at TRAC2018, photos of figurative works done by his students onto the massive screen in the conference room. These photos show painting which display high technical ability. He follows these images with more works by the same painters, but done in a modern style, devoid of the technique and classical figurative talents that these painters have already display. Why do they choose to paint in this manner, when they have spent months and years learning to emulate the classical masters? Nerdrum's answer: for them to earn an income and survive. This knowing or unknowing acceptance of the idea of the proper within art further solidifies the hierarchy of the consensus that Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement fight against.

I noted earlier that (paradoxically) *le partage du sensible* may not always be set up in such a way as to elicit outright experiences of suppression. Furthermore, I made plain that *la police* does not necessarily take on the form of an obviously menacing military organisation. In Nerdrum's discussion on the Art Police at TRAC2018 he chooses not to indulge in subtle comparisons between his experience as a representational painter and the suppression enforced by the Art Police. Not for the first time, Nerdrum compares modernist ideas to that of communism and Nazism. Earlier, he writes (Nerdrum, 2011c:30):

The idea of a new world, where out aesthetic and moral perceptions should be improved has already been tried out by both the Communists and the Nazis, as well as the modernists.

This comparison makes obvious reference to suppression and social engineering which had devastating consequences. Granted, Nerdrum's comparison is hyperbolic in nature and implication (and reflects his selective definition of the artworld), but this "over reaction" could serve a specific purpose. It has been stated that the consensus of a group can in some cases seem so democratic that dissensus seems jarring because of its apparent suddenness and unexpectedness. I suggest that Nerdrum's exaggerated demonising of the artworld (or Art Police) is intentionally done in order to create an awareness of the presence of a hierarchy which many believe does not exist. To the general art practitioner, enthusiast or public, the artworld may seem



open to all and give opportunity to all expression. Rancière (1999:62) states that the political community tends to be transformed into an ethical community, a community of a “single people” in which everyone is presumably counted, thus declaring that no outsider exists. This implies that the way in which a community is set up, all are considered and none are excluded. This presumed equality of all, specifically within art, supposedly underwrites the thinking of postmodern thought. The unawareness of suppression makes members of society unknowing members of *la police* (or Art Police) because their acceptance of the status quo supports the hierarchy which upholds the consensus. They may not be aware of exclusion or marginalisation by the artworld, but that does not mean that it does not exist. Nerdrum and the members of the Kitsch movement, however, are very much aware of the existence of a hierarchy within contemporary art. They profess to suffer professionally and privately because the paintings which they create does not fit into the consensus of the Art Police. By comparing the Art Police to communism and Nazism Nerdrum forces those who do not find themselves on the margins of the status quo to reconsider the perceived democracy of the artworld.

Through these efforts Nerdrum, to my mind, reflects Rancière’s concept of dissensus. Nerdrum speaks up as that part of the art society which has no part, because he is not satisfied with the artworld’s use, definition and application of the word kitsch, nor their appreciation (or lack thereof) of figurative painting. In order to bring about dissensus, *la police* (the Art Police) must be opposed, and so too *le partage du sensible* (the hierarchy embedded within the artworld) which they uphold and enforce. Rancière identifies *la politique* (*politics*) as that which opposes *la police*. What *la politique* strives to achieve is *la répartition du sensible*, which can only be brought about by this defiant act of dissensus.



**Figure 4.1. The Art Police**

Odd Nerdrum presenting the key note speech at The Representational Art Conference (TRAC) 2018,

Leeuwarden, Netherlands

Photo credit: Willem Venter

#### 4.4. The saviour of talent

Nerdrum has done for the word Kitsch what the  
LGBT did for the word Queer. Liberated it.  
(Gormley, 2011:27)

Subverting the truth of the consensual takes place when someone identifies themselves as the subject of marginalisation, or the other to a group or society. In the quote above, Gormley (2011:27) links Nerdrum's subversion of the consensual to an act of liberation. He argues that as the word *queer* was once used to denigrate members of the LGBTQIA+ community, by appropriating the word for self-identification, the word was disconnected from its derogative past. Gormley feels that Nerdrum does the same for the members of the Kitsch movement when appropriating the term kitsch to create a collective which celebrates representational painting. Although (problematically) simplified, Gormley positions these two cases as instances of individuals or groups who were not allowed within a community; the LGBTQIA+ community was seen as the other to heteronormative society, and representational art is purportedly considered as other within contemporary art creation.

Rancière describes this idea of an *other* as the "part of those without part" (*la part des sans-part*) or "the count of the uncounted" (*le compte des incomptés*). This Rancièrian concept, as Tanke (2011:43) explains, which is derived from Aristotle's description of the Athenian *de-mos* emphasises a group which "had no part in anything." According to Rancière (1999:1-19) the identification of the *de-mos* embodies an awareness of the existence of "those without a place" and "those without a voice" and this initiates a discourse on equality and emancipation which questions the nature of a community. This *de-mos* undermines *la police* and *le partage du sensible* by its very existence, as it destabilises the community's claim of the inclusion of all. The *de-mos* thus becomes a political subject destabilising the community's logic and so draws attention to the inherent hierarchy which exists therein. The negotiation between the competing interests of already competing parties within a society. Because *le partage du sensible* does not acknowledge the *de-mos*'s existence, the *de-mos* cannot have equal (and in fact, fundamental) rights within the community (Rancière, 1999).

True politics then, argues Rancière (1999:58), is this paradoxical identification of the *de-mos*, as forgotten, ignored or unknown entity which falls outside of the system of consensus. When the

*de-mos*, as one without a place or voice within *la partition du sensible*, takes the opportunity to speak up, they subvert the status quo and start the re-establishment of norms in the social space. Rancière defines the emergence of and protest by the *de-mos* as *la politique*. Thus, *la politique* is the destabilising of consensus' solid axioms: "the whole is all, nothing is nothing" (Rancière, 1999:129). Now, the consensus upheld by *la police* comes into question and ideas about the functioning of society, and possible different ways of functioning in the future, replaces the consensus. This resistance occurs when *la police* is opposed by *la politique*, specifically in the form of art which questions the distribution of the sensible—a process that leads to *la répartition du sensible* or the *redistribution of the sensible*. This method of questioning and reimagining a society's structure defines Rancière's dissensus (Corcoran, 2010:6-7). When Nerdrum creates a "superstructure" for figurative painters, he professes that they have no other place to belong. Through this action, I argue, Nerdrum identifies himself and his students as the *de-mos* of the artworld. Furthermore, this act exposes the hierarchy present within the artworld and also brings into question *le partage du sensible* which is brought into effect, and upheld through this hierarchy. When the Kitsch movement identifies itself as a place for those without a place in the art community, it does not only oppose the members of *la police* upholding the consensus on a formal level, but everyone else who has become complacent in *le partage du sensible*. Hereby, Nerdrum not only questions the right of art galleries, dealers, festivals, etc. to determine which art is proper and who is allowed to partake, but also questions the general public's acceptance and submission to the propagated consensus. Hence, Nerdrum and his movement makes the political engagement with the hierarchy of the artworld personal, as it influences every member of society's understanding of *le partage du sensible*. By making the political personal the Kitsch movement (*la politique*) aims to instil within the public *la répartition du sensible*—the consideration of a different way of structuring the community, the role-players included in that community and the level at which they are permitted to partake. Such an egalitarian disruption of the prevailing categories governing perception and action of the proper (*le partage du sensible*) aims to change a society's understanding of the present consensus (i.e. *la répartition du sensible*) (Corcoran, 2010:3). Rancière's most basic understanding of *la politique* is at play in this questioning of all members' understanding of the proper: the search for complete democracy (i.e. the restoration of fundamental rights to existence of the *other*).

Expanding on this idea of making that visible which was invisible within the consensus, Corcoran (2010:2) refers to dissensus as a "form of innovation against the dictates of hierarchy and the policing of domains." The Kitsch movement is, in my opinion, just such an innovation, acting

against the hierarchy and dictates which enforce an idea of the proper within contemporary art by the Art Police. When Nerdrum accuses the artworld of ignoring those artists who continue to work in historical art traditions, he questions the idea of the proper within the artworld. He is not calling for the eradication of current art tendencies and philosophies but he does challenge the understanding of who is allowed to partake and what they are allowed to produce in order to be considered a part of the community.

Questioning the structure and functioning of a society in this manner is the moment which Rancière considers to be the *political* (*la politique*). Here, the art of politics becomes active by the creation of a subject which forces a reconsideration of the understanding of that given society. Rancière considers art's ability to support and propel this disruption (dissensus) of our understanding of a community (consensus) as the zenith of stressing our misconception of the democracy of a society.<sup>32</sup> Art, he argues, has the potential to question the way in which a society is structured. In doing so, art destabilises the consensus on which a society functions, and brings into being a platform for questioning and reshaping the consensus of the society (Corcoran, 2010:1). In terms of practising politics and art, consensus (a logic of the proper) establishes hierarchy, and dissensus establishes equality and demonstrates the superficial nature of hierarchy (Corcoran, 2010:5).

Nerdrum's use of the word kitsch can now perhaps be understood as an obvious form of dissensus. He states: "Kitsch became the unified concept for all that was not intellectual and new..." (Nerdrum, 2011:27). Nerdrum appropriates a word normally used by *la police* to describe that which does not belong as a tool to engender *la répartition du sensible*—giving voice to those without a voice and insisting on a part for those without a part. Using this same term of marginalisation (i.e. kitsch) to conceptualise the Kitsch movement shows a decidedly political act of *la répartition du sensible* by Nerdrum. By using a traditionally exclusionary term which carries a certain level of consensus for the proper functioning of contemporary art, he destabilises exactly that consensual understanding of the meaning of the term and those who supposedly belong to it.

Nerdrum's dissensus can be argued to be twofold, though. Firstly, he highlights the fact that representational painting, in a classic style, is not considered as serious art by his contemporaries. This patronising view towards figurative painting in a postmodern artworld alludes to a consensus

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<sup>32</sup> The precise role, form and function of art within the method of Rancièrian dissensus is further propounded in Chapter 5.

of a hierarchy of taste within the artworld. This hierarchy of taste pushes representational painting to the lower rungs of seriously considered art. Secondly, kitsch, as a concept distinct from the Kitsch movement's use of Kitsch, is reconsidered. This reconsideration of the notorious "non-art" forces a reconsideration which goes beyond Nerdrum's defence of representational painting. It questions the entire concept of kitsch as a denominator for that which "does not belong" in the artworld. This questioning simultaneously asks: "What is kitsch? Who determines kitsch? and "What is the position allotted to kitsch within contemporary art?"

