

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



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Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics

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* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘Politics is aesthetic in principle.’

– *Jacques Rancière*

Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics

Samuel Alexander

Today the world is trembling with a disturbing number of global crises, ranging from the geopolitical to the financial, through to the cultural and spiritual, and extending out to the ecological. It is easy to conclude, therefore, that political practice demands an urgent and radical engagement with the unsustainable structures, goals, and values of global industrial society. This civilisation has no future – a statement that is both normative and descriptive.¹ It is normative in the sense that this civilisation *ought* to have no future, owing to its ecological contradictions and social injustices. The claim is descriptive in the sense that this civilisation *does* have no future, for the same reasons. Fortunately, there is still indeterminacy concerning when and how global industrial society becomes an historical phenomenon – there are many ends of the world. It follows that we must not sit on our hands and simply watch the ship of civilisation drift over the cliff. There are things to do!

But *what* is to be done? This is surely one of the central questions for those who are animated by what Charles Eisenstein calls ‘the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible’;² a central question for those of us with the fire of ecological democracy burning in our eyes. In this collection of essays I have been exploring the human condition through the lens of aesthetics, and have arrived at a point where I am increasingly confronted by questions of political and social import. What is the relationship between, on the one hand, the social, ecological, and political imperatives for a new civilisational trajectory, and, on the other, the aesthetic dimensions of human experience? Beyond direct political engagement – such as voting, protesting, or practising civil disobedience – might societal change also require, perhaps first and foremost, an engagement and transformation of our aesthetic sensibilities, capacities, and practices? Those questions are the guiding lines of inquiry to be explored in this essay, which I will develop by offering political reflections on aesthetics that prove indistinguishable from aesthetic reflections on politics. This relatively short analysis is designed as a primer for the longer engagement with the politics of art in the next essay.

As outlined in the introduction, aesthetics can be understood as a domain of inquiry pertaining both to *art* and the *senses*, with these two aspects often overlapping. Central considerations include not merely the meaning and function of art and the role of the artist in society, but also broader considerations pertaining to taste, beauty, judgement, perception, imagination, creativity, emotion, and sensuous or bodily experience. To now I have defended the thesis that the aesthetic dimensions of life, far from being fringe or marginal, are in fact definitory of what it means to be alive.³ We – *homo aestheticus* – can be coherently understood as an artful species in an aesthetic universe. Our individual existence, our societies, and indeed the cosmos itself, are aesthetic to the primordial core, such that time itself can be seen as an unfolding of creative evolution.

Nevertheless, it would not be unreasonable for readers to approach my aesthetic inquiries with a degree of scepticism. After all, in an age where ecocide, financial crisis, war, and creeping fascism loom ominously on the horizon like dark clouds gathering for a perfect storm, a turn to aesthetics certainly needs justification. We find ourselves in a situation which clearly demands a radical political engagement in order to dissipate and transcend the various tragedies already taking form. How, then, could one justifiably look to poetry, literature, music, or the imagination in a world immiserated by violence, oppression, and unspeakable suffering? Wouldn't a turn to aesthetics be what Marxists sometimes call a 'pessimistic retreat'?⁴

As critical theorist Herbert Marcuse noted when he began his own meditation on aesthetics: 'It would be senseless to deny the element of despair inherent in this concern: the retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed only in the imagination.'⁵ At first, aesthetic concerns might seem like a petty indulgence or trivial distraction, reserved for the comfortable few who do not have to worry about the problems of the real world. Art, one might contend, is not a serious subject for the activist or theorist of political economy. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas went further when he stated that 'there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.'⁶ In the same critical spirit, philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir once dismissed art as 'a position of withdrawal, a way of fleeing the truth of the present.'⁷ These critiques imply that one should not make or enjoy art while the world weeps. There are more important things to do.

