"The Aesthetic Ideology" as Ideology; or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?

Martin Jay

In 1930, Walter Benjamin reviewed a collection of essays edited by the conservative revolutionary Ernst Jünger and entitled *War and Warrior*. Noting its contributors' avid romanticization of the technology of death and the total mobilization of the masses, he warned that it was "nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l'art pour l'art* to war itself" (122). Six years later, in the concluding reflections of his celebrated essay "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin widened the scope of his analysis beyond war to politics in general. Fascism, he charged, meant the aestheticization of politics, the deadly consummation of *l'art pour l'art*'s credo *"Fiat ars-pereat mundus"* (244).

Like much else in Benjamin's remarkable corpus, the reception and dissemination of these ideas was delayed for a generation or so after his suicide in 1940. By then his remedy—the politicization of art by Communism in the 1936 piece,[1] the transformation of war into a civil war between classes in the earlier review—was forgotten by all but his most militant Marxist interpreters. But

the fateful link between aesthetics and politics was eagerly seized on in many quarters as an invaluable explanation for the seductive fascination of fascism.

In such works as Bill Kinser and Neil Kleinman's *The Dream That Was No More a Dream,* Nazism was explained by the fact that "German consciousness treated its own reality—developed and lived its history—as though it were a work of art. It was a culture committed to its aesthetic imagination" (7). Hitler's personal history as an artist *manqué* was recalled by commentators like J. P. Stern, who saw the legacy of Nietzsche's conflation of artistic form-giving and political will in Nazism (45).[2] The confusion between reality and fantasy in films like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* was taken as emblematic of the illusory spectacle at the heart of fascist politics by critics like Susan Sontag.[3] Similar inclinations were discerned in French fascism by Alice Yaeger Kaplan, who successfully solicited the admission from one of her subjects, the film historian Maurice Bardèche, "there is, if you like, a link between aestheticism and fascism. We were probably mistaken to connect aesthetics and politics, which are not the same thing" (184). Even the contemporary representation of the fascist past has been accused of being overly aestheticized, albeit in the sense of kitsch art, by Saul Friedländer.[4]

As a result of these and similar analyses, the connection between "the aestheticization of politics" and fascism has become firmly established. In fact, it has become such a commonplace that some of its affective power has wandered from the historians' treatment of the issue into a related, but not identical discussion carried on mainly by literary critics over what is called "the aesthetic ideology." The term was coined by Paul de Man, whose interest in ideology critique seems to have been increasing shortly before his death in 1983.[5] The concept has been taken up by his defenders in the controversy that followed the disclosures of his wartime journalism, for reasons to be examined shortly.[6] And it has also appeared in the recent writings of the Marxist critics David Lloyd and Terry Eagleton, whose agenda is very different from that of most of de Man's supporters.[7]

The displacement of the discussion from historical to literary critical circles has involved, however, a significant, but not always acknowledged reevaluation of the aesthetics whose imposition on

the political is damned as pernicious. The change has also meant a concomitant reattribution of the original culprits allegedly responsible for the crime. In what follows, I want to explore the implications of the shift and ask if the critique of "the aesthetic ideology" in certain of its guises may itself rest on mystifications, which allow us to call it ideological in its turn.

Any discussion of the aestheticization of politics must begin by identifying the normative notion of the aesthetic it presupposes. For unless we specify what is meant by this notoriously ambiguous term, it is impossible to understand why its extension to the realm of the political is seen as problematic. Although a thorough review of the different uses in the literature cited above is beyond the scope of this essay, certain significant alternatives can be singled out for scrutiny.

As Benjamin's own remarks demonstrate, one salient use derives from the *l'art pour l'art* tradition of differentiating a realm called art from those of other human pursuits, cognitive, religious, ethical, economic, or whatever. Here the content of that realm apart—often, but not always, identified with something known as beauty—is less important than its claim to absolute autonomous and autotelic self-referentiality. For the obverse of this claim is the exclusion of ethical, instrumental, religious, etc. considerations from the realm of art.

A politics aestheticized in this sense will be equally indifferent to such extra-artistic claims, having as its only criterion of value aesthetic worth. Moreover, the definition of that worth implied by such a rigid differentiation usually suppresses those aspects of the aesthetic, such as sensuous enjoyment and bodily pleasure, which link art and mundane existence; instead, formal considerations outweigh "sentimental" ones. On a visit to Paris in 1891, Oscar Wilde was reported to have said: "When Benvenuto Cellini crucified a living man to study the play of muscles in his death agony, a pope was right to grant him absolution. What is the death of a vague individual if it enables an immortal word to blossom and to create, in Keats' words, an eternal source of ecstasy?" (Raynaud 397). Another classical expression of this attitude appeared in the notorious response of the Symbolist poet Laurent Tailhade to a deadly anarchist bomb thrown into the French Chamber of Deputies in 1893: "What do the victims mat-

ter if the gesture is beautiful?"[8] Not long after, F. T. Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* echoed the same sentiments in glorifying, along with militarism, anarchistic destruction, and contempt for women, "the beautiful ideas which kill" (182). Moving beyond the Futurists' flatulent rhetoric, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister Ciano would confirm the practical results of its implementation when he famously compared the bombs exploding among fleeing Ethiopians in 1936 to flowers bursting into bloom.