When an internationally renowned, though not internationally respected, painter starts to use kitsch as way of describing himself and his work, he leaves many art lovers confused. This confusion is connected to the general idea that kitsch signifies cheap, unintellectual, mass produced items. To many this general understanding does not equate with Nerdrum's impressively detailed, large figurative paintings. They are conditioned to think of mass produced figurines of neon lights when thinking about kitsch. Those educated in the arts might very well understand Nerdrum's intention in using the word, as well as the conscious appropriation imbedded therein. They may recognise that his work does not reflect new approaches in visualising ideas, or new sentiments in the message which is relayed. To the artistically educated the out-datedness of Nerdrum's work in itself professes an unwillingness or incapability to fall in with contemporary sentiments regarding art (consensus). Defiantly, however, Nerdrum is not succumbing to the demoralising condescension of the artworld when his paintings are removed from a university hallway, for example (Nerdrum, 2011a:26). He is resituating himself and the Kitsch movement outside of the realm of *art*. This move allows him to fulfil the *standards of Kitsch* rather than being judged by the *standards of art*. The hierarchal power within the art community, which forced painters like Nerdrum to function on the periphery of the artworld, is thus undermined.

We can argue that this attempt to undermine the artworld is futile and insignificant. The power and presence of aesthetic thinking in the artworld cannot be matched by a single artist and a few followers. As arrogant and obstinate as Nerdrum is in his repeated attacks on the artworld, he may well be aware of his limited power in bringing about change. This, however, is not a criterion for "successful" dissensus. Rancière does not draw up minimum requirements for *la politique*, or political action. The fact that the action is taken constitutes a redistribution of the sensible. Dissensus is also not a clearly outlined process of beginning, middle and end. The constant aspirations of individuals and/or communities to be truly democratic entails constant and never-ending dissensus, as each consensus which is attained, even with the best intentions, may later

find the existence of the *de-mos*, who will again petition for a place to belong and the right to speak.

Although Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement are not the only voices that are currently speaking up as the *de-mos* within the arts, it does serve as a specific example of questioning the consensus of hierarchy surrounding contemporary art appreciation. In as much as this is true, it would seem that Nerdrum has created a platform for dissensus, and has made the existence of the *de-mos* known.

## 4.5. Concluding remarks

Even the most timeless picture would be considered  
Kitsch if they had been painted today.  
(Nerdrum, 2011:28)

Nerdrum is relentless in his quest to reinstate figurative painting to its former glory. He draws numerous comparisons between the works of classical painters and himself and his students. In comments like the one above he attempts to remind the artworld that the ability to create masterpieces like those from classical times, still exist. But to regain a position, he must first show that a position has been lost. For this reason, he creates the Kitsch movement, and the existence of this movement is justified by its enemy, the Art Police, who keep figurative painters out of the artworld by reducing their work to kitsch.

This chapter set out to engage with Rancière's method of dissensus within politics. This was necessary in order to comprehend Rancière's theorisation of dissensus and link this activity to the formation, functioning and aims of the Kitsch movement of Odd Nerdrum.

Politics (*le politique*) was shown to be different from the general understanding of political activity by elected officials, campaigning for the rights of different parties. For Rancière, true politics lie in an arena where every member of a community has the right to partake and speak in that community. Although one might think of contemporary democratic politics as being just that—the inclusion of all—Rancière deconstructs society's functioning in order to expose the hierarchy inherent in the functioning of said community.

This functioning of a community is rooted in the consensus which guides it. The consensus determines the "proper" within the collective—that which is considered to be proper to do, say or think, and who is allowed to partake therein. The idea of the proper reflects the ethics which guides a community and is referred to by Rancière as *le partage du sensible*: the distribution of the sensible. This consensus of the proper aims to govern and guide the ideal society, be it intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, the application of the proper is enforced by both official and unofficial members of the collective who subscribe to the consensus. These enforcers Rancière calls *la police*: the police.

*La police's* determination to uphold the consensus can be done knowingly or unknowingly, by force or mere obedience. The aims of *la police* need not always be overtly exclusionary. An issue



arises, however, when a group or individual within this society identifies themselves as being excluded from *le partage du sensible*. This exclusion (whether done on purpose or by accident) destabilises the consensus, as it exposes a hierarchy that is undemocratic and exclusionary. This group who, up until now, had no part or voice within *le partage du sensible*, becomes the act of *le politique*—Rancière’s true form of the political, where complete democracy is sought constantly. By destabilising the consensus *le politique* brings *le partage du sensible* into question in an act called *la répartition du sensible*: the redistribution of the sensible. The purpose of *la répartition du sensible* is to introduce new ways of considering the functioning of the community, as well as who and what is agreed to be part of this community, by way of dissensus.

From the understanding of these role-players and elements in Rancièrian dissensus the Kitsch movement, as part of Nerdrum’s campaign to end his perceived marginalisation of contemporary figurative painters, was brought into relation with dissensus and politics.

Nerdrum identifies the Kitsch movement as the “saviour of talent”, and as a “superstructure” for those artists who do not find acceptance for their figurative work within the contemporary art sphere. Nerdrum’s self-identification as an outsider to the artworld links very directly to Rancière’s understanding of the *de-mos* within the collective—being that part which is ignored/unknown within the functioning of the community. The *de-mos*’s plight to be heard and given a part within the whole is a political action (*la politique*), striving for true democracy. The consensus of the artworld, where the concept of kitsch functions as an umbrella term that places certain role-players outside of the realm of serious art, can be understood to be *le partage du sensible*. Either through officials within the art community or the general public, this idea of the proper continuously allows for an understanding of roles and functions which marginalise some artistic endeavours (such as kitsch).

For these reasons, I argue that the Kitsch movement exemplifies a specific moment of dissensus within contemporary art. It aims to expose the hierarchy (of taste) within the art community which allows for some creators to be ostracised. This denotes political activity which calls for the most fundamental of democratic equalities: being given a part and a voice, without subjection to an imposed hierarchy of value. Nerdrum does not campaign for the destruction of the art community, but propagates the possibility of envisioning a future which is more inclusive and egalitarian.

The creation of the Kitsch Movement, and the dissensus it brings about does not come without its own problems, unfortunately. It becomes evident throughout this research that Nerdrum is reacting against the general vagueness of what the term kitsch implies, but Nerdrum’s deliberation

on Kitsch fails to outline clearly what Kitsch entails. This internal flaw is further examined in Chapter 6, along with other comments on the functioning of the Kitsch movement and the possible contradictions which may arise from its aims and ideas.

The preliminary comparison of the Kitsch movement and Rancièrian dissensus, although brought to a point of similarity in this chapter, holds some pitfalls which directs this research further. Continuing the examination of role-players in the process of Rancièrian dissensus, as examined above, one eventually comes into contact with Rancière's definition of three *art regimes*. Among these regimes Rancière identifies one as the only vehicle for dissensus: the *aesthetic regime*. The aesthetic, to Rancière, is central to *la politique's* dissensus. Yet, ideas on aesthetic judgement and the importance of aesthetic thought is exactly the line of thought that brought representational painting to where it is now, on the side-line. One might therefore suspect that my attempts to define the Kitsch movement as dissensus within contemporary art are moot, as Rancière dismisses representative art at the outset, as the next chapter shows. In order to substantiate and develop my argument further, the next chapter investigates Rancière's definition of the aesthetic regime and his formulation of its function.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Dissensus within dissensus *The hierarchy of regimes*

#### 5.1. Introduction

Art challenges what is sensible, thinkable, and hence possible,  
on the condition that it not surrender its identity as art.  
(Tanke, 2011:75)

In *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (2011), Joseph J. Tanke offers one of the first comprehensive introductions in English to the thought of Jacques Rancière. He explains the dissensual power of art as the challenge art can make on the sensible, thinkable, and possible reflects Rancière's call to question the consensual. In his 2004 publication *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière distinguishes between three regimes of art: i) the *ethical regime of art* ii) the *representative regime of art*, and iii) the *aesthetic regime of art*. It is particularly the third regime, the *aesthetic regime*, that I am interested in. Rancière (2004:12-19) argues that the *aesthetic regime* is the only regime that can bring about dissensus because of its emancipation from consensual hierarchy. When Rancière argues for the importance of dissensus within society, he identifies *le politique* (the political subject) rising up in protest against *la police* (the enforcers of the consensus). He places the aesthetic regime at the very centre of this act of subverting *le partage du sensible* (the consensus). He argues that art which forms part of this regime simultaneously challenges the sensible while remaining true to the identity of *art* (cf. Rancière, 2004:20).

The previous chapter brought Rancière's definition of dissensus, both with regard to its form and function, into relation with Odd Nerdrum's creation of the Kitsch movement. The similitude of the Kitsch movement's aims within his perception of the artworld were preliminarily shown to embody a spirit of dissensus, in as much as it acts as a voice for those who experience marginalisation—or become marginalised over time—in art creation and participation in the formal artworld. I linked the presence of a hierarchy of taste within the art community to what Rancière (1998) describes as the “proper” functioning (consensus) and social divisions within art practices, especially that of

the West. The assumed consensus by a collective, however, needs constant reconsideration in order to ensure that no-one is left out of being a part of the whole; which I have preliminarily shown to be the *modus operandi* of the Kitsch movement. Considering Rancière's further theorising on the act of, and need for dissensus in and through *art*, this chapter scrutinises that which Rancière describes as the *regimes of art*. In an ongoing exploration of Rancière's thinking on the politics of art, I consider the likelihood that the definition of the aesthetic regime—as the only vehicle to bring about dissensus—complicates an understanding of the Kitsch movement's identification as dissensus. This complication derives from the possibility that the Kitsch movement's art production is situated within the principles of the *representative regime*. As Rancière does not consider the representative regime as capable of bringing about dissensus, the Kitsch movement's dissensual nature could therefore be questioned. I launch a comparative reading of Rancière's art regimes, Nerdrum's writing on the aims of the Kitsch movement, and reading of selected works from his oeuvre. The objective of this comparative reading is to investigate the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of my argument for the Kitsch movement as an instance of dissensus, through its relatability (or disparity) to Rancière's aesthetic regime.

