

Unfaithful Reflections: on Cold War Historiography

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Introduction: Post-politics?

The use of the post- as a prefix has a dubious lineage: in the 1950s Daniel Bell announced the advent of a “post-ideological” society; shortly after, it was the turn of the “post-modern condition,” which brought with it “post-colonialism” and “post-industrialism,” along with Francis Fukuyama’s “post-historical” – all equally doubtful claims in hindsight. The use of the “post-“ as prefix seems almost inevitably to mark the triumphalist phase of ideologies – the moment their claim to universality becomes common wisdom. That these moments often coincide with the beginning of the

In this paper, I would like to address three questions related to the de-politicization of architecture. All three have the form of strange symmetries – or oppositions - that can help to understand why any notion of a “post-political architecture” should be resisted. The first is Walter Benjamin’s notorious injunction, in the epilogue to the Artwork essay, to resist the “aestheticisation of politics” through the “politisisation of art.”

ideology’s demise – like the “invisible hand” of the free market on Wall Street today – is evident from the frequency with which such claims are suddenly and theatrically exposed as shams.

If these remarks suggest the greatest possible caution in approaching any notion of a “post-political” architecture, they also imply that whenever the claim is made, a valid exercise is to consider whether the opposite may in fact be happening. Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction* – to take just one example of architectural ideology at its purest – opened with the famous disclaimer about the book’s social relevance.

My concern here is how this famous phrase has been used to advance positions that are sometimes completely at odds with Benjamin’s. Turning next to my own field of historical research, I would like to review how some of the same assumptions that underlie the misuse of Benjamin can be found in architectural scholarship of Europe between the two World Wars. Finally, it seems right to consider the relevance of

century of neo-conservative and Cold War ideology – issues that re-emerge today as historians rethink their discipline in a context that no longer affords the easy comforts of post-modernism's patronage of history.