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. When restricted to a rigorously differentiated realm of art, such antiaffective, formalist coldness may have its justifications; indeed, a great deal of modern art would be hard to appreciate without it. But when then extended to politics through a gesture of imperial dedifferentiation, the results are highly problematic. For the disinterestedness that is normally associated with the aesthetic seems precisely what is so radically inappropriate in the case of that most basic of human interests, the preservation of life. Benjamin's bitter observation that mankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" ("Work of Art" 244) vividly expresses the disgust aroused by this callous apotheosis of art over life.

A related, but somewhat different use of the term *aesthetic* derives from the elitist implications of the artist who expresses his or, far more rarely, her will through the shaping of unformed matter. A characteristic expression of this use appeared in Nietzsche's claim in *The Genealogy of Morals* that the first politicians were born rulers "whose work is an instinctive imposing of forms. They are the most spontaneous, most unconscious artists that exist. . . . [T]hese men know nothing of guilt, responsibility, consideration. They are actuated by the terrible egotism of the artist . . ." (220). The fascist adoption of this stance is plainly evident in Mussolini's boast that "when the masses are like wax in my hands, or when I mingle with them and am 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?" (Smith 82). What makes this version of aestheticized politics so objectionable is its reduction of an active public to the passive "masses," which is then turned into pliable material for the triumph of the artist/politician's will.

Still another use draws on the perennial battle between the image and the word. Insofar as the aesthetic is identified with the seductive power of images, whose appeal to mute sensual pleasure seems to undercut rational deliberation, the aestheticization of politics in this sense means the victory of the spectacle over the public sphere. Russell Berman, in his foreword to Alice Yaeger Kaplan, faults the fascist critics Robert Brasillach and Maurice Bardèche for praising silent films over talkies and compares their celebration of the cinema with Benjamin's:

> The fascist film theoreticians contrast the organic—and organizing!—homogeneity of the silent image with the introduction of speech that dissolves the nation through individuation and criticism. . . . Bardèche and Brasillach value the pure image, popularized aestheticism, in order to produce the fascist folk, while the iconoclast Benjamin applauds the shattering of the image in montage in order to call the masses (for him at this point the communist masses) to language. (xix)[9]

Taking seriously the religious underpinnings of the taboo on images, he further claims that "Benjamin's account of an aestheticization of politics consequently appears as a civilizational regression to graven images of the deity, as in Riefenstahl's representation of Hitler's descent from the clouds in *Triumph of the Will*" (xxi). In short, politics has to be saved from its reduction to spellbinding spectacle and phantasmagoric illusion in order to allow a more rational discourse to fill the public space now threatened with extinction by images and simulacra of reality.

In this cluster of uses, the aesthetic is variously identified with irrationality, illusion, fantasy, myth, sensual seduction, the imposition of will, and inhumane indifference to ethical, religious, or cognitive considerations. If any pedigree is assumed, it is found in the writings of Nietzsche in certain of his moods and in

aesthetic modernists like Tailhade or Marinetti. Scarcely beneath the surface is an appreciation of the links between decadence, aestheticism, and elitism, which suggest that the seedbed of fascism was fin-de-siècle bourgeois culture in crisis. We are, in other words, very much in the world whose decline was so powerfully chartered by Thomas Mann from *Death in Venice* through "Mario the Magician" to *Doctor Faustus.*

In the case of the "aesthetic ideology" criticized by de Man, Eagleton, and other contemporary literary critics, the target is constructed, however, very differently. The aesthetic in question is not understood as the opposite of reason, but rather as its completion, not as the expression of an irrational will, but as the sensual version of a higher, more comprehensive notion of rationality, not as the wordless spectacle of images, but as the realization of a literary absolute. In short, it is an aesthetic that is understood to be the culmination of Idealist philosophy, or perhaps even Western metaphysics as a whole, and not its abstract negation. Bourgeois culture at its height rather than at its moment of seeming decay is thus taken as the point of departure for aestheticized politics.