This examination of Rancière's regimes of art, the Kitsch movement and Nerdrum's works opens up further pressing questions about the nature of and the necessity for dissensus. First, does Nerdrum's definition of the Kitsch movement impose, yet again, a hierarchy within artistic creation, specifically when considering his definition of "high" Kitsch and "low" Kitsch? By highlighting this contradiction between Nerdrum's dissensus against a hierarchy within the formal artworld, and the apparent hierarchy within the Kitsch movement itself, I propose that Nerdrum's Kitsch movement necessitates further acts of dissensus onto itself. Second, does Rancière's regimes of art also reflect a system of hierarchy, when considering the dissensual capabilities of art? Although Rancière does not present his regimes as a hierarchy of regimes, it is worth pausing at the inclusiveness of Rancière's regimes of art. These arguments are based on Rancière's (cf. 1999) claims that "true" dissensus eradicates (or at least uncovers and challenges) a hierarchy of exclusion. Along this line I reflect on the possibility that by singling out the aesthetic regime as the only means of achieving dissensus, Rancière conceivably creates another hierarchy of exclusion. Further to that, the Kitsch movement, in its pursuit of equality within the arts, creates another hierarchy internal to itself, to which the followers of Kitsch much adhere and aspire.

These arguments do not strive to eradicate the existence or function of the aesthetic regime and Kitsch movement, but question the place and voice of those who are marginalised by the hierarchies imbedded in both.

## 5.2. The politics of art

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it,  
around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak,  
around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.  
(Rancière, 2004:13)

The correlation between art and politics that Rancière employs in his writing, specifically in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), may seem far-fetched (in this regard see Corcoran 2010:2). Rockhill and Watts (2009:1) describe his body of work as “a unique and robust project that is helping reshape academic disciplines and contemporary thought about the complex relationship between politics and aesthetics.” Corcoran (2010:2) explains that, in Rancière’s view, the otherwise separate realities of art and politics can be placed in relation because it is not the forms of their manifestations which give them their specificity but their ability to effect a redistribution of the sensible. In this way they are clearly linked “as both activities...have to do with reorienting general perceptual space and disrupting forms of belonging” (Corcoran, 2010:2). In other words, Rancière (cf. 2004:12) locates the similarity between art and politics in their capacity to initiate the necessary action for questioning the consensual. Rancière’s definition of politics, as outlined in the previous chapter, does not align with the common understanding of politics (Rancière, 2004:22). Rather, “the political” or *le politique* refers to political action which questions *le partage du sensible*. In perceiving both the domains of art and politics as such (*le politique*), Rancière shows, that “politics has an inherently aesthetic dimension and aesthetics an inherently political one” (Corcoran, 2010:2). For Corcoran (2010:2), we cannot simply reduce art and politics to each other without generating contradictions; we must somehow account for their subjective motivation for coming into being. For Rancière this motivation defines dissensus.

The context for considering art and politics together within dissensus, as Rancière does, is always *la partition de sensible*. Rancière (2004:22) describes the interaction as follows:

The principle regulating the external delimitation of a well-founded domain of imitations is thus at the same time a normative principle of inclusion. It develops into forms of normativity that define the conditions according to which imitations can be recognised as exclusively belonging to an art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate: partitions between the representable and the unrepresentable; the distinction between genres according to what is represented; principles for adapting forms of expression to genres and thus to the subject matter represented; the distribution of resemblances according to principles of verisimilitude, appropriateness, or correspondence; criteria for distinguishing between and comparing the arts; etc.

Thus, not only does art reflect on the allotments and divisions embedded in the consensual *la partition de sensible*, it is in itself subjected to this distribution. The consensus of art—its meaning, function and power—is at any given time demarcated within *la partition de sensible* (Tanke, 2011:74). Consequently, art does not only reflect politically on thoughts, things and actions exterior to itself but can, and must, engage with the consensus about itself. This means that besides the commentary art can evoke about the world around us, it can also comment on its own place and importance within this world. This statement considered, the argument that the Kitsch movement thus introduces dissensus within the artworld is brought to the fore once more, as it seems to satisfy this understanding of the political power of art. The Kitsch movement challenges *la partition de sensible*—specifically that of a hierarchy within art creation—and I therefore consider it as an instance of dissensus. In this process it also questions the allotments and divisions embedded within the nature, role and function of art as a whole (cf. Rockhill, 2011:28-56).

It follows that different eras, communities and circumstances can have different distributions for the application, importance, place and function of art. For this reason, art does not always “interact” with *la partition de sensible* in the same way. Rancière (2004:20) cautions us not to make the mistake of assuming that all art is, within the time of its creation, similar in its aim and position toward *la partition de sensible*. Reflecting on and interacting with its own time means that art can be used to further a cause (e.g. propaganda, Figure 5.1.), question the logic of a cause of political or economic system (e.g. protest art, Figure 5.2.) or be created outside of the consideration of art’s intended role, form or hierarchy (e.g. “Art Brut” *outsider art*, Figure 5.3.). For this reason, Rancière is not drawn to art which is generally considered to be political art (Tanke, 2011:75). Political art and the politics of art are not the same within Rancière’s method. As noted, Rancière does not acknowledge political activity by those who identify as politicians as true politics (Rancière, 2004:12). Art which supports, contests or comments on activities related to this “perversion” of politics is accordingly not always art which strives for the political cause which Rancière holds central—democracy. Accordingly, art which does not appear to have an obvious political theme could in fact be political in the way that it interacts with *la partition de sensible* and could be instrumental in inducing change in a society (Rancière, 2004:9-11).



**Figure 5.1.** Anonymous. **Augustus of Prima Porta.** Unknown.

*It was often the case with Roman art that the artworks created were often intertwined with propaganda as a tool to forward some political agenda. Some of these works include the sculptural and pictorial depictions of Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire. Augustus often used these images to invoke the power of imagery to promote his ideology (Jucker, 1977:17; Reeder, 1997:90; Klynne & Liljenstolpe, 2000:122).*





**Figure 5.2.** Sibidi, Helen. *The child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife* (1988-89)

*Helen Sebidi's work reflects the happenings and experiences she had during her daily life in the township. Her work often draws inspiration from the horrors inflicted by apartheid, especially on women and uses these themes as a means of protest. This is visible in her collage piece *The child's mother holds the sharp side of the knife* (1988-89) (Williamson, 2010:37-38).*





**Figure 5.3.** Wölfli, Adolf. *Der San Salvathor* (1992)

*Adolf Wölfli's artworks are often labelled as complex, intricate works synonymous with the Art Brut movement. He himself has also been referred to as an 'outsider artist'. The term 'outsider art' was coined by art critic, Roger Cardinal in 1972 and is applied as the English version of 'art brut'. Wölfli's work also figured prominently in Dubuffet's Art Brut manifesto and collection (Peiry, 2001:313).*

As Rancière avoids linking regimes to particular periods or art styles, the foundation for discerning between them lies in the general understanding and position which art production holds within the moment of its creation, i.e. the extent to which can art influence *le partage du sensible* (Tanke, 2011:76). Rancière (2004:13) phrases this interaction as follows:

Artistic practices are “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. The Platonic proscription of the poets is based on the impossibility.

Thus, in formulating his regimes of art Rancière reconsiders *le partage du sensible* which surrounds and defines art throughout history. In relation to *le partage du sensible* a regime is defined as a “system of principles that allows certain practices to be recognised as art” (Tanke, 2011:74). Rancière does not subscribe to a teleological understanding of art history, however, nor does he aim to reflect on art history as a whole. Furthermore, the nature of the regimes of art questions twentieth-century notions of art history and categories like modernism and postmodernism:

I do not think that the notions of modernity and the avant-garde have been very enlightening when it comes to thinking about the new forms of art that have emerged since the last century or the relations between aesthetics and politics. (Rancière, 2004:20)

Rancière urges the reader to avoid a consideration of art created within a certain timeframe to be inherently associated with the same regime of art. He takes a clear position that all art that is considered modernist should also not be thought of in this way. When considering a regime of art, it is necessary to take into account the identity which art possesses in *le partage du sensible* as well as its interaction with or opposition to the consensus. Tanke (2011:74) puts it as follows: “The point of Rancière’s analyses is in fact to see how different understandings of sense allow or prevent art from distributing and redistributing the sensible.” Rancière’s three regimes, the *ethical regime of art*, the *representative regime of art* and the *aesthetic regime of art*, are based on this point of departure. Each regime structures a specific relationship between words, vision, and affect, indicating how art becomes active or not within the order of appearances more generally.

Rancière’s first regime, the ethical regime, is of limited use in my argument, since it has specific limitations pertaining to the role art plays within the functioning of a community. Rancière bases

this regime on Plato's (c.424/423 – 348/347 BCE) critique of imitation (see Denham, 2012). In the *Republic* (c.375 BCE), Plato argues that the harmonious functioning of a just city can be destabilised by images (ideas) which offer another narrative—possibly undoing the harmony of the city.<sup>33</sup> Rancière (2004:20) states: “In this regime, art is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images.” He continues by explaining that “[t]he entire Platonic polemic against the simulacra of painting, poems, and the stage also falls within this regime (Rancière, 2004:21).” For this reason, new ideas, whether in the form of plastic, literary or auditory images, must be controlled. Through this consideration of the dangers and consequential need to contain art production which threatens the harmony of the city, art is placed under a policed eye which keeps it from engaging with or dissenting with the consensus (Tanke, 2011:76). In as far as Plato's ideas on art within the Greek city-state is concerned, the ethical regime is the regime most directly aligned with a specific historic era, though it is not entirely exclusive to it:

In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities. This question prevents art from individualizing itself as such (Rancière, 2004:21).

Where the ethical regime flows from Plato's critique of mimeses, hindering art's individuality and autonomy, the representative regime develops from the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.335 BCE). Rancière (2004:21) explains the shift in thinking as follows: “The poetic—or representative—regime of the arts breaks away from the ethical regime of images. It identifies the substance of art—or rather of the arts—in the couple *poiēsis/mimesis*.” Plato denied art individuality and participation in the politics of the city but Aristotle grants art certain freedoms within the community and rituals of religion. The power of speech and action which art is afforded by Aristotle became the definition of the Greek tragedy and later again came into use in the *partage du sensible* in the Classic Age of art (early 16<sup>th</sup> century to late 18<sup>th</sup> century) (Rancière, 2004:21).