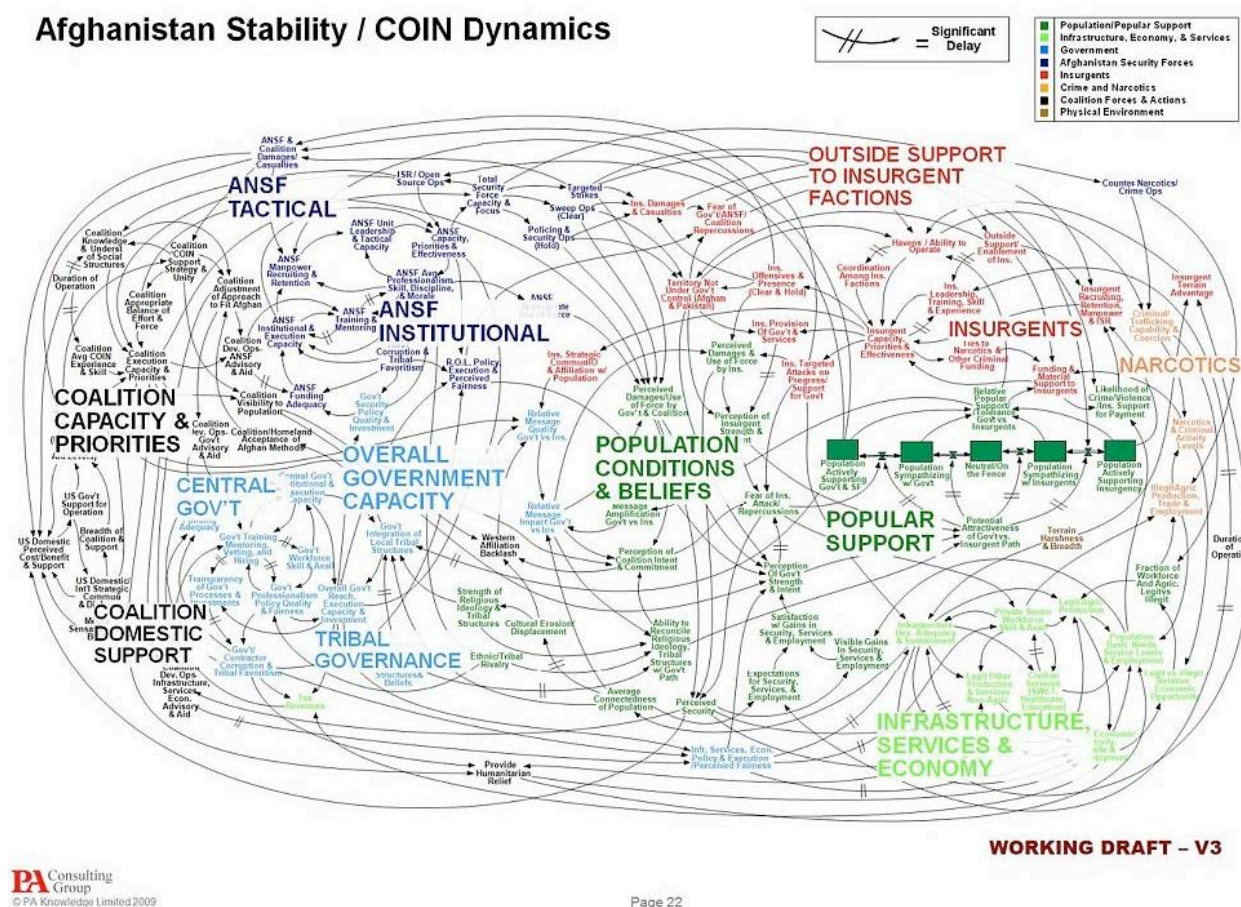


FIG.1. I have searched for a visual analogue for the Cold War ideology. The best I have been able to find is this diagram, recently issued by the US department of defense, which purports to summarize General Petreus' strategy to win the hearts and minds of the Afghans -- a late version, we could say, of Cold War planning that effectively conveys the paranoid complexity of the imperial mindset.

I. *Disabling Benjamin*

Probably no part of Benjamin's writings has been cited more often than his conclusion to the Artwork essay. Although generally placed in non-committal quotation marks, the "aestheticisation of politics" is a standard reference in many discussions of art and society, or art and media -- so common, in fact, that quite a few critics on the Left have been moved to distance themselves from it,¹ with some, like the film theorist Peter Wollen, going so far as to recommend -- unwisely, in my view -- discarding it altogether.²

Let us recall the essay's historical circumstances. Written over a period of four years, from 1934 to 1939, it addressed a political crisis of historical proportions: the failure of the Left to mount any effective opposition to the

rise of Fascism. Benjamin perceived this crisis as a fatal conjunction between two particularly dangerous conditions: on the one hand, there was the aestheticisation of political life as practiced by Fascism, which gave the masses an illusion of self-expression instead of their rights and which culminated in the glorification of war. On the other hand, within the cultural sphere, there was the cult of decaying aura of a belated aestheticism (as in the George circle and among individual avant-gardists such as Marinetti) that supplied a direct link to Fascism by transferring the mystique of art for art's sake to the cult of war.

In this situation of extreme emergency, the only remaining strategy for intellectuals, according to Benjamin, was to combat Fascism's aestheticisation of politics with the politicization of art. Examples of the latter would have included Bertold Brecht's epic theater; new literary forms able to respond rapidly to events, such as Benjamin's own experiments with montage; mass reproducible kinds of "prompt language" expressed in leaflets, posters, pamphlets, or newspaper articles; and perhaps most importantly, an appropriate use of the most powerful

¹ See Martin Jay, "The Aesthetic Ideology as Ideology: Or, what does it mean to Aestheticize Politics?" in *Cultural Critique*, No. 21 (Spring 1992), pp. 41-61.