An early version of this argument appeared in *The Literary Absolute* by the French theorists Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, published in 1978 and translated into English a decade later.[10] Discussing the Jena Romantics' redemptive notion of art, they claim that it represents the displacement of Platonic eidetics, the search for essential forms, into a new realm, which they call "eidaesthetics." This quasi-religious metaphysics of art is responsible for an absolute notion of literature, whose task is the overcoming of differences, contradictions, and disharmonies. Although implicitly challenged by a counterimpulse they call "romantic equivocity," the telos of eidaesthetics is the closure of a complete work produced by an omnipotent subject, who realizes the Idea in sensual form. Jena Romanticism's desire for poetic perfection is thus derived from an ultimately metaphysical project, which has political implications as well. The Romantic fascination with the fragment, they contend, is premised on the possibility of an "ideal politics . . . an organic politics" (44–45). As Europe's first self-conscious intellectual avant-garde, the Jena Romantics thus set the agenda for the

conflation of art and politics pursued by so many later intellectuals.

What we might call the "eidaestheticization of politics" is even more explicit in one of the main instigators of the aesthetic ideology as de Man describes it, Friedrich Schiller. According to de Man, "the aesthetic, as is clear from Schiller's formulation [from a passage in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*], is primarily a social and political model, ethically grounded in an assumedly Kantian notion of freedom" ("Aesthetic Formalization" 264).[11] Its effect on writers like Heinrich von Kleist, whose *Über das Marionettentheater* de Man reads with alarm, was pernicious. The dance of Kleist's puppets, so often admired as a utopian state of grace in which purposiveness without purpose is brilliantly realized, turns out to have a very different implication. "The point is not that the dance fails and that Schiller's idyllic description of a graceful but confined freedom is aberrant," de Man darkly warns. "Aesthetic education by no means fails; it succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible" ("Aesthetic Formalization" 289). That violence is directed against all the cultural impulses, especially those in language, which resist coerced totalization and closure.

In a later piece on "Kant and Schiller," de Man teased out the implications of this argument for fascism. Although in many ways appreciative of Kant's resistance to metaphysical closure and epistemological overreaching, de Man nonetheless identified in him the potential to sanction, however unintentionally, a sinister tradition. Citing a passage from Goebbels's novel *Michael*, which includes the claim that "politics are the plastic art of the state," he concedes that "it is a grievous misreading of Schiller's aesthetic state."[12] But he then adds, "the principle of this misreading does not essentially differ from the misreading which Schiller inflicted on his predecessor, namely Kant." In other words, for all their emancipatory intentions, Kant and even more so Schiller spawned a tradition that contained the potential to be transformed into a justification for fascism.

Lest the specific antifascist purposes of de Man's critique of the aesthetic ideology be missed, Jonathan Culler spells them out in his defense of de Man in the controversy over the wartime journalism. "Walter Benjamin called fascism the introduction of

aesthetics into politics," Culler writes. "De Man's critique of the aesthetic ideology now resonates also as a critique of the fascist tendencies he had known" (780). That critique was carried out in the name of a notion of literature very different from that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy saw as complicitous with eidaesthetics. For de Man, it was precisely literary language's resistance to closure, transparency, harmony, and perfection that could be pitted against the aesthetic ideology. According to Culler, de Man's realization of this opposition demonstrates his rejection of his earlier collaborationist position: "The fact that de Man's wartime juvenilia had themselves on occasion exhibited an inclination to idealize the emergence of the German nation in aesthetic terms gives special pertinence to his demonstration that the most insightful literary and philosophical texts of the tradition expose the unwarranted violence required to fuse form and idea, cognition and performance" (783).

Whether or not this apology is fully convincing, it nonetheless clearly expresses one way the concept of the aesthetic ideology functions for deconstruction. Another concerns the sensual dimension of aesthetic pleasure, which we've also seen evident in the critique of images in the name of words made by Kaplan and Berman. In a telling passage in his essay on Hans Robert Jauss's "reception aesthetics," de Man claims that "the aesthetic is, by definition, a seductive notion that appeals to the pleasure principle, a eudamonic judgment that can displace and conceal values of truth and falsehood likely to be more resilient to desire than values of pleasure and pain" ("Reading and History" 64).[13] Ironically, here aesthetics is attacked not because it is formally cold and antihumane, but rather because it is human-all-too-human.

De Man's ascetic resistance to eudamonism and desire fits well with his frequent insistence that language is irreducible to perception and provides none of its easy pleasures. It also jibes nicely with his hostility to natural metaphors of organic wholeness, which, as Christopher Norris correctly notes, he saw as a major source of the aesthetic ideology (xii). By implication, an aestheticized politics would thus be seductively promising sensual pleasures, such as oneness with an alienated nature, it could never deliver (or at least so the resolutely antiutopian and austerely self-abnegating de Man thought).[14]

A similar, but less one-dimensionally negative analysis of this very dimension of the aesthetic ideology has recently been advanced by Terry Eagleton. He begins by noting the importance of the body and materiality in aesthetic discourse beginning with Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century. It is not so much the realization of the Idea that is crucial as its concrete manifestation in the "feminine" register of sensuous form. Aesthetics thus expresses the need to leave behind the lofty realm of logical and ethical rigor for the rich if confusing realm of particular experience.