For Plato art (or specifically poetics) cannot be trusted as it is a mere imitation (art work) of an imitation (life) of the ideal (Kristeller, 1951:512, Denham, 2012:62, Verdenius, 1949:5). Aristotle saw a place for art in the catharsis it can bring to the individual. To him the variety of experience, and the emotions that went along with that experience, contributed to the formation of a well-rounded mind (Husain, 2001:22, Sinclair, 2007:31, Ingarden, 1962:2). As no person has the opportunity to experience all situations and their accompanying emotions, art provides the

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<sup>33</sup> Here we are reminded of the concept of the *polis*, discussed in section 4.3., from the Greek idea of the city which exists as the ideal or utopia. This term, and reference, is implied in Rancière's identification of *la police*, being the power which upholds the consensus within a community.

opportunity to envision a world which you could not experience yourself, but can relate to through emotion. Aristotle does, however, limit the range of subjects that can be addressed by art, seeking to focus on subjects worthy of consideration. In describing this regime, Rancière (2004:22) writes:

I call this regime poetic in the sense that it identifies the arts—what the Classical Age would later call the ‘fine arts’—within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts.

When Aristotle’s ideas again become the centre of art creation in the Classical Age, the systems of the *beaux-arts* and the *belle-lettres* came to be defined. Within these systems art forms were placed and produced in a hierarchy linked to the gravity of emotion and/or thought it could convey to the onlooker. In sixteenth-century Italy a hierarchy of painting, for instance, was developed which remained the standard within European artistic academies until the early nineteenth century (Flemming, 2008:7, Hauser, 1999:9). This hierarchy determined the importance of certain genres, the meaning they could convey and place they could hold in public discourse (Rancière, 2004:22). The hierarchy of importance closely linked genre to size as well, for more highly regarded genres would be produced on large canvasses, diminishing in size as one moves lower down the hierarchy. In guiding artistic endeavours for several centuries, this hierarchy considered the importance of artworks in the following descending order: history painting, including historically important, religious, mythological, or allegorical subjects; portrait painting; genre painting depicting everyday life; landscape and cityscape art; animal painting; and lastly, still life.<sup>34</sup> When created within these parameters, art is understood to have certain desired cathartic influences that stem from personal reflection as well as fulfilling a positive ethical and social function. Through these principles, art of the representative regime is created in order to convey speech (*logos*); a message which requires the viewer to take the necessary time to understand and process it. Here it can be noted that the representative regime’s *mimesis* has definite guidelines on the relationship of *poiesis* (a manner of making) and *aisthesis* (the effect it produces) (Tanke, 2011:76)—as for instance in the hierarchy of painting. Although art becomes autonomous through this regime, it is quickly subsumed into *le partage du sensible*. Rancière (2004:22) describes it as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière does not only consider painting in his writing on art, but also other art forms such as literature and film, always reflecting on the general conditions which allows or prevents art from taking part in the distribution and redistribution of the sensible (Tanke, 2011:75).

A regime of visibility is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making. ... [T]he logic of representation, ... enters into a relationship of global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations. The representative primacy of action over characters or of narration over description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the very primacy of the art of speaking, of speech in actuality, all of these elements figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community.

Rancière's reference here to "a fully hierarchical vision of the community" reminds us of the basis on which dissensus comes about: i.e. as political reaction to a hierarchy which excludes (cf. Chapter 4). What he implies is that the representative regime aligns itself with the consensus of the community (*polis*), by adhering to the hierarchy which is upheld by, and in turn upholds, *le partage du sensible*. This *le partage du sensible* stands in stark contrast with the aesthetic revolution which would soon come into being to give birth to modernist thought regarding aesthetics.





**Figure 5.4.** Unknown. *The Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden.* (c. 1300)

*Medieval art, especially European art of the Middle Ages resulted as a direct influence from religion with Christian iconography at the forefront. Nearly all the works of art starting from the Medieval period were commissioned by religious authorities or secular leaders. The visual culture of Medieval art strongly conveys the visual rhetoric of power on the one hand (the church), and the culture of a society on the other. In reiterating the convention that religious art was particularly useful for those unable to read, it is important to note that the representation was almost entirely commissioned 'purposefully' to prompt religious submission (Sand, 2014:245).*



**Figure 5.5.** Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1483-86)

*The Virgin of the rocks was one of the first examples of an Italian Renaissance artist abandoning the halo depicted alongside the holy figures. This shift represents the antithetical symbolism of Medieval art to the realistic representation of the Renaissance (Berger, 1998:42). The representation of divinity and its convergence with realism shows the shift in visual history. Alberti ([1435], as quoted by Levy, 2019:55) argues in his inaugural treatise on painting that the goal of 'visual history' is the "representation of significant actions of man and god" and stated that this was the pivotal task of all artists.*





**Figure 5.6.** Rigaud, Hyacinthe. *Louis XIV* (1701)

*The portrait of Louis XIV is often regarded as Rigaud's best known portrait. The representational use of majestic posture, rich draperies and impressive décor is some of the key elements often used in baroque depictions of powerful figures. Baroque representation is often distinguished by its dramatic, emotionally-laden depictions coinciding with qualities of grandeur, sensuous richness, vitality and complex compositions. There were however three main tendencies of representation, mainly influenced by religion (once again) and the bourgeois aristocratic exuberance. The first was the emergence of the Counter-Reformation – opting for a propagandistic stance. The second was the depiction of absolute monarchies as well as art patrons ranging from powerful families to prominent middle class figures. The third reflected the renewed fascination with nature (science), travel and the general expansion of human intellectual horizons (Rietbergen, 2019: 65-66).*





**Figure 5.7.** Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (1818)

*What distinguished the Romantic representation from that of other visual histories is the importance which is placed on individuals who, inspired by the emotive aspect of imagination, perceive and order the world as experienced through their own senses. Influenced by the philosophical arguments of British empiricism or Kantian idealism, the conclusion drawn by the Romantic is the same: the world can only be viewed as it is perceived by us through our own perception/senses and artists with their heightened emotional intuitiveness are ideal to reveal this truth through artistic representation (Pirie, 1994:234-235). The German painter Caspar David Friedrich said (as quoted by Court, 2016): “The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him.” The empiricist Edmund Burke explains this profound self-awareness and emotional experience from nature as “the sublime” (see Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1757]).*

Rancière argues that the relationship between mimesis, poesis and aisthesis reflects the representative regime's underlying conception of who should be represented, in what way they should be represented and how artistic arrangements would be received (Tanke, 2011:77). This implies that there are specific parameters for creating art, with specific responses connected to each. For Rancière, it is easy to evaluate art from the representative regime, because artworks centre around a fable. One needs only to determine if the work has successfully conveyed the story, remarks Rancière (2004:22).

Rancière's disdain for hierarchy is obvious in this understanding of the representative regime, but that is not the only critique he has to offer. This hierarchy underwrites a *le partage du sensible* which presupposes human nature and leaves no place for art to enact *la répartition du sensible*. This preconception of social nature creates a hierarchy of subject matter, reflecting and portraying persons and situation deemed worthy of the attention of the artist as well as the audience. Tanke (2011:64) describes it as follows:

The representative regime is thus a distribution of the sensible that determines what can be the subject of art, into what genre it should be placed, and how it is to be depicted, with reference to the more general distribution of capacities. It is in general a system that outlines the conditions according to which imitation can be recognised as distinct from other ways of doing and making, and the source of a normativity that defines the forms appropriate for the representation of specific subjects.

As certain members of a community come into dissensus in order to be emancipated from a hierarchy from which they are excluded, so Rancière finds in certain artistic endeavours the regime of art which aspires to achieve this same emancipation from its role and definition within the distribution of the sensible. He calls this regime the aesthetic regime of art. Rancière's conceptualisation of the aesthetic regime contains the central break that aesthetics proper makes with Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of art. For this reason, much of the aesthetic regime's philosophy flows from ideas regarding art and taste, as conceptualised and applied since the time of Kant and his contemporaries. The concept of aesthetic action grounds Rancière's aesthetic regime, specifically in the opportunity it grants for emancipation of the individual or group.

### 5.3. Emancipation through aesthetics

I call this regime aesthetic because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products.  
(Rancière, 2004:22)

For Rancière, art's power to promote egalitarianism is vested in the cultural transformation brought about by the "aesthetic revolution" at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century (Tanke, 2011:73). Here one notices the obvious link between the history of ideas (philosophical thought) and theorisation on aesthetics and Rancière's attraction to it; within aesthetics is embedded the ability to bring about equality. Tanke (2011:60) explains that, for Rancière, the aesthetic regime "engenders a form of equality in its production and reception" which hints at a "life reconfigured." This implied reconfiguration reflects Rancière's view that art has political power, because art has the capacity to question *le partage du sensible*. Rancière phrases this idea as follows: "The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres." Rancière argues that the aesthetic regime, or aesthetic art, is a far-reaching transformation that took place within Western culture over the last three centuries (Tanke, 2011:73). The roots of Rancière's ideas on the emancipatory abilities of aesthetics can be traced to Kant (1724-1804) – and his works *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

Kant lays the foundation for Rancière's conception of the kind of aesthetics that politics must disrupt as well as the kind of aesthetics Rancière sees as synonymous with the political event and the dissensus which it can illicit (Wolfe, 2006:1). Panagia (2018:3) explains that Rancière "put on display how aesthetic practices that transform perception and sensibility are also political practices of emancipation, solidarity, and participation, and vice versa."

Rancière considers the relationship between art and life differently from the way it is situated within the representative regime of art (Tank, 2011:73). In many ways the representative regime is similar to French classicism. Within this framework certain types of representational art are held in higher regard than others, making way for the idea of "high" and "low" subject matter. Rancière (2004:21) states:

The mimetic principle is not at its core a normative principle stating that art must make copies resembling their models. It is first of all a pragmatic principle that isolates, within the general domain of the arts (ways of doing and making), certain particular forms of art that produce specific entities called imitations.