² Peter Wollen, "Detroit, capital of the Twentieth Century," lecture presented at the centennial symposium on Walter Benjamin, Wayne State University, Detroit, April 1992, cited in Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room for Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema" in *October* (Summer 2004), p. 3.

means of mass communication, radio and film. All these forms of modern propagandizing, for Benjamin, could be used effectively to redirect the energies of fascist politics back to their real source in a *civil war* of the workers against capitalism's property structure.

Seen in the context, therefore, the alternative was clear and unambiguous. It reflected Benjamin's direct political engagement in a Communist revolution on the side of the working class. Yet this is precisely what has been carefully edited out by most of Benjamin's US commentators – starting with Horkheimer removing any reference to Communism from the first published version and replacing it with the vague phrase “the free forces of humanity” and continuing on through the various theoretical phases that have marked Benjamin's reception in the US.

Much of the writing on the Artwork essay has been useful: beginning in the 1970s, a number of important contributions by Martin Jay and others have probed the implications of Benjamin's arguments, helping to better understand the disagreement with Adorno and to appreciate the complex background of

aestheticism from Schiller onwards. Major contributions have also been made to understanding Benjamin's ideas of aura, distracted perception, wish-images – as seen especially in his explorations of 19th century Paris. Yet as Esther Leslie has shown, since he was first introduced to US audiences by Hannah Arendt in 1969, the Anglo-American reception of Benjamin has focused chiefly on his importance as a literary critic, or an *homme de lettres*. Citing Markner and Weber's bibliographic survey of Benjaminian scholarship, she notes how, far from historicizing his work, the dominant thrust of academic work has been to “snatch motives from here and there to extract a philosophy consistent with the academic fashions of the moment, while dodging the task of situating Benjamin's writing within the context of his dialogues with left politics.”³

It is not possible here to review all the relevant literature, but it is significant that of the two terms of Benjamin's choice, the greatest amount of attention has gone to the first, the aestheticisation of

³ Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London, Pluto Press 2000) p. 220 ff.

politics. A simple Google search of “Benjamin aesthetic politics” turns up about five times more hits than “Benjamin political art”. This imbalance is symptomatic, since contrary to the politicization of art, the aestheticisation of politics does not commit one to Benjamin’s radical views. One can talk freely about the dangers of media manipulation and political spectacle, of commodification and collective dream-images, and still remain firmly within the liberal-democratic mainstream. Politicizing art, on the other hand, confronts one directly with a militant posture regarding the new forms of political art needed to advance a genuine project on the Left, a posture that goes directly against the prime tenets of Cold War ideology.

A second way to dismiss Benjamin’s politics is the tried-and-true method used by Karl Popper and others to discredit Marxism: it consists of recasting the entire essay as a series of scientific propositions about the conditions of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Thus reframed as an abstract scientific theory, critics may then proceed to show how “the facts” confirm, or more often disprove, Benjamin’s “predictions.”

Recently, this approach has been used in an otherwise interesting book, *Mapping Benjamin*, edited Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Micael Marrinan, where we find articles with such titles as “Confronting Benjamin” by Stephen Bann or “How to make Mistakes on so Many Things at Once and Become Famous for it” by Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour.⁴ In architectural theory as well, critics as different as Antoine Picon and Mario Carpo have argued along similar lines that Benjamin’s theory is spectacularly disproved by the historical evolution towards new “auratic” forms of digital reproduction – ignoring the ethico-political thrust of Benjamin’s argument and recasting it in quasi-scientific terms.

Most often, though, avoidance simply takes the form of a polite downplaying. Richard Wolin, for example, in an early and still useful commentary of the *Artwork* essay, dismisses Benjamin’s final call to politicize art as a rhetorical flourish, a misguided reversal that “crucially overlooks” Adorno’s well-

⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrian, *Mapping Benjamin: the Work of Art in the Digital Age*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2003.

founded objections.⁵ The latter consisted essentially of Adorno's much less hopeful view of mass culture, his staunch defense of artistic autonomy and the values embodied in high art, and his insistence on the essential mediating role of an intellectual vanguard.⁶ Here again, it is interesting to note that Adorno's position was much more in line with the climate of the Cold War and its hysterical fear of political activism.

