

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2020 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857570020, DOI 10.7413/18258630082

## POLITICAL AESTHETICS

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(First published May 31, 2020)

It. *Estetica politica*; Fr. *Esthétique politique*; Germ. *Politische Ästhetik*; Span. *Estética política*.

### THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

The notion of political aesthetics is intended, in some regards, to be jarring. Plenty of analysis has been devoted in philosophical aesthetics to what might be termed the science or theory of the beautiful. Aspects of this include questions of taste or sensibility, the nature of art and the form of representation, especially in relation to the question of mimesis or imitation of nature. Beauty, taste, style or genre might be regarded as issues remote from the affairs of politics. Politics deals with the everyday affairs of the world, the pragmatic art of ruling and ordering social worlds, and the capacity to take decisions that affect large bodies of people, as in statecraft. Politics is in the realm of the necessary. Aesthetics is attributed to the realm of the possible, or impossible. It is speculative and imaginary and supplementary to meeting the basic necessities of life. To yoke together politics and aesthetics is to imply that the beautiful, tasteful and formal have a socially significant aspect, and, conversely, the world of power and social ordering has some, at least potential, relationship to questions of beauty, taste and representation. Whether as a retro-projection on art and politics of the past, or as a named area of analysis, the politics of aesthetics, as well as the aesthetics of politics, has become a well-explored subfield of art theory and cultural studies. There is, though, no settled sense of what political aesthetics means or encompasses.

As suggested by the partner phrases, the “politics of aesthetics” and the “aesthetics of politics” (deriving from the epilogue of Walter Benjamin’s landmark 1930s essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (Benjamin 2008), both of which might be conceived as an expression of political aesthetics, there are multiple possible directions to this conjunction. The politics of aesthetics, forged, in one principal line, in the wake of Marxist explorations of culture, is not just a mode of analysis appropriate for a body of artworks and cultural forms that require interpretation. It is also an approach adopted by those who wish

to direct art and culture as weapons wielded in social and political struggle, thereby changing cultural forms and the world. The politics of aesthetics insists that aesthetic choices, such as the choice to paint a picture or take a photograph, to write a poem in obscure and high-flown language or in the vernacular discourse of the street, the decision to work as an individual artist or as a collective of makers and producers, and so on, are all political aspects of art. There are also contextual relations of art that have political effects, such as, for example, the issuing of a decree which makes certain styles acceptable, while others are outlawed or, in another example, the attribution of the status of artist to anyone at all, an ascription gatekept by the institutions of art. The aesthetics of politics, on the other hand, understands that politics, or the performance of politics, possesses an aesthetic aspect. It foregrounds questions pertaining to the physical appearance of politicians or to the representation and mediation of political acts. It considers the enstaging of politicians as, for example, superhumans or akin to figures in a melodrama, conveyed by devices such as rhetoric or, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, tweets. Political aesthetics, too, explores the consequences of the enactment and broadcasting of parades and rallies. It reflects on the implications of such representations for democratic or other political systems, asking questions such as: does this forward or undermine democracy; how is power distributed through these representations, what is made possible and impossible through these representations?

Some have argued for a long history of the concept of political aesthetics, even if it was not named as such. Crispin Sartwell's 2010 book, titled *Political Aesthetics*, traces the content of the term, if not the term itself, back to Plato (for his dismissal of poetry as arational, corrupting and debilitating and for his aesthetic design of the model state in *The Republic*) and Confucius, for his mobilization of music on behalf of the state. Sartwell tracks political aesthetics through early eighteenth-century British aesthetic thought, as conveyed by those such as the Earl of Shaftesbury, for his interest in taste and morality and the supposition that the quality of a political regime is expressed in the exquisiteness of its culture. He extends from here to Friedrich Schiller's idea of the "statesman-artist", whereby art is the bridge from the realm of mere force to the rule of law. The emphasis in Sartwell's study is on the political state's enlistment of aesthetic elements. A lineage that explores the relation of politics and aesthetics from the other direction – the influence of art and aesthetics in the realm of politics – would cite other names. It might begin with reflection on the emergence of art manifestos and art polemics from the middle of the nineteenth century, beginning with Gustave Courbet and his insistence, in 1861, that art deals with the realities of contemporary life. Issuance of this form of the manifesto, an aping of political manifestos in the domain of art, gathered pace in the 1910s and 1920s, with the proliferation of Futurist, Dadaist, Surrealist and other avantgarde manifestos. A certain culmination of this form might be seen, in 1938, when Surrealist André Breton, muralist Diego Rivera and exiled politician Lev Trotsky co-authored *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, a defense of artistic freedom in the face of authoritarian regimes' sometimes murderous efforts to monopolize the formats of artistic expression (Breton 2020).