Thus Rancière argues that art created within the representative regime is created according to a predetermined relationship between art and life, with art as a representation of life. Artists, such as those in traditions like Realism and Romanticism (Flemming, 2008:7), started to question the hierarchy of art by introducing themes and subject matter that did not follow the “rules” of the art academies. This gradual defiance of representational hierarchy brought into question how art is related to life, but more importantly, how art is different from life. Tanke (2011:73) explains that “[a]esthetic art is a rejection of the idea that things have a single and definitive meaning.” Through this rejection aesthetic art questions the idea that certain sensible things (as being able to sense through the senses) have inherent meaning (sense of meaning) (Tanke, 2011:73). Corcoran (2010:15) states: “What Rancière in fact shows is that the freedom of the aesthetic [...] is based upon the same principle of equality that is enacted in political demonstration.”

The use of the term *aesthetics* needs, once again, to be situated within the frame of reference which Rancière ascribes to it, rather than being connected with a general concept of an awareness of the appearance of art. Rancière (2004:13) starts off by explaining that “[a]esthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of a *priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.” Notably, he (Rancière, 2004:22) continues to define aesthetics as follows:

In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.

One could argue, as does Corcoran (2010:15), that dissensual disruption of domination (within Western society) is embedded in the time of the French Revolution, with its separation from the strictures of tradition and historical rule. Here art is connected to the promise of a new world and a new life for individuals and the community. According to Wolfe (2006:1) Rancière argues that politics happens not only through the disruption of a certain aesthetic organisation of sense experience but through the eruption of a distinct aesthetic. What this implies is that the political

action against *le partage du sensible* is rooted in an aesthetic organisation (regarding the challenge of the consensus) and that this aesthetic thinking is visualised *through* a unique aesthetic appearance.

Rancière (2004:24) identifies Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) theory of the “aesthetic state” (as he describes it in his publication *Letters on Aesthetic Education* of 1759) as the ultimate example of deferment of *le partage du sensible*: “The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself. Moreover, it is the moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity.”

In taking Schiller's concept of the aesthetic state as a departure for the nature of the aesthetic regime, Rancière (2004:10) explains: “Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought's effectivity).” As examples for the type of art which embodies the aesthetic thinking that challenges *le partage du sensible* Rancière (2004:25) references, among others, the thinking and art creation of the Futurists and Constructivists. He identifies these movements for their dissensus against the establishment, and art's role within this dissensus. He sees within these movements a declaration of the end of art's identification in relation to communal life (Rancière, 2004:25). For this reason, Rancière (2004:22) can state: “I call this regime aesthetic because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products.”

Rancière (2004:27) argues that the aesthetic revolution produced a new idea of political revolution. Within this political revolution is vested the material realisation of a common humanity which still only exists as an idea (Rancière, 2004:27). For Rancière, says Corcoran (2010:6-7), “politics” is an activity that sees speech engaged by marginalised voices towards the subversion of the status quo and the re-establishment of norms in the “social space”. The “common humanity” which the aesthetic revolution conjures up in the minds of the community stands in contrast to the actual community and the hierarchy upheld therein. So, the sensible (consensus within the community) is reconfigured to include a broader range of subjects (i.e. the *de-mos*). Connecting this premise with art creation from the nineteenth century onward, there is a noticeable shift in the way that art is understood, and where the centre of power over art creation lies. Here, as Rancière argues above (Rancière, 2004:27), the aesthetic regime brings about dissensus, which frees art

creation from the bounds of the representative regime, which up until then determined the distribution of the sensible.

Rancière (2004:13) comes to the conclusion that on the basis of this primary aesthetics, “it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.” In this, Rancière clearly sees certain artworks (as but one possible *form of visibility*) as endowed with aesthetic principles, which supports emancipation, and these artworks belong to the aesthetic regime.

The problem which arises from this understanding of Rancière’s definition of regimes within art, is that the Kitsch movement—notably aiming to continue a “classical art” tradition without technical innovation or reflection on the time within which it is made—may be argued to belong to the representative regime. Are we consequently to understand that Nerdrum and his followers are precluded from questioning the consensus which exists within the artworld? Does their possible membership to the representative regime imply that they are not able to bring dissensus about in order to subvert the hierarchy that marginalises them and the works they produce?

## 5.4. Dissensus through the representative

Rancière (2010:27) states in his third thesis, from his *Ten Theses on Politics* (Rancière, 2010:27), that “the ‘freedom’ of the people that constitutes the axiom of democracy has as its real content the rupture of the axiomatic of domination” that causes a divide “between a capacity to command and a capacity to be commanded”. He therefore implies that true democracy eradicates the structural hierarchy of being grouped into a role of leader or follower. All citizens are granted the same rights and therefore the same position within democratic society. For this reason, all citizens have the right and power to speak, especially when their voice is used to bring attention to the fact that some are not included in the whole. The previous section elucidated the philosophy and construction of Rancière’s regimes of art. Within Rancière’s body of work the continuing search and campaign for complete democracy is encapsulated in the notion of the aesthetic regime as a force which engenders *la répartition du sensible*.

Rancière’s understanding of art and art history is not one of linear historical development, but rather a continuous reflection on the political role which art plays in the consensus of a given collective (cf. Rancière, 2004). Still, the aesthetic regime is connected, to a large degree, with developments in aesthetic understanding which came into being at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The absolute autonomy that art gained during this time forms the basis for contemporary thinking on the power of art, i.e. its political power to bring about dissensus. Rancière’s understanding and description of the aesthetic regime, as well as the philosophical roots of his ideas in the thought of Kant and Schiller, among others, paint a clear and logical picture of the legitimacy of this theory and primacy of this regime. The position this regime takes in opposition of the representative regime also supports Rancière’s esteem for the aesthetic regime, as it clearly debunks the hierarchy—and therefore undemocratic nature—of art embedded within the aforementioned.

The representative regime’s correlation with the classical art academy stands as one of the main features of hierarchy in the politics of art which the aesthetic regime devalues (Rancière, 2004:22). This leaves us with an issue in understanding the true position and dissensual ability of the Kitsch movement, precisely because the Kitsch movement is rooted in Classical painting. In order to reach an understanding of the power of dissensus situated within the aims and production of the Kitsch movement, the relatability of the movement to both the representative and aesthetic regimes must be ascertained.

Considering the foundational principles of Nerdrum's movement, one of the first and most important aspects of the Kitsch movement is the primacy given to representational art. Nerdrum and his students are in the first instance proponents of the continuation of classical figurative painting, dedicating immense time, training and thought to the development of technique. These techniques include what is considered to be *classical* art education, including figure studies, copying and replicating from nature, and learning all there is to know about their medium—to the extent of mixing and creating their own oil paints from raw material (Shiner, 2001:10). Furthermore, Nerdrum takes obvious exception to modernist thinking regarding innovation in art creation. He devalues the centrality of conceptual art over technically masterful work when, for example, he refers to modernist artworks as “intellectual scribble” (Nerdrum, 2011c:31).

The use of the word *representative* presents the first issue. The possible understanding, or confusion, this term holds for the relation between Rancière's regime and Nerdrum's painting, should therefore be considered. As noted earlier in this thesis, the use of the term *representational painting* is used synonymously with the terms *figurative painting* and *classical painting*, as referring to a mimetic painterly style which aims to represent images which reflect the visual world. When the term is used in relation to the works created by Nerdrum and his students, it is used to describe the physical appearance of the paintings, drawings, etc., which these artists produce. The previous section shed light on the specific understanding behind the *representative* properties Rancière attributes to the representative regime. Rancière (2004:22) explains that the representation of this regime is embedded in the way art represents the consensus of the community, and also how this consensus (of both the community and of art) predetermines the position of the individuals which make up the community and its proper functioning. In fact, Rancière (2004:21) specifically states that the mimetic principle is not where the power of the *la police* is situated within the representative regime. For these reasons, we can see that the works created by the painters of the Kitsch movement cannot automatically be grouped under the definition of Rancière's representative regime. Yet, this is not the only aspect that questions the positioning of the Kitsch movement within the regimes of art.

Nerdrum insists that Kitsch painting holds at its core the representation of the eternal, dismissing what he calls modernism's never-ending race to discover and explore the new (Nerdrum, 2011b:27). These two major features of painting within the Kitsch movement—the continuation of classical figurative painting and perpetuation of established forms of art creation—seems to indicate a possible positioning of this movement within Rancière's representative regime. Nerdrum's persistent antagonism toward modernism and specifically the importance of art created



by the avant-garde, paints a picture of modernist art as forever innovative and new—an idea which might tempt art enthusiasts to understand this “definition” of modernist art, and its departure from figurative painting, as belonging in its entirety to Rancière’s aesthetic regime. Rancière (2004:20) counters such an assumption outright by stating that the innovation which is present in some modernist and avant-garde works of art should not be taken as designating all of the works ascribed to these ideas as belonging to the aesthetic regime.

Nerdrum’s simplified villainization of modernist art may not find an echo in Rancière’s writing, but Rancière does not position modernist art (or any era of art) as being the pinnacle of aesthetic practice—although he does find much aesthetic thought connected with the idea of modernism. For Rancière, modernism’s break with the past is not so much a definition of the appearance of art, but more an attitude of resistance to the way a hierarchy predetermines the position of everyone in the community.

They actually confuse two very different things: the historicity specific to a regime of the arts in general and the decisions to break with the past or anticipate the future that take place within this regime. (Rancière, 2004:20)

Continuing on these aspects of dissimilarity, there are some more features of Kitsch painting which do not align with the definition of the representative regime. First, the hierarchy of painting which is central to classical art production seems to have been deliberately skewed in Nerdrum’s oeuvre. Although Nerdrum and his followers create work that often recalls or mimics classical art, the pre-modernist rules and requirements for the subject and size of paintings is not necessarily present in the Kitsch movement’s paintings. Large canvasses in classical art were earmarked for subjects considered to be of greater significance—simultaneously predetermining the viewer’s reaction and understanding of the artwork. This hierarchy of representation seems to have been foregone in Nerdrum’s teaching, as large canvasses no longer refer to actual or mythological tales from history. An argument can be made, as Nerdrum does himself (2018), for a watershed which is noticeable in Nerdrum’s work of the 1980s, perhaps most obviously in the painting *Twilight* (Figure. 2.24). In this work the vulgar depiction of a person defecating forms a stark contrast with Nerdrum’s classical technique. Instead of an oil painting on a large canvas of an important historic, biblical or mythological event the viewer is confronted with the backside of a woman crouching in a forest to relieve herself.