Whether framed as a scientific theory or recast in Adorno's terms, which effectively displaces the political back on to the aesthetic, these readings have served to obscure the force and urgency of Benjamin's argument. Certainly the culminating point of these distortions is the late Paul De Man, who as Martin Jay has shown, uses Benjamin's conclusion to the Artwork essay to warn darkly against the dangers posed by all "aesthetic ideologies" that might attempt to change the status quo. Deliberately conflating left and right, Communism

and Fascism, De Man targets the whole of western metaphysics to advance what is, in essence, a slightly updated version of Popper's tirades against the inherent violence of utopias.⁷ Here Benjamin's thesis is turned upside down. In open contrast to his underlying intentions, it serves to reinforce one of the cardinal principles of the Cold War doctrine - the injunction to separate art from politics - which has remained remarkably consistent over more than half a century, persisting through changes in fashion from post-modernism to deconstruction and beyond.

⁵ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: an Aesthetics of Redemption*, New York, Columbia University Press 1982, p. 184.

⁶ See among the various accounts of the Adorno-Benjamin correspondence, F. Jameson, ed. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London Verso 1977).

⁷ See Paul de Man, Andrezej Warminski, *The Aesthetic Ideology*, UMP 1996, and Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Manchester University Press 1986, as well as Martin Jay's "The Aesthetic Ideology as Ideology," cit.

II. *Right-wing avant-gardes?*



FIG.2 Mario Sironi, Cover Illustration for *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, 1934

The tendency to philosophize Benjamin has resulted in a predicament for historians like myself, since one of the first casualties of the Cold War's refashioning of Benjamin has been historical scholarship, especially the scholarship that addresses cultural trends of Benjamin's own time. Thus, for all his importance as Europe's leading XXth century cultural critic, with few exceptions Benjamin's insights have remained a dead letter for the historian of Italian art and politics during the

fascist period. Today, in the mass of historical scholarship in my own area of interest – the Novecento and Italian rationalism – there is not a single sustained study of the works of this period that makes any meaningful connection to Benjamin's writing.

This state of affairs brings me to the next issue I would like to address, which is a problem confronting any scholars of art and politics during the interwar years. There are two separate but related issues here – both of them closely linked

to Cold War orthodoxy: first is the tendency to isolate from the mainstream anything with an overt political resonance, as in those history book chapters devoted to architecture and politics under the totalitarian regimes of Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union (Frampton, Benevolo). While understandable as an effort to deal with the circumstances prevailing in these countries, this tendency has served to create an invidious distinction between so-called “political” and so-called “non-political” architecture. Certainly, a great deal of recent scholarship has worked valiantly to break down this distinction – Mary McCloud’s research on Le Corbusier is one example - but the distinction remains, grounded in the hierarchy of high art vs low that is one way that Cold War ideology perpetuates its elitist conception of art.

Closely related to this is the question of so-called fascist avant-gardes. As is well known, a core principle of Cold War thinking is that political extremes meet, that Fascism and Communism should be seen as two versions of a single “totalitarian” model distinct from liberal democracies. This sort of egalitarian approach underlies an interesting journal

such as the Miami-based *Propaganda Arts*, for example, that professes to treat art of all stripes, regardless of their political orientation. The mere fact that numerous family resemblances can indeed be traced among works produced for very different ideological agendas seems to validate this kind of catholic approach.