Even if one were not persuaded that that art is positively wicked or egotistical, an objection might still arise that condemns art for being *useless*, in the sense of it not being able to change the world. Artists must not merely interpret or represent the world; the point is to change it! Did anyone lay down their guns after seeing Picasso's evocative critique of fascism in *Guernica*? The poet W.H. Auden would reflect with some despondency that 'poetry makes nothing happen,' lamenting that 'all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, did not save a single Jew.'⁸ In a manuscript he worked on in 1939 we read:

Artists and politicians would get along better at a time of crisis like the present, if the latter would only realize that the political history of the world would have been the same if not a poem had been written, nor a picture painted, nor a bar of music composed.⁹

I have been attempting to deconstruct such simplistic dismissals of aesthetics by examining the blurry distinction between art, life, and politics. Continuing that project, my purpose in this essay (and the next one) is to show that there is in fact an inherent aesthetic dimension to politics, just as there is a political or even revolutionary potential inherent to certain forms of art or aesthetic practice. In doing so, the analysis is shaped by the emerging 'aesthetic turn'¹⁰ in political theory, and by various political interpretations of art and aesthetics. My approach is to mix and develop these substantive bodies of thought in the hope that this alchemy produces a deeper understanding of the nexus that conjoins (as it attempts to separate) art, life, and politics.

To be clear, my premise is not that we *should* or *should not* infuse politics with aesthetic considerations, but rather, as Jacques Rancière states, that ‘politics is aesthetic in principle.’¹¹ Terry Eagleton makes a similar point when acknowledging that the aesthetic is ‘politics in non-political disguise.’¹² The insight here is that politics has various aesthetic dimensions which should not be ignored. Most fundamentally, politics is shaped and even underpinned by social narratives about what is possible, proper, and important. These narratives, often supported by imagery, icons, public gestures, and soundbites, are critical not only in how citizens *think* about political life but, perhaps more importantly, how they *feel* about it – and thus how they act and vote. Usually operating beneath the level of consciousness, social narratives, myths, and stories both reveal and conceal possible forms of life, colouring them with value-laden judgements about their worth. Thus, political society is both enabled and constrained by the aesthetic soil in which it is rooted. Change the soil, and different things can grow, and in different ways.

Consequently, an *effective* politics must be an *affective* politics, engaging the heart as much as the head (a distinction always threatening to collapse). This implies that political messaging that conveys societal hopes, dreams, fears, and promises, must be communicated effectively, for even the best policies, programs, or social movements will fail if they are unable to successfully appeal to the public imagination. Good ideas need to be powerful ideas – or else they will be condemned to being good but ineffective. Political argumentation, therefore, is not merely about providing ‘reasons’ or winning the political debate through the non-coercive force of ‘better arguments’. Rather, political success is partly about creating imaginative and emotional space that allows people to believe that ‘other ways’ of doing things are possible. This involves the aesthetic challenge of opening up alternative political spaces and contexts where new visions of self and society can be received in aesthetically engaging and digestible ways.¹³

Poet-philosopher Friedrich Schiller argued, ‘the way to the head must lie through the heart.’¹⁴ This is not in any way an anti-intellectual or anti-scientific position. Schiller offered the profound and subtle insight that through the works of artists and aesthetic experience, the intellect can be engaged most effectively *having first affected or shifted the emotions*. Note that this is a politically neutral insight. Aesthetics is a tool that can be employed to advance either progressive or regressive agendas, just as fire can be useful or harmful depending on how it is used. Accordingly, it is no objection to a political vision that it is, at base, aesthetic. The critical issues to be addressed are *how* politics is aesthetic, to what *ends*, and for *whose benefit*.

When the public imagination expands or contracts, political space for radical innovation and progress can be created or enclosed. A utopian vision, for example, can be understood as an imaginative and sensuous extension of our socio-political concepts, understandings, and pathways. Such visions can be progressive or transgressive if they energise a citizenry for political participation. They can be regressive or conservative, however, if they merely mislead, distract, or sedate a population with unrealisable fantasies (or with realisable cruelties). Furthermore, in a world where public consciousness is shaped to varying degrees by media and marketing, it becomes clear that a ‘politics of attention’ is always and everywhere at play.¹⁵ Some issues are brought to the surface of public discourse, not necessarily because they are

the most pressing; while other matters, often the most pressing, can be pushed to the margins, usually because they are not politically useful or expedient.