Neither the identity of the woman nor the depicted event seems to hold any significance, overt reference or importance, in the traditional sense of considering figurative painting. Still, great

technical care is given to the creation of the image. It is imposing in size too, covering a canvas of roughly five square meters. Once again, Nerdrum—who is not known for his subtlety—simultaneously shocks and fascinates the viewer with this unexpected, crude thematic depiction. The onlooker could be tempted to note the correlation between this work's depiction of an unrefined, unimportant moment in time, conveyed on a grand scale, to realist works such as *The Stonebreakers* (Figure 5.8.) by Gustav Courbet (1819-1877). To be sure, some correlation between the two works could be conjured up. Both undoubtedly challenge classical consensus of the importance and hierarchy of subject matter. This gives the two works, specifically within their own time, an air of revolt, even if Nerdrum's revolt (and possible, deliberate mimicking of the realists' revolt against academic art) carries less weight than that of the nineteenth century realists. This attempt at revolt should at this point alert us to the possibility for dissensual thinking which is linked to Rancière's aesthetic regime.



**Figure 5.8.** Courbet, Gustave. *The Stonebreakers* (1849)

Courbet's *Stonebreakers* stands as a beacon of a change in thought in Western society, captured in oil painting. The change in thought alluded to in this case, is connected with post-French-revolutionary thought and its challenge of hierarchy, specifically in support of those who are marginalised by society—in this case, the poor. For this reason, the universal poor depicted in Courbet's work—spending the duration of their lives doing backbreaking, unrewarding and unfulfilling work to merely survive—become the focus in this large oil painting. Courbet uses the medium and standards of the elite to give voice to those who have no voice within the community. This instance appears to achieve that which Rancière holds most dear—a form of democracy. Where only those of historical or religious importance once had the privilege to be depicted in this way, this exclusion is eradicated by Courbet's depiction of nameless peasants doing ungrateful work. Courbet's work was met with disdain and ridicule, because it questioned the consensus. In effect, it brought about *la répartition du sensible* within the art academy of France (which would gradually radiate outward further within Western artistic tradition). The realists were the forerunners of modernism, which was to follow and flourish within a few decades thereafter (Rancière, 2004:20).

Considering this interpretation of Courbet's work, some questions arise regarding the work of Nerdrum. The first is: Does *Twilight's* similarity to *The Stonebreakers*, in its approach to the use of oil painting on large canvas to depict unglorified themes, indicate a similar act of dissensus? The fact that *Twilight* presents an obvious challenge to Classical hierarchies of subject matter in oil painting has already been established. Apart from Rancière's contempt for hierarchies, and his ongoing campaign for their eradication, another important aspect of his method of dissensus is the importance of giving a voice to those who do not have a voice to speak up for themselves. I have suggested how Courbet appropriated the vehicle of the elite art academies to represent the marginalised poor—upsetting the consensus and initiating a complete turnaround in the meaning of and approach to art creation. Nerdrum's painting, however, does not appear to present a similar revolutionary act in favour of the excluded. The woman's bowel movement, captured on a grand scale, does not overtly suggest the victimisation or marginalisation of a specific group or an exclusion of some from the functioning of society through a hierarchal system.

Here I suggest taking the importance and role of the time within which these works were created into account—as Rancière's development of his regimes firstly considers the way in which art reflects, interacts, comments, represent, and contests the zeitgeist (*consensus / le partage du sensible*) of the time within which it is created. Courbet, a harbinger of modernist art, obviously dissented against the classical art academy and simultaneously visualised an issue within society

which had had little support up until then. I posit that Nerdrum's work does have similar attributes, but focusses on the marginalisation of a group present in the artworld itself more than the economic marginalisation of a group of suffering people within a time and place. What I mean by this is the following: where Courbet uses representational art to represent the outcasts of nineteenth-century Western socio-economic community, Nerdrum uses representational art to represent the outcasts within the contemporary art community.

The woman crouching in a forest in *Twilight* may not in herself be an object or representation of hierarchal oppression, but Nerdrum's painting—a figurative, highly masterful oil painting in the style of the old masters—does present an instance of speaking up by a group who has not been permitted an opportunity to speak, i.e. those artists who are dismissed from contemporary significant art society because they paint in an “out-dated” style. The subject of the painting is not the act of dissensus, but the painting in itself (specifically in its elaborate reference to baroque painting). Within the context of the late twentieth century, figurative, representational painting based on the methods and approaches of the old masters are considered to be kitsch because they do not fit into the consensus of constant renewal and conceptual thinking which typifies the *le partage du sensible* of contemporary art. Thus Nerdrum's work does not represent dissensus in its subject matter; it is dissensual in its very being.

Because the avant-garde (cf. Greenberg, 1939) positioned representational art as tasteless, uninformed, and intellectually vapid kitsch, the very existence of an oil painting on such a grand scale, produced by one who has spent decades learning and perfecting the craft of the old masters is in itself a challenge to artistic consensus. By simultaneously evading the trap of replicating classical art academies' hierarchy of subject matter, a poignant, albeit crude, point is made. I would go as far as to venture an interpretation of *Twilight's* subject matter as continuing this obstinate revolt. Nerdrum's experience of the regard within which representational painting has been held for almost a century, could be described as comparable to the value of excrement. Such a reading could further support an argument for dissensus in Nerdrum's work, as he brings to light the oppression and devaluation of a group of artists and their work through its own subject matter.

This interpretation of one of Nerdrum's works as an instance of dissensus should, however, not be taken up as a signifier which groups all of his work under the umbrella of dissensual painting as possibly being part of the aesthetic regime. Let us consider some of his earlier works, specifically (*Refugees at Sea*, Figure 2.23. & *The Murder of Andreas Baader*, Figure 2.9.). These

works, equally imposing in size and mastery, present a different approach to the role of subject matter. Both works clearly reference classical painting. *The Arrest* is a homage to Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (Figure 2.10.), in its replication of layout colour and use of light. *Refugees at Sea* shows similarities with Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633) (Figure 5.9.) as well as Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) (Figure 5.10.), although being much more static than the two classical paintings.



**Figure 5.9.** Van Rijn, Rembrandt. *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633)





Figure 5.10. Géricault, Théodore. *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19)



These classical painting references traceable in Nerdrum's twentieth-century works are large canvases (excluding *The storm on the sea of Galilee*, which is of more modest size). Furthermore, the canvases depict historical or biblical occurrences. It can be argued that these works are in step with representational painting of their time, and therefore align with Rancière's description of the representational regime. This means that the subjects depicted held specific value within the art tradition in which they were created. Additionally, these values directed the way in which they were received and understood. Biblical representations commanded reverence. Caravaggio's dramatic use of light and colour exemplary of the Italian Counter-Reformation baroque style envelops the viewer when entering the chapel where this huge fresco is painted. The more intimate nature of the smaller *The storm on the sea of Galilee* reflects the domestic baroque style of the Netherlands in this era while still powerful conveying the sublime power of nature (and God). These works, and their themes, are meant to invoke specific feelings of awe in the Christian viewer. *The Raft of the Medusa*, however, approaches its subject matter differently. This dramatic work from the Romantic period, with its imposing size and urgent dynamism initially comes to the viewer disguised as a heroic portrait of a historical event (as was popular around the same time in Neo-Classical painting). On closer inspection of the canvas's surface one realises that the starving, dying and dead figures, arranged on a dynamic cross which indicates force and movement, are everything but forceful or mobile; they are hopelessly trapped and at the mercy of the ocean.

Although this depiction recalls an actual historic event, this remembrance is not invoked to praise or regale in the circumstances of the event, but rather to criticise and question it. The events depicted in this work recalls a shipwreck in which 147 people were left to survive on the ocean on makeshift rafts. Under atrocious conditions for almost two weeks most of these sailors died, leaving only 15 alive. The event, although historic, is tragic and upsetting rather than celebratory. I would argue that Géricault hereby initiates a crossing between the lines of Rancière's representational and aesthetic regimes. In painting a historical event on the scale and size customary for such depictions in this time, it seems that Géricault continues the hierarchy of painting typical of the classical artworld. Conversely, the subject matter (and critique against an incompetent captain whose actions cost many their lives) is arguably an instance of *la répartition du sensible*. Géricault upsets the consensus of history painting, and drew both praise and scandal when it was revealed at the 1819 Paris Salon (the "temple" of classical art education).

Nerdrum's reference to this painting in *Refugees at Sea*, however, does not reach the same climax: neither in visual force or dissensual practice. It displays clear talent in its reference to the

influence of Rembrandt, but this does not help to lift the work to a level of the classical works it strives to emulate. Admittedly, Nerdrum himself later described this work as “cloying” (cf. section 2.3.)—showing his own awareness of the flaccid impact of the work when considered within a larger context of art creation.

The same argument can be made about *The Arrest*, as it mimics a baroque work with expert painterly mastery, but carries no artistic weight in its own right. Remembering that Nerdrum took a noticeably and self-acknowledged different direction in his figurative painting and representation from the 1980s onwards. *Twilight*, discussed earlier, marks this change in direction. His works hereafter no longer mimic old masterpieces but strive to be visually significant in their own right. It is almost two decades after this change in direction that Nerdrum delivers his public Kitsch manifesto. Here he attempts to bring together what he has learnt over many decades of studying and adoring classical painting. The dissensual act of moving away from subject matter associated with the representative regime, leads me to argue that the works specifically created within the Kitsch movement forms part of the aesthetic regime because of their dissensual value. This dissensual value is present in a break from the hierarchy of Classical subject matter as well as in break away from the perceived hierarchy of the artworld.

## 5.5. Concluding remarks

The principle of superiority is ruined if it has to be explained to inferiors why they are inferior.  
Rancière (1999:140)

This chapter questions the apparent dissensus which the Kitsch movement brings about, by redefining the understanding of Kitsch and the work associated with it. The reason for this questioning derives from Rancière's distinction between the aesthetic regime of art and the representative regime of art. Rancière argues that art created within the aesthetic regime is the only art which can bring about dissensus.