In my own field, I repeatedly come across art from the fascist era produced by loyal followers of Mussolini, like the Italian rationalist Giuseppe Terragni, or the painter Mario Sironi – who nevertheless drew a surprisingly large number of themes from their political rivals. Sironi’s propaganda of the 1930s, for example, shows a very close and detailed knowledge of Konstantin Melnikov, El-Lissitzki, and Rodchenko, and in some cases can even be said to anticipate graphic devices popularized by the Constructivists a few years later.⁸ Such parallels cannot be dismissed as fortuitous. They are too widespread to

⁸ See Libero Andreotti, “The Techno-aesthetics of Shock: Mario Sironi and Italian Fascism” in *Grey Room* 38 (Winter 2011) pp. 38-61. Earlier versions have appeared in G. Hartoonian, Benjamin and Architecture (London, Routledge 2010) and Bechir Kenzari, ed. Architecture and Violence (Barcelona ACTAR 2011).

be due to chance or idiosyncrasy. They point rather to a deep structural link between fascist and communist art that demands interpretation. Unfortunately, it is precisely at this point that the Cold War notion of totalitarianism becomes, as Slavoj Zizek puts it, a *theoretical stopgap* which “instead of forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, relieves us of the duty to think or even actively prevents us from doing so.”⁹

In the standard interpretation, there is little to explain: Fascist and Communist art is similar because the movements themselves were similar. Both departed from the democratic model and as a result, faced similar issues (of communication, political influence, illegitimate interference in the artistic process, and so on). Hence the tendency to explain aspects of fascist and communist works in terms of the need, felt equally on both sides, to communicate through legible symbols – a reading that ends up dissimulating many striking differences of program, use and intention. To mention just one

example, Boris Iofan’s universally reviled winning entry for the Palace of the Soviets (1931) was radically unlike the projects for the Palace of Fascism (1934) of a few years later with which it is nevertheless often compared – the first conceived (at least in program) as a democratic political assembly hall, the second as an extravagant stage set for the leader accompanied by an exhibition space.

Even more problematic than the tendency to overlook significant differences, however, is the failure to see how similar works may differ in important symptomatic ways. More specifically, what the Cold War model precludes is an understanding of how one family of works *depends*, structurally and ideologically, on the other, how it enacts a parasitic exchange determined by the opposing strategies of the two sides. This view requires that we adopt Benjamin’s critique of social democracy and his understanding of Fascism as a “defused revolution” – designed to divert and neutralize the revolutionary worker’s movement.

Slavoj Zizek recently elaborated on this point. For Zizek, the primary techniques

⁹ Slavoj Zizek, *Did Somebody say Totalitarianism?* London: Verso 2001, p. 3, 182.

used *by the right* to deflect the revolutionary impulses from the left are best seen in terms of Freud's notion of *verschiebung*, obfuscation or displacement, in which something that is – as he puts it – “inherent and constitutive of the social field” is replaced by a “positive naturalized element” that is formally similar but ontologically different. The most emblematic example of this process is the way Fascism, in Žižek's view, turned the class struggle into a *racial* struggle – through a series of relatively small but decisive twists or displacements. To understand this process it is critical to recognize how right-wing ideology preserves large parts of its source, leaving its emotional force intact. Many times, as Žižek notes a propos of Leni Riefenstahl, the twist is just enough to shift what he calls the ontological framework of the work. The result is a deflected or incomplete version of the original – characteristically a hybrid (fascist) or even simply a confused reproduction of a purer (communist) source.

Sironi's work is a perfect illustration of this process. Take any one of his political drawings: epic visions of the

masses swept along by irresistible historical forces, monumental symbols representing the strength of the movement, its goal, and the sacrifice necessary to achieve it. If one abstracts from the literal symbolism, it is not difficult to recognize the source of these themes in the history of the workers movement, where Sironi, like Mussolini, was formed. This image of insurrection is overlaid with the fascist symbol – the fascio – and the colors of the Italian flag. In Žižek's terms, we can say that they displace what is inherent and constitutive of the social field – the struggle of the working class – onto a “positive naturalized element” of the nationalist narrative.