But despite what may seem to be progress in the detranscendentalization and demasculinization of reason, Eagleton reads the political implications of the ideology of the aesthetic with no less suspicion than de Man. It marks, he claims, "an historic shift from what we might now, in Gramscian terms, call coercion to hegemony, ruling and informing our sensuous life from within while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy" (328).[15] Once again the culprit is Schiller, who was "shrewd enough to see that Kant's stark imperatives are by no means the best way of subjugating a recalcitrant material world. . . . What is needed instead is what Schiller called the 'aesthetic modulation of the psyche,' which is to say a full-blooded project of fundamental ideological construction" (329). The modern subject is thus more aesthetic than cognitive or ethical; he is the site of an internalized, but illusory reconciliation of conflicting demands, which remain frustratingly in conflict in the social world. As such, the aesthetic functions as a compensatory ideology to mask real suffering, reinforcing what the Frankfurt School used to call "the affirmative character of culture."[16]

Eagleton remains, to be sure, enough of a Marxist to interpret the aesthetic dialectically, and thus acknowledges its subversive potential. "Aesthetics are not only incipiently materialist," he writes, "they also provide, at the very heart of the Enlightenment, the most powerful available critique of bourgeois possessive individualism and appetitive egoism. . . . The aesthetic may be the language of political hegemony and an imaginary consolation for a bourgeoisie bereft of a home but it is also, in however idealist a vein, the discourse of utopian critique of the bourgeois social order" (337). Eschewing the deconstructionist assumption that all

dreams of autonomous and autotelic life are recipes for totalitarianism, he lyrically concludes that Marx himself was an aesthetician: "For what the aesthetic imitates in its very glorious futility, in its pointless self-referentiality, in all its full-blooded formalism, is nothing less than human existence itself, which needs no rationale beyond its own self-delight, which is an end in itself and which will stoop to no external determination" (338).

Although Eagleton's recuperation of the aesthetic moment in Marxism may seem excessively starry-eyed, and indeed is rejected by more uncompromising Marxist critics of the aesthetic ideology like David Lloyd,[17] it nonetheless reopens the question of how unequivocally evil the link between aesthetics and politics must be. Fortunately, a new and magisterial history of the problem has just appeared, which provides ample evidence for a more nuanced judgment: Josef Chytry's *The Aesthetic State*.[18] Although he acknowledges the usefulness of Benjamin's interpretation of fascism, Chytry is at pains to disentangle the earlier advocates of aesthetic politics from their alleged fascist progeny. Rather than positing an essentially unified narrative of fateful misreadings from Schiller and Kleist up to Goebbels, as did de Man, he stresses discontinuities instead, going so far as to argue that even Richard Wagner's version of the aesthetic state should not be confused with that of twentieth-century totalitarians. Having read Benjamin's essay on the Jünger collection, he knows how important the experience of the First World War was in giving an irrationalist aesthetic gloss to mass mobilization and the violence of the new technologies. There is a difference, he implicitly suggests, between the brutality committed by Kleist's dancing marionettes and that celebrated in Jünger's "storm of steel."

After a learned prologue on Greek, Renaissance, and other antecedents, Chytry's overview of the German tradition of the aesthetic state begins with Winckelmann's mid-eighteenth-century recovery of the myth of an aesthetic Hellenic polis. He painstakingly traces its fortunes through the Weimar Humanists, Schiller, Hölderlin, Hegel, Schelling, Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marcuse. His account ends with an appreciation of Walter Spies, the German modernist artist who escaped in the 1920s to Bali, where he found—or helped create—a stunning realization of the "magic realism" that had been his artistic credo.

Clifford Geertz's celebrated discussion of the Balinese theater state derived from ancient Hindu-Buddhist religion serves Chytry as scholarly support for the plausibility of Spies's vision.[19]

However idealized Spies's interpretation of Bali may seem, it is clear that Balinese aesthetic politics is a far cry from Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* or Ciano's callous reduction of bombed humans to blossoming flowers. Nor is it reducible to the nightmare of seductive sensuality that appears to have kept de Man restlessly tossing and turning in his bed of linguistic austerity. Chytry's book, moreover, has another lesson worth heeding by those who want to avoid hastily turning all aesthetic politics into a prolegomenon to tyranny. In his discussion of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, he tacitly contests the critical reading we have seen in de Man. Schiller, he writes, "does not identify the moral with the aesthetic. Schiller fully recognizes the dangers of untrammeled aestheticism, but he interprets these pitfalls as resulting from an *inadequate* experience of beauty. The free play of faculties characteristic of aesthetic awareness ought to lead to awareness of the power of reason and the notion of a moral law, and any equation of this free play with the moral law itself reflects a serious misunderstanding of the experience" (90).[20] In other words, rather than yearning to create a fully aestheticized form of life in which all differentiations were collapsed, Schiller was cognizant of the need to maintain certain distinctions. Rather than seek a complete totalization based on the eidaesthetic fiat of a dominating artist/politician, Schiller was sensitive to the value of preserving the nonidentical and the heterogeneous.