Nerdrum represents a number of art practitioners who experience themselves as marginalised within the contemporary art sphere. Kant's introduction of new thoughts during the Enlightenment, or one might argue *la répartition du sensible*, has reached a point where those, like Nerdrum, who associate with aspects of historic painting styles, feel that there is no longer a place for them within contemporary art. In order for them to break away from this perceived hierarchy I argue for the need to bring about a redistribution of the sensible—i.e. upsetting the consensus within the artworld which is the root of their feeling of marginalisation—by opposing the nature of the artworld itself. In this chapter I argued that Nerdrum opposes the contemporary consensus of devaluing figurative art by declaring that he and his students are not artists but Kitsch painters. In this definition he does not only deny art its hierarchy but also repositions kitsch as Kitsch, thus redefining the understanding thereof and also the position it holds within society.

Rancière continuously reiterates that art and politics are defined by the equality that they pursue. They cannot, however, be reduced to being the same thing, as they offer unique aspects within the process of dissensus, or in the questioning of the consensus (Corcoran, 2010:3). The question I ask in retort to this basic understanding of true democracy in art and politics, is whether Rancière's regimes actually prevents the Kitsch movement from being a force for dissensus, or whether the Kitsch movement's bid for equality overshadows its representative roots, thus allowing for the Kitsch movement to be included in the aesthetic regime.

Through readings of Rancière's definitions of the two regimes and Nerdrum's painting produced over many years, I discussed some correlations between Nerdrum's work and the representative

regime and aesthetic regime. From this discussion it transpired that Nerdrum's early work, which clearly appropriated the appearance and subject matter of classical paintings, would appear to align with Rancière's definition of the representational regime. The similarities between the aspects of this regime and the selected works show that, although Nerdrum's work is technically exceptional, its reliance on older masterworks prevents them from achieving dissensus within the artworld. His later works, though, depart from the hierarchy of Classical painting and enters a new world unrelated to that which the viewer has seen before. Although the teaching, technique and love for the old masters is still present in Nerdrum's later works, their autonomy and revolt leads me to conclude that the ideals and works of the Kitsch movement can be considered as part of Rancière's aesthetic regime.

Rancière cautiously points out that his regimes of art cannot directly be linked to periods of Western history or specific artistic styles. Rancière cautions the viewer through this statement not to group all work from a period or style under any given regime. The same goes for an understanding of the work of the painters within the Kitsch movement. Nerdrum may have achieved dissensus in some of his work, as has some of his students, but this does not ensure that all Kitsch painting brings about *la répartition du sensible*.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Concluding remarks *The never-ending cycle of dissensus*

#### 6.1. Introduction

This thesis launched a critical exploration into Norwegian “master” painter Odd Nerdrum’s conceptualisation of the Kitsch movement as a possible form of French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s theory of dissensus. I ultimately argue that Nerdrum’s construction and total embodiment of the Kitsch movement as a political act aimed towards an artworld (be it one which only exists within his own definition and from which he feels cast out), hints at an instance of Rancierian dissensus. I argue that the identification of the Kitsch movement’s challenge to the structure of hierarchy it perceives in and so-called proper conduct of the artworld highlights a tension of exclusion with regards to the politics of art.

These two European men’s work are situated in different scholarly fields, but have much in common. These similarities are especially focused around how they approach the politics of art and the artworld, both focussing on the eradication of exclusion. I show that Rancière’s constant advocacy for democracy can be identified in Nerdrum’s search for figurative painting to be granted a position of more prominence in the artworld. Rancière’s writing on opposing hierarchy which predetermines the role of the members of a community is also argued to be central to Nerdrum’s work.

This study aimed to unlock the interpretative possibilities of using Rancière’s theory of dissensus, whilst furthering a theoretical exploration of Nerdrum’s Kitsch movement. I argued that the Kitsch movement can be regarded as an instance of dissensual action within the artworld, but also as a new hierarchy which could illicit further dissensus.

This concluding chapter offers a summary of the main arguments of the preceding chapters of this project as well as final conclusions and reflective comments. I close with an overview of possibilities for further research that was uncovered during the course of this research.

## 6.2. Framing the thesis

**Chapter One** introduced the subject matter of this thesis by presenting the main scope of this project and the issues it aims to address. It also offered a brief introduction to the conceptualisation of Odd Nerdrum's Kitsch movement as well as Jacques Rancière's method of dissensus. The departure for the study was shown to be rooted in the possible similarities between the aims of the Kitsch movement and a dissensual mind-set. Nerdrum's position as a highly technical, figurative, representational painter, working in what he experiences as an artworld which focuses on concept over "masterly technique" prompts him to position himself as the outcast of the contemporary artworld. He is not alone in this sentiment and emblematically reflects the voice of those (figurative painters) who feel marginalised by the art community. The act of disagreement aligns with an action central to Rancière's definition of dissensus; Rancière (cf. 1999) argues that the self-identification and subsequent protest by a group who is marginalised within a society begins the process of dissensus.

The initial comparison between the Kitsch movement and Rancière's definition of dissensus was questioned because of the further importance of Rancière's (2004) aesthetic regime—as the harbinger of dissensual action—and its possible exclusion of the type of work created by the painters within the Kitsch movement. This set the stage for a deeper understanding of Rancière's regimes of art, along with an investigation into Nerdrum's oeuvre in order to determine the formation of the Kitsch movement as an instance of dissensus.

**Chapter Two** set out to introduce and position Nerdrum as a contemporary painter, simultaneously considering his biography as well as his mind-set towards the artworld. The chapter started off by contextualising Nerdrum's upbringing, education and career. This biographical positioning was then brought into relation with Nerdrum's own experience of marginalisation, and his consequential antagonism toward modernist thinking and the artworld—an artificial and almost fictional concept of the artworld which he has created in order to position himself against it. Finally, Nerdrum's persona, writing and art were connected to the intense, cult-like following he has amassed over the last six decades. His devoted following of artists, writers and teachers, has shown that Nerdrum's influence does not only extend to the creation of the Kitsch movement. His personal experience and philosophical views of art and figurative painting

has also extended to include a fluctuating group of individuals from the artworld who subscribe and are loyal to his ideas and ideals.

From here, **Chapter Three** presented an exploration into the historical and theoretical conceptualisation of the idea of kitsch, within the Western art tradition. The parameters of this exploration were aligned with Nerdrum's arguments regarding the influence of modernist thinking on art creation over the last century and a half. For this reason, the modernist idea of the avant-garde as the opposite to kitsch—as famously theorised by Clement Greenberg (1939)—was situated as the central antagonist to Nerdrum's personal aims as a representational, figurative painter (as Nerdrum ignores any further development in artistic thinking further than the modernist ideas from his youth). Furthermore, Nerdrum's utterances regarding the detrimental influence of Emmanuel Kant's (1790) philosophies on Western art were taken under consideration in the identification of a possible hierarchy within the artworld. Having outlined and aligned these developments with Nerdrum's selective thinking and personal experience, I came to the conclusion that his creation of and discourse on the Kitsch movement was an instance of the marginalised figurative painter's (among others') resistance against the accepted understanding of the functioning of the artworld (even if the imagined in-group to which the marginalised are the out-group is one of their own imaginative creation). My conclusion regarding this positioning of marginalisation brought the question of the Kitsch movement's relatability to the idea of dissensus to the fore again.

The question of considering the Kitsch movement as an instance of dissensus was taken up in **Chapter Four** through a critical reading of Jacques Rancière's theorisation of dissensus. Here, the role-players identified and defined by Rancière—namely; *le politique*, *la politique*, *la police* and *le partition de sensible*—were sought to be defined and understood within the context of dissensus. Through the identification of the function and nature of these role-player I was able to compare the role-players in Nerdrum's Kitsch movement to Rancière's method of dissensus. Following this explication of Rancière's ideas in comparison with the Kitsch movement, I preliminarily showed the alignment between the role-players of the Kitsch movement and Rancière's dissensus. In conclusion, this alignment was questioned when Rancière's definition of the *regimes of art*, and their role in defining art within the act of dissensus, presented themselves as further detail in the understanding of Rancière's work.

Although Chapter Four brought the aims of the Kitsch movement into relation with the concept of dissensus, the importance of the aesthetic regime—as Rancière's sole vehicle for dissensus—

was propounded upon in **Chapter 5**. This investigation focussed on the possibility that the aesthetic regime, as conceptualised by Rancière, does not recognise the works of Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement as able to act as an agent for dissensus, because of its possible alignment with the representative regime (which does not and cannot, according to Rancière's thinking, act as dissensus). Through an analysis of Rancière's regimes of art, and the comparability of Nerdrum's work (as a representative of and ambassador for the Kitsch movement) I argued for the individual consideration of Nerdrum's works, as his oeuvre shows different moments of dissensual thinking. I argued that, although much of Nerdrum's later work shows strong dissensual thinking, earlier works, are more closely aligned with Rancière definition of the representative regime.

Continuing the critical consideration of both Nerdrum's work and Rancière's theories, I questioned the possibility for the further need for dissensus. First, Nerdrum's "standards of Kitsch" were shown to, ironically, instate another form of hierarchy within art creation. This hierarchy is especially evident when considering Nerdrum's argument for and specifically the differentiation between the terms high Kitsch and low Kitsch. I suggested that this hierarchy, when measured against the principles of Rancièrian dissensus, elicits another dissensus. A dissensus within a dissensus occurs in opposition to this consensus within the Kitsch movement. Along the same vein of dissensual action, I considered Rancière's regimes of art as possibly reflecting another consensual hierarchy. Although Rancière does not present these regimes in hierarchal order, the fact remains that certain works are not considered to belong to certain regimes of art. I argued that such a consideration could point to an ironic institution of a hierarchy of regimes. The creation of another hierarchy would counter Rancière's principle for equality.

### 6.3. False dissensus

My research was born of an interest and curiosity of the beautiful works created by Odd Nerdrum and some of his more acclaimed students—specifically that of the Italian Roberto Ferri (born 1978) and the Chilean Guillermo Lorca (born 1984). These two very recent students of the Norwegian master do not actively promote themselves as Kitsch painters, however. Nevertheless, my interest in their work led me to Nerdrum and his discourse on Kitsch.