A closer reading of the actual political sources of Sironi's art might go further and note, along with Ernesto Laclau, that every one of the “elements” of Sironi's work is leftist in origin, and that only their “articulation” makes them fascist. After all, nationalism comprises such traditionally leftist themes of self-determination and freedom from imperialist oppression. Similar considerations could be made about the image of the leader. On one level, to be sure, it is the very embodiment of

authoritarian rule. Yet from another angle, from what Žižek calls “the plebiscitary logic of charismatic leadership” that “enables me – as he puts it – actually to choose myself,” it is an amplified image of self-determination. Finally, there is the iconography of the fascio -- the principles of solidarity and justice inherent in the bundle of sticks and the ax -- that made it so serviceable to represent republican values throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Seen in this way, Sironi’s propaganda appears to offer a curious mixture of progressive and reactionary themes – a mixture that recalls that of another great right-wing philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Here again, Žižek’s comments are pertinent. According to Žižek, Heidegger’s philosophy cannot simply be branded as fascist, since to do so would be to “concede too much to the enemy”: just like there is nothing “inherently fascist” about many of the Heidegger’s notions (of decision, repetition, assuming one’s destiny), so there is nothing inherently fascist in many of Sironi’s themes. As Žižek puts it, “one should not allow the enemy to define the terrain of the battle and its stakes.”

What is crucial, instead, is to recognize two things: first, that the content of right-wing ideology is largely made up of leftist themes, and second, that in order to usurp a popular base it does not have, in order to appropriate ideas and values that don’t belong to it, the right is required to employ a whole apparatus of techniques and distortions that must be understood and exposed – and that it is exactly at this level that the “aestheticisation of politics” operates. To look at right-wing avant-gardism in this way is quite the opposite of what many liberal historians such as Susan Sontag have done – hunting for so-called “proto-fascist elements” in cultural traditions that are a great deal more complex on the mistaken belief that fascism was ever anything more than a pragmatic collection of slogans stolen from here and there and adapted for particular ends. When Žižek stresses the syncretism of fascism he is simply reaffirming the common knowledge of an earlier generation of anti-fascists – like Benjamin – who witnessed directly not only the paralysis of the Left in the face of the mounting power of Fascism, but the latter’s pillaging of its political culture.

III. *Art Equals Politics*



FIG. 3. Wall Street Protests, 2008

So far, I have been discussing the basic framework of Cold War criticism – a point of view that systematically privileges autonomous art over social engagement, the status quo over any effort to bring about change, upholding what Edward Said described as the unwritten rule of intellectual discourse in academia, the principle of non-intervention.

Against this, it seems that the project for a new historiography of modern art and architecture is much the same as that of the political left in general: to reclaim a territory that has been taken over by the

enemy. In politics, that is the whole tradition of popular anti-capitalism that is now being claimed by the far right, assisted by the liberal democratic mainstream; in history, it is art and architecture that has been too hastily branded as right-wing and proto-fascist. This includes much of the mass choreography stigmatized by the left as proto-fascist; the celebration – however naïve – of popular cultural themes of solidarity and community, and the symbolism of heroic struggle and sacrifice, especially when it shades into Christian imagery – the cult of the martyrs, for example, which is nothing

more than the moral obligation to reactivate the past, looking backward rather than forward.

This way of looking does not, obviously, imply a wholesale rehabilitation of fascist artists (such as we see today in Berlusconi's Italy). On the contrary, we should probably be asking the opposite question: what secret fascination might there be in the persistent, obsessive demonizing of fascist and proto-fascist artists the liberal-democratic intelligentsia. What is it about Sironi, Leni Riefenstahl, or Richard Wagner that causes such distress?

A famous passage from the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is that "to articulate the past historically ... means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." If there is one common thread that connects Benjamin's politics to our own, it is the failure of the left to mount any kind of effective resistance against the advance of the right, and the consequent threat of physical and now ecological disaster that confronts us today with the same urgency it did for Benjamin almost a century ago. Now more than ever, it would seem, a willingness to gamble on

direct political action, the way Benjamin advocated is essential.