This is one example of what Rancière calls a ‘distribution of the sensible’,¹⁶ a framework for understanding how political decisions, actions, and narratives determine what presents itself to sense experience. In other words, politics shapes what can be seen, felt, and spoken about – and by whom. At the same time, in a dialectical fashion, what can be seen, felt, and spoken about shapes politics. This is to say, the aesthetic sensibilities of a citizenry provide the contours within which realisable political action takes place.

Of course, the inherent aesthetic dimensions of politics complicate the very valid concern over how aestheticising politics gives rise to the spectre of fascism. One way to understand fascism is precisely in aesthetic terms – a totalitarian government entrenching and expanding power and authority by using the mechanisms of mythology, narrative, and propaganda to glorify a nation-state and to scapegoat enemies. Such scapegoating can deflect attention away from internal societal difficulties and thereby operate as a counter-revolutionary force. By these means the aesthetic can be a tool for igniting national passion, fervour, and obedience, exemplified by the spectacle of Nazi films like *Triumph of the Will*. As scholar Desmond Manderson writes, ‘the emotive paraphernalia of fascism – propaganda films, marching troops, flags, insignia, and the rest – clearly recognised the potential that aesthetics held to marshal collective experience as a powerful social force.’¹⁷

Linked to these issues is concern over how the application of aesthetic criteria to politics can produce callous and inhumane results. Mussolini’s son-in-law compared the bombs exploding among fleeing Ethiopians in 1936 to flowers bursting into bloom. Mussolini himself once boasted that:

when the masses are like wax in my hands, or when I mingle with them and almost crushed by them, I feel myself to be a part of them. All the same there persists in me a certain feeling of aversion, like that which the modeler feels for the clay he is molding. Does not the sculptor sometimes smash his block of marble into fragments because he cannot shape it into the vision he has conceived?¹⁸

Another notorious example is the response given by the poet Laurent Tailhade to a deadly anarchist bomb thrown into the French Chamber of Deputies in 1893: ‘What do the victims matter if the gesture is beautiful?’ As philosopher Martin Jay writes: ‘The aestheticization of politics in these cases repels not merely because of the grotesque impropriety of applying criteria of beauty to the deaths of human beings, but also because of the chilling way in which nonaesthetic criteria are deliberately and provocatively excluded from consideration.’¹⁹

Walter Benjamin, writing in a time of rising fascism in Europe, sounded a warning that remains relevant today: ‘All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war.’²⁰ While this warning needs to be taken seriously, I challenge Benjamin’s claims that ‘[t]he logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.’²¹ My position is that aesthetics is *always and already* a part of political life, and Fascism is just a particularly objectionable form of this inevitable intermingling. It follows that one cannot merely advocate for aesthetic education, in general, as a means of societal progress. After all,

as Paul de Man once wrote, under fascist ideology, aesthetic education ‘succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible.’²²

If fascism is an obscene and disturbing example of *aestheticising politics*, Soviet communism was an example of the *politicisation of aesthetics*.²³ This means more than merely appropriating art and culture as vehicles for ideological communication and propaganda. It can refer to the ways in which Stalin and the Communist Party provided the political filter through which art had to proceed. Any artists that produced work that criticised or resisted Party rule or undermined the socialist imaginary, were at high risk of being murdered or sent to the gulags.