A politics of aesthetics, furthermore, would refer to the discussions, from the 1930s to the 1950s, between György Lukács, Bertold Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch, carried out through essays, polemics and letters. These figures of German Marxist Modernism debated a variety of issues: questions of political capacities of aesthetic form, whether technologically reproduced art was more

democratic than traditional artforms; the capacities of art advanced in form compared to popular entertainment; the relation of art to utopian thinking; whether artworks that presented the world in a fragmentary or non-realist way were reactionary or socially critical; in what ways the forms of art relate to a rising or a decadent bourgeoisie and in what ways they forwarded the assumption of power by a revolutionary proletariat? The key contributions in these debates enjoyed subsequent widespread exposure when collated in one volume and published in English translation, with an afterword by Fredric Jameson, as *Aesthetics and Politics* in 1977 (Taylor 1977).

A study of how aesthetics is politicized might also look at the contributions from Soviet art and cinema: the practices of the Constructivists and Productivists, who abandon the creation of singular art objects in favour of applied arts, such as furniture, textiles and clothing, ceramics, typography, advertising and political propaganda; the films of Sergej M. Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Esfir Shub and others who deploy overt montage, documentary, found film footage and other techniques of filmic expression to raise the class consciousness of New Soviet Man through the mechanisms of cinema.

A politics of aesthetics would, furthermore, consider the contribution of the Situationists in post-war France, inaugurated in Debord's 1957 tract *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1995), as they developed a terminology including the spectacle, recuperation and detournement, as a critical and a re-constructive language for art practices after the emergence of societies of consumerism and mass media. It would extend into subsequent practices that foreground questions pertaining to factors such as gender, sexuality and race and which privilege art and culture, especially the reproducible arts, as sites for explorations of critical approaches and counter-proposals

#### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The notion of political aesthetics has gained in currency in the last 10 years. In part, this can be traced to the widespread reception of the work of Jacques Rancière, whose book, *Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique* (2000), gained increased traction when it appeared in English as *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* in 2004. Rancière introduces a vocabulary for interpreting what he terms "regimes", in which aesthetics and politics interact differently over historical time. In the "ethical regime of art", artistic works, stylistically mimetic works, are conceived to be of direct utility to the socio-political formation and are of no greater or lesser status than the products of craft labour. This regime is succeeded by the "representational regime of art", in which art emerges as a special sphere subject to its own rules, and the artist is granted an, at least nominal, freedom and autonomy. Modernism breaks after this, with the emergence of the "aesthetic regime of art", a complex, contradictory mix of autonomy for art, combined with the refusal of a distinction between the realms and practices of life and art. Rancière's work explores the intersections between political allegiances, social institutions and aesthetic formations – in another work, *La Nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*, from 1981, translated into English as *Proletarian Nights* in 2012, workers' reclamation of night time by the writing of poetry is a motif; in *The Intervals of Cinema*, a collection of essays translated into English in 2014, Rancière speculates on what would constitute a cinema of equality, as film engages with the autonomy and arrangement of bodies and

the autonomy and positioning of the spectator in relation to judgement and knowledge. These last instances evoke a key aspect of Rancière's parsing of aesthetics and politics: the partition (or distribution) of the sensible. Political aesthetics marks out a relation between the aesthetic, as a realm of sensory perception, or who sees and what can be seen, said or heard, and politics, which is a distribution of this capacity in space and time, whereby some perceptions are common, some debarred and a struggle exists over participation, access and entitlement (Rancière 2004: 13) Rancière's writings in English were taken up widely amongst artist-activists, as well as academic and art institutions. It is now not uncommon to see courses engaging with questions of political aesthetics, extending the concept to address issues such as postcolonial and decolonizing approaches to culture, environmental humanities or queer culture. It signals an acknowledgement that all cultural forms are simultaneously political, in the broadest sense, and in a recursion of Walter Benjamin's notion, related simply as: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 2002) In more extended form, it reads: "Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture —as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive. In this way they serve the apotheosis of the latter, barbaric as it may be" (Benjamin 1999). All products of culture are produced within the prevailing barbaric circumstances of class society. A change in politics changes the extent of the barbarism. For contemporary purveyors of Political Aesthetics, all artworks display a politics. Some artworks are consciously developed to emanate a politics that counters the prevailing heterosexist, racist, sexist, classist order.

In another sense too, political aesthetics, in terms of the aestheticization of politics, becomes an apposite coinage in the contemporary moment, as commentators note the amplified relevance of the "aestheticization of politics" thesis in the Age of Trump, rule by publicity and "fake news" and alt-Rightist memes (Leslie 2019).

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

E. Leslie, *Political Aesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2020 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2020/spring/PoliticalAesthetics.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630082.

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E. Leslie, *Political Aesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 3, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.