To evaluate this prospect, it is useful to return to Adorno's objections and consider how his view of mass culture, of autonomous art, and of the role of an intellectual vanguard have held up over the last eight decades. As far as the culture industry is concerned, it would certainly appear that the aestheticisation of politics has proceeded apace, growing exponentially and reaching ever more dizzying levels of political spectacle that make fascist propaganda look quaint by comparison. What is less evident, however, is whether, as Adorno believed, the spectacle is all that effective. As Benjamin clearly saw, the development of technology is linked inextricably to changes in the human sensorium, including the human organism's capacity to 'master' technologies critically. In the race between ever more sophisticated methods of control and manipulation and the public's capacity to see through them, it is not at all clear which side may be gaining the upper hand. A pessimistic view would point to unprecedented levels of alienation and passivity in the public and the extent to which people

can be made to act against their own interests. On the other hand, an optimistic view might ask: What have the new media achieved, in the end, if not the clearest ever divide between the spectacle and the vast majority of world opinion – on practically every major issue of consequence, from militarism to social, civil, and human rights, education, economic justice, health care, and the environment?

Similar doubts emerge if we consider Adorno's defense of autonomous art. For one thing, we are now aware of how even the most autonomous art has served ideological agendas and has been unable to escape the commodification of aesthetic experience in each one of the component registers of vision, sound, touch, taste and smell described by Caroline Jones in her book *Sensorium*. The massive expansion of the role of art in the economy would also seem to limit the conditions and scope of such practices. On the other hand, this same dynamic opens up new perspectives on the politicization of art and the possibility of new syntheses of the aesthetic and the political in line with those developed by the Situationist

International, for example, in May 68.¹⁰ The latter were based on a simple rule, which has lost none of its value today: that we consider every genuine political action to be art, and every genuine artistic expression to be political.

To identify art and politics in this way entails new practices that have nothing to do with the institutional forms each of these separate activities have in the society of the spectacle – practices that reinvent both in new, more effective, spontaneous combinations. Examples of the latter may be found wherever people decide to take their lives in their own hands. Within and around architecture, they can be found in the proliferation of resistant practices around the world, from "reclaim the streets" to the various forms of insurgent urbanism catalogued by Jeffrey Hou, among others.¹¹ Beyond architecture, we may ask whether the global phenomenon of urban insurrections today does not herald a

¹⁰ See my "Play-tactics of the Internationale Situationniste" in *October* 91 and *Le Grand Jeu à Venir: écrits situationnistes sur la ville* (Paris: Editions La Villette 2007).

¹¹ Jeffrey Hou, ed. *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (London, Routledge 2010).

new and more decisive phase in the unfinished business opened up in May 68.

These new forms of global awareness express new kinds of activism that recall the interpenetration of “image-space” and “body space” (Bildraum and leibraum), that Benjamin recognized as unique to revolutionary situations. Culturally ambiguous, drawing their subversive strength from many sources, from high culture and low, from secular as well as religious traditions – their distinguishing characteristic is precisely their horizontal, “leaderless” nature – their greatly reduced dependence on the mediation of an intellectual vanguard so crucial for Adorno. Central to these new forms of non-objectified subjectivity is rather the dialectics of play theorized in the so-called “ur-text” of the Artwork essay – a productive dynamic that points to an alternative, politicized aesthetics, on a par with contemporary forms of collective experience.

To conclude with an anecdote, and a question: When in 1968 student revolutionaries in Frankfurt entered a classroom in which Adorno was lecturing, he called the police to have

them arrested. When they went to Heidegger’s house, he received them warmly and expressed his approval of what they were doing. How should one explain these unexpected reactions – the first from a figure traditionally associated with the Left, the second from an unrepentant supporter of Nazism? Adorno’s chronic timidity and Heidegger’s notorious opportunism aside, we might still ask what different attitudes to historical events like May 68 these two philosophers have to offer. Would it not be best to combine the intellectual courage of the Adorno with the timeliness of Heidegger, who however mistaken in his views was not afraid to jump into the fray?