In attempting to understand the position Nerdrum so vehemently takes against “Art” I was gradually shepherded toward the method of dissensus. Understanding Rancière’s theorisation on politics and destabilising hierarchy soon proved to be the more potent and significant aspect of this thesis and its eventual purpose. The initial point of departure, Nerdrum and his movement, has essentially become a single instance within the artworld which can be considered and measured against Rancière’s work. In this endeavour much of what is central to the Kitsch movement’s ethos was taken in the light of how Nerdrum presents it, as fact. This approach served to create links between the beliefs and experiences that guide the movement, and how they are relatable to the elements of dissensus. So, for instance, Rancière’s *police* was equated with Nerdrum’s *Art Police*. According to Nerdrum, the Art Police is an omnipresent modernist entity, hell-bound on exterminating the existence of classical figurative art. Having entertained Nerdrum’s tales of suffering and injustice in order to present a study of possible dissensus within the artworld, I feel it is necessary to briefly address Nerdrum’s views from another angle, as a *false dissensus*.

Throughout this thesis I have continuously referred to Nerdrum’s selective and self-serving definition of the artworld. Accepting the existence of this modernist, abstract and conceptually-minded entity allows Nerdrum, but also myself, to identify a hierarchal structure against which dissensual action is necessitated. Rancière’s process of politics cannot arise without the *de-mos* identifying itself as such. Thus, for Nerdrum to claim marginalisation and suffering he first needed to create the hierarchy of exclusion.

Nerdrum positions himself as a singular genius (itself part of modernist rhetoric), fighting against exclusion on behalf of everyone who also experience it. Yet, his narrow focus on the work which he produces propagates its own very narrow space of inclusion. His views, aims and techniques remain at the centre of his discourse on Kitsch, and not a broader consideration for a multitude of differently focused artists who have also come under the judges hammer as being kitsch.

Furthermore, Nerdrum’s obsessive theorisation and self-reflection regarding his work is almost laughably modernist in its manifesto-like presentation. Again, it becomes obvious that Nerdrum cherry-picks those elements from the artworld which suit his argument and self-identification as martyr. His feelings of exclusion are interesting to consider in relation to whether he is a reactionary rather than an activist, as he desperately attempts to be perceived as the latter.

Nerdrum’s own alignment with the downtrodden, suffering artists of the world is difficult to accept, considering his notable wealth and the eccentric lifestyle which goes along with it. He seems to

employ his education and experience similarly to how the Bourgeoisie position themselves as cultivated, with a taste for the old, to legitimate their position.

These are but a few of the more obvious contradictions in Nerdrum's espoused theories and lived practices. The shortcomings and dilutions of the old master have not enjoyed much attention in academic writing, but his work and artistic importance also has not been deemed worthy of much considered in academic publications, as research for this thesis showed. While publications on Nerdrum's work, life and philosophies exists, such as Kuspit (2000); Conradie (2006) and Bethea (2011), the greatest amount of literature has been predominantly produced by himself and/or his sons, students and close followers (see Nerdrum 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2018, Nerdrum & Tuv, 2011, Nerdrum *et.al.* 2013, Nerdrum, B.S., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, Nerdrum, Ö., 2018, Kreyn & Nerdrum, 2011). These publications grant some insight into the mind and influence of this charismatic and controversial artist, they are unmistakably biased in their interpretation of the "mastery" and importance of Nerdrum's contribution to Western art creation. This bias extends to the interpretation of the position his contributions (technically, artistically and philosophically) hold within its own time, but also within Western art history and the canon itself—a balance only slightly altered by this thesis's reflection from outside Nerdrum's inner circle.

## 6.4. Reflection and further research

Within an art-historical context, this study aimed to contribute to the existing scholarly work considering the life, work and influence of Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum. Possible further research suggestions that I would be interested in investigating would include interviews with the artist himself and his followers. While not denying his technical skill, international renown and notable influence on numerous artists, there is space for more critical reflection on the life and work of Odd Nerdrum. There is no doubt that Nerdrum has positioned himself as a master to many who aim to learn the techniques of classical figurative painting. His school, students and following attest to the influence he has, as well as the need for a figure such as himself in supporting representational art education. The extreme position he adopts against the artworld—as what he seems to perceive as a community of extreme modernists—ignores the theoretical and critical complexities and developments which are present in the ever changing world of art, visual and material culture. Subsequently, those who accept his narrative take on a similar, limited view and understanding of art and visual creation. This position of selective ignorance may, in fact, hinder the very thing that Nerdrum and his group is trying to produce—a place of belonging for the figurative, technical “master” painter in the contemporary artworld.

Methodologically, this thesis presents a reading and understanding of Jacques Rancière’s notions of dissensual thinking. In this study this understanding is applied to comprehend the aims of Odd Nerdrum’s creation of the Kitsch movement. This approach lends itself to application in other fields of social and artistic evaluation. The understanding of the various role players in the act of and need for dissensus, presents the opportunity to apply such understanding to other occurrences, very specifically within the Southern African and South African milieu. Rancière’s writing and philosophy is still growing in popularity in the field of philosophy (only relatively lately making a debut in English translations). Considering the complexity, density and span of Rancière’s work, this thesis suggested a possible contradiction in his creation and positioning of the regimes of art: that the ethical, representational and aesthetic regimes of art ironically create a new hierarchy of exclusion within the understanding of art. A comprehensive investigation of such an argument would be of value and simultaneously necessitate a study on its own. Rancière might still, being an active member of the international philosophical community, in time, have something to say on this issue himself.

This thesis presented a critical reading, investigation and comparison of the work of two European men, both born in the 1940s, working within philosophical and artistic studies primarily centred around a Western paradigm and Western history. The positioning of my study considered these aspects from the outset, being mindful of a Eurocentric awareness of the art historical canon. However, as a point of departure in framing and understanding both Nerdrum and Rancière's work, this research confined its parameters to the immediate awareness and considerations of both men. Further research is critical towards the decolonial consideration of not only Nerdrum and Rancière's work, but also to the questioning of the Western artworld as an enabler of hegemonic art practices.

Nerdrum appropriates the term kitsch in order to defend and position his work, and that of painters like him. The purposeful use of a term known to be derogative serves a specific goal in Nerdrum's provocative way of doing things. His questioning of the definition and boundaries of kitsch also aligns with other commentators' views on this ambiguous term. However, there are many aspects of kitsch, both in the application of the term or the purposeful creation of artistic artefacts, that reflect a Eurocentric and colonialist mind-set of superiority which goes unnoticed and unchallenged. Nyong'o (cf. 2002), for instance, identifies a sub-genre of kitsch, which she calls racist kitsch. Within this genre of producing, situating, re-situating and understanding certain artistic artefacts is complicated by more than the modernist identification of kitsch as being cheap, unintellectual and tasteless. A further aspect of stereotyping and racial or cultural degradation needs to be considered as well. This consideration does not only apply to aged works which are now curios of indifferent and outdated thinking, but also takes into account the continued production, purchase and understanding of cultural artefacts for Western consumption.

Nerdrum's work, already shown to be self-centred to an alarming degree, becomes even more problematic when considering his self-importance outside of the borders of Western art creation. Not only does he ignore the aspects of a history of kitsch which reflects its own marginalisation, he overlooks those who are truly the *other* to Western art creation. Nerdrum does not refrain from referring to himself as the "other" (Nerdrum, 2011b:27) and continuously identifies himself as the marginalised victim of the artworld. However, he continues this discourse as a white, European male, writing from one of his several houses or estates scattered across the European continent. As neglected as he may feel the type of art he creates is within the artworld, he still earns a significant income. Although professing to having the suffering of the universal individual at heart, Nerdrum's painting and writing does not show an awareness of hardship dissimilar to his own.

Rancière's work, on the other hand, lends itself more readily to the position of those who find themselves on the margins of Western dominance. Although Rancière too reflects on and positions his work in Western history and philosophy, the very nature of the objective of dissensus allows for wider application. Having the questioning and resistance to a hierarchal structuring of the community, and the predetermined position of everyone within that community, at heart, Rancière's method of dissensus stands at the ready to investigate and understand the plight for equality.

To my mind, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) is a poignant and recent example of just such a consideration. The movement necessitates the call for equality as the basis for the existence of this movement, in simplified terms, reflects the African American community's (in the US) experience of not being seen as equal to all within the community. Compared to Rancière's arguments, this action could be argued to reflect the call of the *de-mos*; the members of society who are not afforded the opportunity to speak. Coincidentally, this movement has positioned itself in direct opposition to the police, specifically police brutality in the US. This obvious recollection of Rancière's *la police*, as the upholders of *le partage du sensible*, should not mislead one to think that police brutality is the only form of consensus in question in this instance.

As this study has shown, the position of *la police* can be embodied by any participant within the community who upholds the consensus, and denies the existence of the *de-mos*—those who are not included in the whole. A counter argument, as witnessed in relation to BLM, such as the slogan "All Lives Matter" could therefore be argued as being part of *la police*, denying those who experience marginalisation the opportunity to speak. By dismissing the voice or existence of the *de-mos*—as does "All Lives Matter"—the experience of a certain group within the society is disavowed and so the ones who fall outside of consensual conduct are once again denied the chance to participate in the structure of society. Thus, *repartition du sensible* cannot be attained.

However, by merely bringing together those who experience the same marginalisation, BLM puts into motion a dissensual discourse that sets into motion the reconsideration of the consensus of a society.

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**Figure 5.4.** Unknown. *The Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden*. (c. 1300).

**Figure 5.5.** Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1483-86). Oil on panel. 189.5 cm x 120 cm. National Gallery, London (Wikimedia, 2020).

**Figure 5.6.** Rigaud, Hyacinthe. *Louis XIV* (1701). Oil on canvas, 114cm x 62cm The J. Paul Getty Museum (Wikipedia, 2020).

**Figure 5.7.** Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) Oil on canvas. 95cm x 75cm. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Wikiart.org, 2020).

**Figure 5.8.** Courbet, Gustave. *The Stonebreakers* (1849). Oil on canvas. 170cm x 240cm. (Wikipedia, 2020).

**Figure 5.9.** Van Rijn, Rembrandt. *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633). Oil on canvas. 160cm x 128cm. (Wikiart.org, 2020).

**Figure 5.10.** Géricault, Théodore. *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19). Oil on canvas. 490cm x 716cm. Louvre (Wikiart.org, 2020).