Another dimension of Schiller, as Chytry reads him, concerns the universalizing impulse in his notion of the aesthetic, which he connects to Winckelmann's emphasis on the Greek polis's democratic character. The aesthetic state in this sense is profoundly anti-Platonic and thus less the outcome of eidaesthetics than of the alternative Greek notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. "Against 'the most perfect Platonic republic' [Schiller] gives precedence to consent, and against what will be the German romantics' staple argument of individual sacrifice on behalf of the greater whole based on the metaphor of the formal artwork, he points out the basic categorical fallacy behind such arguments"

(86). According to Schiller, the lesson of learning to appreciate natural beauty is transferable to intersubjective relations; in both cases, individuals come to respect the otherness of different objects and subjects, rather than dominating them. Even if Schiller withdrew at the end of the *Letters* into a pessimistic acknowledgment of the likely realization of his ideal by only a small elite,[21] his legacy was flexible enough to sanction a variety of aesthetic states, some more sympathetic than others.

Another way to express the more benign implications of aestheticizing politics in certain of its guises concerns the thorny issue of judgment, which takes us away from producing works of art (or their political correlates) to the problem of how we appreciate and evaluate them.[22] It was, of course, in Kant's Third Critique that the link between judgment and aesthetic taste was classically forged. Aesthetic (or what he also called reflective) judgment is not cognitive (or determinant) because it does not subsume the particular under the general. Rather, it judges particulars without presupposing universal rules or a priori principles, relying instead on the ability to convince others of the rightness of the evaluation. When, for example, I call a painting beautiful, I assume my taste is more than a personal quirk, but somehow expresses a judgment warranting universal assent. I imaginatively assume the point of view of the others, who would presumably share my evaluation. Aesthetic judgment thus cannot be legitimated by being brought under a concept or derived from a universal imperative; it requires instead a kind of uncoerced consensus building that implies a communicative model of rationality as warranted assertability.

Kant's critique of judgment has been itself criticized by those hostile to the aesthetic ideology. In *The Truth in Painting*, for example, Jacques Derrida claims that its dependence on the principle of analogy (as opposed to induction and deduction) means it tacitly privileges an anthropocentric law-giver, who relentlessly reduces difference to sameness (117).[23] Like de Man, he sees the aesthetic as thus complicitous with violence. He also claims that the very attempt to restrict aesthetic judgment to autotelic works of art necessarily fails because the boundary between the work (*ergon*) and the frame (*parergon*) is always permeable, so that it is

impossible to distinguish one form of judgment from another so categorically.

This last argument, however, can be turned against the critics of the aestheticization of politics, who want to maintain a rigid demarcation between the two allegedly separate spheres. If the boundary is always to be breached (although not completely effaced), what will the results look like? The negative answers have already been spelled out above. Are there more attractive alternatives? Three come to mind. The first draws on, but doesn't fully accept, the absoluteness of the distinction between the aesthetic and the literary in de Man; whereas the former tends toward closure, mastery, control and the deceptive hiding of violence, the latter means heightened sensitivity to everything in language that resists such an outcome. De Man himself drew political consequences from this contrast in one of his last essays, in which he invoked no less an authority than Marx as a model for his own work: "[M]ore than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx's *German Ideology*" (*Resistance to Theory* 11). The implication of this argument is that a politics informed by the skills of reading literature deconstructively will be less prone to tyranny than one that is not. Although the target is the aesthetic ideology, the remedy is thus a kind of extension of certain tools of aesthetic analysis into the realm of politics. How, of course, anything beyond ideology critique, anything constructive, will emerge is not very clear.

Two more promising defenses of a benign version of the link between aesthetics and politics have drawn on the lessons of Kant's Third Critique, which critics like de Man dismissively assimilated to the totalizing, analogizing impulse they so disliked. The first of these can be found in the political musings of Jean-François Lyotard, most notably his dialogue with Jean-Loup Thé-

baud, *Just Gaming*.[24] For Lyotard, both politics and art, or at least postmodern art, are realms of "pagan" experimentation in which no general rule governs the resolution of conflicts. Kant's exposure of the dangers of grounding politics in transcendental illusions, of falsely believing that norms, concepts, or cognition can provide a guide to action, is for Lyotard a valuable corrective to the terroristic potential in revolutionary politics in particular. The recognition that we must choose case by case without such criteria, that the conflicts Lyotard calls *differends* cannot be brought under a single rule, means that political, like aesthetic practice, is prevented from becoming subservient to totalizing theory. Rightly understood, it also prevents us from embracing a more problematic version of aestheticized politics, which draws on the mistaken belief that the political community can be fashioned or fabricated like a work of art.[25]

For Lyotard, the result is a politics that can be called aestheticized in the sense of an aesthetics of the sublime. That is, insofar as the sublime acknowledges the unpresentability of what it tries to present, it stops short of attempting to realize theoretically inspired blueprints for political utopias. Rather than trying to instantiate Ideas of Reason or the Moral Law, it follows aesthetic judgment in arguing from analogies, which preserve differences even as they search for common ground. As David Carroll, one of Lyotard's admirers, puts it, "the sublime serves to push philosophy and politics into a reflexive, critical mode, to defer indefinitely the imposition of an end on the historical-political process" (182).