Conversely, Socialist Realism – the ‘official style’ of the Soviet Union from 1922-1988 – became one of few ‘legitimate’ forms of art. What this style required was a promotion of communist values and the expression of ideas and visions that celebrated the proletariat. It was believed that such instrumental art could assist in the cultural education of citizens to be ideal Soviets. During the Soviet Congress of 1934, four guidelines were laid out for Socialist Realism. The work must be: 1. Proletarian: art relevant to the workers and understandable to them; 2. Typical: scenes of everyday life of the people; 3. Realistic: in the representational sense; and 4. Partisan: supportive of the aims of the State and the Party. This naturally resulted in art that would depict scenes celebrating the revolution or workers happily labouring in the field or factory in post-revolutionary society. The truth or otherwise of these images or scenes was not the point. Politicising art in this way reduces or abolishes art’s critical function, becoming merely a handmaiden to politics.

I argued earlier, however, that politics is inherently and inescapably aesthetic, and thus aesthetics is something that shapes *every society*, including those with a liberal democratic self-image. In advanced capitalist societies today, where mass media have been concentrated in the hands of a few (often private hands), the potential to manipulate public consciousness with the subtle or not so subtle art of propaganda is perhaps historically unrivalled. This is a power shaped by aesthetics. Indeed, the aestheticisation of politics under capitalism creates and condones what Marxist theorist Guy Debord called the ‘Society of the Spectacle.’²⁴ That is, the programming of mass media risks creating – or perhaps has already created – a passive, obedient citizenry that is willing to embrace its own servitude so long as it is distracted and entertained. This has helped entrench the ‘one-dimensional society’ and the ‘culture industry’ of which the Frankfurt school warned in the twentieth century. These concepts of critical theory were developed to highlight the smooth, comfortable, democratic ‘unfreedom’ present in advanced industrial societies. Looking toward the United States, especially, the Frankfurt school suggested that this paragon of capitalism was being shaped by its own forces of fascism, albeit in cultural disguise.²⁵ Benjamin would bitterly observe that ‘self-alienation has reached such a degree that [humankind] can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’²⁶

In this context the affective dimensions of political authority and submission should also be acknowledged. The eighteenth-century theorist of conservatism, Edmund Burke, wrote of the ‘delight’ that citizens can take in their own subordination.²⁷ His terminology of ‘proud submission’ and ‘dignified obedience’ points to the role affect can play in maintaining and

naturalising the existing order of things.²⁸ Burke's conservative instincts also identified a worrying aesthetic energy that radicals and revolutionaries were displaying as they watched the French Revolution unfold. We can go further back, to antiquity, and recall that it was Plato who defended the policy of governments telling a 'noble lie' to the masses in order to maintain the social order through fabricated stories about natural hierarchies.²⁹

But if politics, like power itself, is *inherently* aesthetic, highlighting those dimensions is not an invitation to fascism but a warning against it. Michel Foucault said of power that it is not necessarily evil, but it is always dangerous – because power is everywhere.³⁰ And because it is everywhere, we always have something to do: 'my position leads not to apathy,' Foucault said, 'but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.'³¹ One could say the same thing concerning the role of aesthetics in politics. It is pointless regretting the fact that politics is aesthetic in principle, any more than we should regret gravity, because this is simply a feature of the ways things are. And so acknowledging the aesthetic dimensions of politics certainly should not be assumed to be a prologue to tyranny. As Martin Jay argues, '[t]he wholesale critique of "the aesthetic ideology"... can thus be itself deemed ideological if it fails to register the divergent implications of the application of the aesthetic to politics.'³²

Accordingly, it makes little sense to talk of the 'modern aestheticisation of politics' since, again, politics is and has always been aesthetic in principle, even as one can accept that it takes on new and often worrying forms in technocratic society of the twenty-first century. A fascist aestheticisation of politics is always worryingly possible – a spectre to be on guard against. But if politics is inherently aesthetic then the question is: what will be done with this critically important tool? What is not possible is a politics entirely devoid of aesthetic dimensions. The perennial challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the tools of aesthetics are used out in the open, rather than insidiously sharpened and employed by oligarchs and elites in the dark corridors of political and financial power. If such risks are not respected, we might, as George Orwell warned in *1984*, casually usher in a future whose image is a boot stamping on the human face – forever.