There are, to be sure, potential problems in this version of an aesthetic politics. Not all political problems, after all, allow the luxury of an indefinitely deferred solution. The sublime may be useful as a warning against violently submitting incommensurable differends to the discipline of a homogenizing theory, but it doesn't offer much in the way of positive help with the choices that have to be made. Lyotard's anxiety about introducing any criteria whatsoever into political judgment opens the door, as Eagleton has noted, for a politics of raw intuition, which fails to register the inevitable generalizing function of all language (396ff.).

A more promising version of the claim that aesthetic judg-

ment can be a model of a politics that avoids the imposition of rational norms from without can be found in the work of Hannah Arendt.[26] Aesthetics in her sense is also not the imposition of an artist's arrogant will on a pliable matter, but rather the building of a *sensus communis* through using persuasive skills comparable to those employed in validating judgments of taste. Here the recognition that politics necessitates a choice among a limited number of imperfect alternatives, which are conditioned by history, replaces the foolhardy belief that the politician, like the creative artist, can begin with a clean canvas or a blank sheet of paper. It also means, however, acknowledging the intersubjective basis of judgment, which Lyotard's strong hostility to communication tends to obscure.[27]

As Arendt put it, "that the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability in exactly the sense denoted by Kant, namely, the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present; even that judgment may be one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world—these are insights that are virtually as old as articulated political experience" ("Crisis in Culture" 221). Because judgment operates by invoking paradigmatic examples rather than general concepts, it avoids reducing all particulars to instantiations of the same principle. Instead, it involves the faculty of imagination, which allows participants in the process to put themselves in the place of others without reducing the others to versions of themselves. The "enlarged mentality," as Kant called it, that results from imagination produces a kind of intersubjective impartiality that is different from the alleged God's-eye view of the sovereign subject above the fray (Arendt, *Lectures* 42ff.). Although not transcendental, it is nonetheless more than the validation of infinite heterogeneity and the paradoxical sublime representation of the unpresentable; it mediates the general and the particular rather than pitting one against the other, as Lyotard would prefer.

Arendt's exploration of judgment is, to be sure, more suggestive than fully worked out. Even friendly commentators like Richard Bernstein have faulted her for failing to resolve the implicit tension between her stress on the virtues of action, on the

one hand, and her praise of the spectatorial role of judging, on the other (237).[28] And her problematic segregation of a putatively political realm from its socioeconomic other, which has troubled many of her critics, is not resolved by her desegregating the political and the aesthetic.

But whatever their inadequacies, both Lyotard's and Arendt's thoughts on the potentially benign links between aesthetic judgment and politics serve as useful reminders that not every variant of the aestheticization of politics must lead to the same dismal end.[29] The wholesale critique of "the aesthetic ideology," to return to our initial question, can thus be itself deemed ideological if it fails to register the divergent implications of the application of the aesthetic to politics. For ironically, when it does so, it falls prey to the same homogenizing, totalizing, covertly violent tendencies it too rapidly attributes to "the aesthetic" itself.

Notes

1. In the original version of the essay, which appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5.1 (1936): 40–66, the word *Communism* was replaced by the euphemism *les forces constructives de l'humanité* (66). When the essay was republished in the 1960s, the original word was restored and appears in the English translation.

2. For another account of Nietzsche's influence on aestheticized politics in the milieu which spawned Hitler, see William J. McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria.*

3. See her "Fascinating Fascism."

4. See Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism.*

5. See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory.* This volume includes one of de Man's last essays, which dealt with Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." In his foreword, Wlad Godzich notes the forthcoming appearance of another collection to be called *The Aesthetic Ideology,* edited by Andrzej Warminski. The concept's importance for de Man has been underlined in Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man.*

6. See, for example, Jonathan Culler, "'Paul de Man's War' and the Aesthetic Ideology," and J. Hillis Miller, "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Weiner."

7. See David Lloyd, "Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller" and "Kant's Examples," and Terry Eagleton, "The Ideology of the Aesthetic."

8. For a recent account of Tailhade and other Symbolists involved with anarchist politics, see Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France.* The links between anarchist and fascist politics have often been made because of their shared aestheticization of violence.

9. In a subsequent piece on Ernst Jünger, Berman makes a similar charge of the fetishization of images. See his "Written Right Across Their Faces." Inter-

estingly, the same assumption was held by a very different figure, the logical positivist and avid socialist Otto Neurath, who claimed that "*Words divide, pictures unite*" (217).