There are alternative futures, however, based on human emancipation and ecological viability. My overarching argument in this collection of essays is that any hope for deep revision in the established politico-economic order depends on acknowledging, appreciating, and operating within the aesthetic dimension. It is one thing to establish firm scientific, ethical, and philosophical foundations for an alternative form of societal organisation. But if there is no *felt need* in society for such a political transformation then this can be understood in part as an aesthetic obstacle that demands an aesthetic intervention or series of interventions. J.G. Ballard once wrote: 'Many of the great cultural shifts that prepare the way for political change are largely aesthetic.'³³

A major prerequisite to societal transformation, as Marcuse recognised, is 'the fact that the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives, and their goals.'³⁴ Specifically with respect to the 'advanced capitalist societies', currently these felt needs are, for the most part, absent, confused, or severely underdeveloped. It follows that the ongoing neglect of the aesthetic realm is a mistake that political movements for human emancipation and sustainability cannot

afford to make. The critical role of art and culture is not merely to assist with transgressive political communication or social education. It also plays a role prosecuting the existing order, of holding politics to account, not merely ushering in the new. More deeply still, art is tasked with *undoing* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, the felt needs of the body, and to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of the preservation and flourishing of humanity and the planet.³⁵ Having laid the groundwork for an aesthetic analysis of politics, I will delve more deeply into these matters in the next essay, through an exploration of Marcuse's aesthetic writings on the relationships between art, politics, and revolt.

¹ Rupert Read and Samuel Alexander, *This Civilisation is Finished: Conversations on the End of Empire – And What Lies Beyond* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2019).

² Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2013).

³ See Samuel Alexander, 'Introduction: The Aesthetic Dimension' and 'Creative Evolution and the "Will to Art"', in this collection of essays. The full set will be published here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

⁴ See Pauline Johnson, *Marxist Aesthetics: The Foundations Without Everyday Life for an Emancipated Consciousness* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) p. 3.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (London: MacMillan Education, 1979), p. 1.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow' in Sean Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 142.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road, 2015), p. 81.

⁸ Quoted in Artur Danto, 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art' ((1985) *Grand Street* 4(3): p. 172.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See generally, Nikolas Kompridis (ed.) *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 58.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 123.

¹³ See, e.g., Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014).

¹⁴ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 86-178.

¹⁵ See generally, Peter Doran, *The Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness and Consumerism: Reclaiming the Mindful Commons* (London: Routledge, 2017); see also, Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005, new edition).

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 12.

¹⁷ Desmond Manderson, 'Here and Now: From "Aestheticizing Politics" to "Politicizing Art"' (2016) *NoFo* 13: p. 3.

¹⁸ I draw these examples from Martin Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology" as Ideology: Or, What Does it Mean to Aestheticize Politics?' (1992) *Cultural Critique* 21: pp. 42-5.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 44.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 36 (emphasis removed).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 289.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2006).

²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002); Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, note 20, p. 38.

²⁷ For a discussion, see Jason Frank, 'Delightful Horror', in Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), Ch. 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Similarly, in the ethical domain. A case can (and will) be made that art and aesthetics have the potential to expand and refine the moral imagination, but this spiritual tool has the potential, at least, to cut both ways: the aesthetic perspective always raises the risk that someone misapplies the discipline and attempts to make the suffering of others an object of aesthetic pleasure or focusses on aesthetic pleasure in ways that marginalise or ignore the suffering of others.

³⁰ Michael Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: Overview of a Work in Progress' in Michael Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 256.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Martin Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology: Or, What Does it Mean to Aestheticize Politics?' (1992) *Cultural Critique* 21: p. 56.

³³ See Samuel Alexander, *Art Against Empire: Toward an Aesthetics of Degrowth* (Melbourne, Simplicity Institute, 2017), p. 1.

³⁴ Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, note 4, pp. 3-4.

³⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered' (1992) *October* (62): p. 5.