10. In a later work on Heidegger and Nazism, Lacoue-Labarthe returned to the issue of "the aestheticization of politics." See chapter seven of his *Heidegger, Art and Politics*.

11. The fairness of de Man's reading of Schiller has been powerfully challenged by Stanley Corngold in "Potential Violence in Paul de Man."

12. It should be noted that misreading was not simply a pejorative term in de Man's vocabulary, for all interpretations were inevitably misreadings in the sense that no reading could claim to be the only correct one. The adjective *grievous*, however, indicates that he wanted to distinguish between misreadings, perhaps in terms of their pragmatic implications.

13. See also his remark in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant": "morality and the aesthetic are both disinterested, but this disinterestedness becomes necessarily polluted in aesthetic representation: the persuasion that [such] judgments are capable of achieving is linked, in the case of the aesthetic, with positively valorized sensual experiences" (137–38). I will leave de Man's more psychoanalytically inclined interpreters to muse on the implications of his anxiety about sensual pollution.

14. Although this is not the place to launch yet another analysis of the links between de Man's wartime writing and his later work, it may be conjectured that the ascetic, antieudamonistic rigor of the latter was in some sense a reaction to—perhaps even a self-punishment for—his having fallen for the seductions of an organic ideology of aesthetic redemption.

15. David Lloyd also claims that it functioned in the transition from coercion to hegemony; see "Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller," 155.

16. See Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture."

17. Lloyd's greater hostility is perhaps explained by his interest in the way that the ideology of the aesthetic functions in the relations between hegemonic and marginal cultures, such as the English and Irish. He notes its role in establishing the canon of great texts, which works to exclude "minor works" that fail to fit the hegemonic model.

18. See also Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: L'invention du goût a l'âge démocratique*.

19. See his *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*.

20. For a similar analysis of Schiller, see Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, 61f.

21. For a less generous interpretation of this withdrawal, see Lloyd, "Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller," where he writes, "since the realization of the aesthetic state is perpetually deferred and can be found in only a few representative individuals, the aesthetic education of individuals towards participation in the ethical State is likewise deferred in a process which requires the order guaranteed by the dynamic State of rights, that is, by the force of the natural State once again" (167).

22. For a recent and very thorough consideration of the issue, see Howard Caygill, *The Art of Judgement*.

23. In *Paul de Man*, Norris also spells out the problematic implications of analogy in Kant's discussion of both the beautiful and the sublime. The former analogizes between the realm of sensual experience and the faculty of the Understanding, the latter between sensual experience and Reason (56ff.).

For a subtle response to Derrida's analysis, see Caygill, *The Art of Judgement,* 395.

24. See also Lyotard, *The Differend,* 140ff., and "Lessons in Paganism." For sympathetic accounts of Lyotard's political thought and its relation to aesthetics, see David Carroll, *Paraesthetics,* chapter seven, and Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard.*

25. In his April 1987 interview with Willem van Reijen and Dick Vreeman, Lyotard explicitly draws on Lacous-Labarthe and Nancy's rejection of politics as a work of art. The critique of this version of aesthetic politics appears on 296f.

26. Arendt's discussion of judgment was unfortunately cut short by her sudden death in 1975, which prevented her from adding a volume on it to the planned trilogy that began with "Thinking" and "Willing." These are included in *The Life of the Mind.* Her most extensive early discussion can be found at the end of her essay "The Crisis in Culture," in *Between Past and Future.* Her last thoughts on the subject are collected as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy.* For analyses of Arendt on judgment, see Michael Denneny, "The Privilege of Ourselves," and Richard J. Bernstein, "Judging—the Actor and the Spectator." Despite the clear similarities in their work, Lyotard never acknowledges Arendt's earlier use of Kant's Third Critique as a model for politics. For a comparison of Arendt and Lyotard, see David Ingram, "The Postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and Lyotard."

27. According to Lyotard, even if aesthetic judgments contain a pretension of universality, they are still

> exempt from the domain of conversation. Even if my taste for a work or for a landscape leads me to discuss it with others (taking that last term in the sense, this time, of an empirical group), it is no less true that any assent that I can obtain from them has nothing to do with the validity of my aesthetic judgment. For the conditions of validity of this judgment are transcendental and are clearly not subject to the opinions of any others whatsoever. The communicability, and even, to speak rigorously, the communion of aesthetic sentiments, cannot be obtained *de facto,* empirically, and much less by means of conversation. . . . [A]esthetic judgment does not proceed through concepts, it cannot be validated by argumentative consensus. ("Interview" 306)

28. Ronald Beiner too wrestles with this tension. See, in particular, Arendt, *Lectures* 135f. One example of the difficulties of her position appears in her citation of Kant's treatment of war, in which he claims that it expresses something sublime that is lost in a long peace. "This is the judgment," she writes, "of the spectator (i.e., it is aesthetical)" (*Lectures* 53). Here we are not that far from Ciano admiring the formal beauty of bombing Ethiopians. What needs to be done to make the political implications of aesthetic judgment attractive is to close the gap between the actors and the spectators of action, and thus reverse Arendt's curious claim that "the public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers" (63).

29. Still another possible version might be sought in an unexpected place, the work of Jürgen Habermas. Although the role of the aesthetic is less central in his system than in Lyotard's and Arendt's, it might be argued that his recent interest in aesthetic rationality suggests interesting avenues of inquiry. For an account

that stresses their importance, see David Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason.*

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. "The Crisis in Culture." *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought.* Cleveland: Faber, 1961. 197–226.

———. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy.* Ed. with an interpretive essay by Ronald Beiner. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

———. *The Life of the Mind.* New York: Harcourt, 1978.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and the Warrior.*" *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 120–28.

———. "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. 217–51.

Berman, Russell. "Foreword: The Wandering Z: Reflections on Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality." *Reproductions of Banality.* By Alice Yaeger Kaplan. xi–xxiii.

———. "Written Right Across Their Faces: Ernst Jünger's Fascist Modernism." *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism.* Ed. Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. 60–80.

Bernstein, Richard J. "Judging—the Actor and the Spectator." *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986. 221–37.

Carroll, David. "The Aesthetic and the Political." *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida.* New York: Routledge, 1987. 155–84.

Caygill, Howard. *The Art of Judgement.* Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Chytry, Josef. *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.

Corngold, Stanley. "Potential Violence in Paul de Man." *Critical Review* 3.1 (1989): 117–37.

Culler, Jonathan. "'Paul de Man's War' and the Aesthetic Ideology." *Critical Inquiry* 15.4 (1989): 777–83.

de Man, Paul. "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater.*" *The Rhetoric of Romanticism.* New York: Columbia UP, 1984. 263–90.

———. *The Aesthetic Ideology.* Ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, forthcoming.

———. "Kant and Schiller." *The Aesthetic Ideology.*

———. "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant." *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects.* Ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1984. 121–44.

———. "Reading and History." *The Resistance to Theory.* 54–72.

———. *The Resistance to Theory.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Denneny, Michael. "The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment." *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World.* Ed. Melvyn A. Hill. New York: St. Martin's, 1979. 245–74.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Truth in Painting.* Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990.
Ferry, Luc. *Homo Aestheticus: L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique*. Paris: Grasset, 1990.
Friedländer, Saul. *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. Trans. Thomas Weyr. New York: Harper, 1984.
Geertz, Clifford. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
Habermas, Jürgen. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985.
Hillach, Ansgar. "The Aesthetics of Politics: Walter Benjamin's 'Theories of German Fascism.'" *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 99–119 (preface to Benjamin, "Theories").
Ingram, David. *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
———. "The Postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and Lyotard." *The Review of Metaphysics* 42.1 (1988): 51–77.
Kaplan, Alice Yaeger. *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
Kinser, Bill, and Neil Kleinman. *The Dream That Was No More a Dream: A Search for Aesthetic Reality in Germany, 1890–1945*. New York: Harper, 1969.
Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*. Trans. Chris Turner. New York: Blackwell, 1990.
Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: State U of New York P, 1988.
Lloyd, David. "Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics." *Cultural Critique* 2 (1985–86): 137–70.
———. "Kant's Examples." *Representations* 28 (1989): 34–54.
Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
———. "Interview with Jean-Francois Lyotard." By Willem Van Reijen and Dick Vreeman. *Theory, Culture and Society* 5 (1988): 277–309.
———. "Lessons in Paganism." *The Lyotard Reader*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 122–54.
Lyotard, Jean-François, and Jean-Loup Thébaud. *Just Gaming*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985.
Marcuse, Herbert. "The Affirmative Character of Culture." *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon, 1968. 88–133.
Marinetti, F. T. *The Futurist Manifesto*. Rpt. in James Joll, *Three Intellectuals in Politics*. New York: Pantheon, 1960. 179–84.
McGrath, William J. *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974.
Miller, J. Hillis. "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Weiner." *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenen. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989. 334–42.
Neurath, Otto. *Empiricism and Sociology*. Trans. Paul Foulkes and Marie Neurath. Ed. Marie Neurath and Robert S. Cohen. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
Norris, Christopher. *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of the Aesthetic Ideology*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Raynaud, Ernest. *Souvenirs sur le symbolisme*. Paris: Payot, 1895.
Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*. London: Routledge, 1991.
Smith, Denis Mack. "The Theory and Practice of Fascism." *Fascism: An Anthology*. Ed. Nathanael Greene. New York: Crowell, 1968. 73–112.
Sonn, Richard D. *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989.
Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980. 73–108.
Stern, J. P. *Hitler; The Führer and the People*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.