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The Aesthetic Unconscious

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PART ONE

ANTI-COMMUNIST POLITICS

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Aesthetics, Ideology, Critique

Since the end of the eighteenth century, “aesthetics” and “ideology” have inhabited overlapping theoretical domains, but the combination of the two terms into a unified concept (“aesthetic ideology”) is of relatively recent vintage. Why this delay? Why did we have to wait until the second half of the twentieth century for the birth of this concept? In order to answer this question, we should first note that even a brief survey of the contemporary uses of the term will show us two completely different applications. More often than not, popular usage relies on this category simply to name the political dimension of the circulation (the production, exchange, distribution, and reception) of artistic products. The stronger philosophical meaning of the term, however, derives from the critique of “aesthetics” that has formed an important philosophical current of Western thought over the last two centuries. In the latter sense, the birth of “aesthetic ideology” amounts to the philosophical renunciation of the mastery of philosophy over art. From a theoretical perspective, however, one significant question still remains open: what can the simultaneous historical emergence of these two divergent meanings teach us about the meaning of modernity?¹

Our first question, therefore, concerns the historical conditions of this conceptualization. In this regard, it is customary to cite the more or less parallel emergence during the eighteenth century of modern aesthetics (Baumgarten), ideology as the science of ideas (Destutt de Tracy), and transcendental philosophy as critique (Kant).² The interesting thing about the modern inception of aesthetics, ideology, and critique is that their

moments of birth do not fully reflect the later uses of these categories. As is well known, Baumgarten's aesthetic theory is a science of sensory perception; and de Tracy's ideology is not the science of "false consciousness" but the study of the representations of the world in the form of ideas. This dual study of particular perceptions and universal ideas was, then, bridged by Kant's theory of transcendental imagination, which ultimately found its justification in a critique of aesthetic judgment. The latter, however, was not exclusively a theory of art, since its ultimate goal was to define the teleology of nature.

Thus, the familiar meanings of these three categories, as we tend to use them today, are mostly post-Kantian inventions. This historical move, however, introduced certain ambiguities that are still with us. As a philosophical discourse, aesthetics simultaneously names a general theory of experience (mostly concerned with sensory perception) and a theory of art (understood as a specific form of experience). Ideology refers either to ideas constitutive of subjectivity or to a false consciousness which can be replaced by authentic ideas. Finally, critique names the descriptive investigation of "conditions of possibility" as well as the normative application of standards deducible from these conditions.

The prehistory of "aesthetic ideology" was, thus, marked by the tacit assumption that "aesthetics" and "ideology" are two separate entities in ever-changing relations with each other, while "critique" involves their proper separation. Upon further reflection, we find that the identities of the two terms predetermined this history, depending on which of the two was considered to be the primary category. When the stress fell on "ideology," we found ourselves in a classic Marxist problematic. In this sense, "aesthetic *ideology*" refers to the fact that culture, since it belongs to the sphere of superstructure, is always determined (at least in the "last instance") by a more fundamental structural moment. At its worst, aesthetic experience is a false escape from ideology and, as such, an exemplary instance of ideological mystification. At its best, it is the transparent transmission of a good ideology and, as such, not really aesthetic at all. On the other hand, if we choose "aesthetics" as the master term, we find ourselves in the midst of the classic problems of Romanticism. In this sense, the autonomy of the aesthetic is the only viable model of just political organization. Aesthetics is still ideological, but art is the only "good" ideology that could effectively establish the harmony of an "aesthetic state." Aesthetics here names the nonideological instance that fully realizes the essence of ideology.

Within the horizon of this prehistory, then, we can speak only of the "politicization of art" or the "aestheticization of politics." These two basic paradigms were most famously formalized in the concluding sentences of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological

Reproducibility.” Here, Benjamin offers us a choice between (fascist) aestheticized politics and (Communist) politicized art.³ Regardless of whether such interpretations actually exhaust Benjamin’s meaning, these two options and their corresponding political values became the tacit presuppositions of a wide range of subsequent enquiries. As a result, even today “aesthetic ideology” is often condemned as the inappropriate introduction of artistic practices into nonartistic fields. Whichever route the critic chooses to follow (and in this respect it has not proven to be decisive if a combination of the two was professed), the decisive point remains that the ideological problem always emerges at the point of intersection of two supposedly autonomous domains. So the difficult task that we have inherited from Benjamin consists of severing the ties between structural possibilities and political programs: what if the mutual interactions of aesthetics and politics lack an inherent political meaning?

This is why Althusser’s theory of ideology is a crucial turning point in this history, since it redirects the theorization of ideology to the “original” meaning of aesthetics and, thereby, performs an important approximation of the two categories. For Althusser, ideology is to be located on the level of the very constitution of subjectivity and “lived experience.” In this sense, ideology is “aesthetic” because it accounts for the very possibility of experience. Henceforth, ideology will always be aesthetic, even if the ambiguity of the latter category leaves the question open of how we move from a theory of experience to a theory of art. Schematically speaking, the Althusserian theory of ideology is concerned with the problem of reproduction and argues the following: (1) ideology is eternal (it has no history because it is *omni-historical*); (2) it is an imaginary representation (“ideology = an imaginary relation to real relations”); (3) it is realized in material practices; and (4) it interpellates individuals as subjects. Concerning the last point, Althusser speaks of a “double constitution”: “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.”⁴

This dual constitution has at least two significant consequences. First, ideological recognition implies the misrecognition of the real conditions of reproduction. But, as Althusser argues, reproduction is actually the condition of production (for without the reproduction of the conditions of production there would be no production). Thus, ideology always functions as the disavowal of the conditions of a particular mode of production and, as such, it is also the disavowal of the conditions of the constitution of subjectivity. In the same movement, ideology constitutes a subject and covers up the traces of this constitution. The second point concerns the possibility of ideology critique. For, if the subject is constitutively ideological, the move

beyond ideology must take place from within ideology.⁵ Such is the role of science constituted by the knowledge of ideological mechanisms.

But “real art” has a very similar function even if it must be distinguished from science. Althusser’s theory of art can be derived from his essentially aesthetic theory of ideology. In “A Letter on Art,” Althusser writes:

When we speak of ideology we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with the “lived” experience of human existence itself: that is why the form in which we are “made to see” ideology in great novels has as its content the “lived” experience of individuals. This “lived” experience is not a *given*, given by a pure “reality”, but the spontaneous “lived experience” of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real. This is an important comment, for it enables us to understand that art does not deal with a reality *peculiar to itself*, with a *peculiar domain* of reality in which it has a monopoly (as you tend to imply when you write that “with art, knowledge becomes human”, that the object of art is “the individual”).⁶

The important point here is that the function of “authentic” art is an internal critique of ideology. As Althusser argues, unlike science, art does not make us conscious of its object (in the form of concepts). Rather, by establishing an “internal distance” in relation to the ideology that functions as its very condition, art can make this ideology visible, perceptible, and sensible. Nevertheless, art cannot be established as a radically autonomous field outside ideology. All it can do is render visible the conditions of its own constitution (which are disavowed in ideology). In other words, Althusser simultaneously rejects the humanist ideology of art (which claims that art is the autonomous expression of human essence) and the absolute ideologization of art. Thus, Althusser’s significance for this history of “aesthetic ideology” was to question the autonomy of the two fields. On the one hand, he performed a significant approximation of the aesthetic and the ideological through his theory of the ideological constitution of subjectivity. On the other hand, he rejected the radical autonomy of art and redefined it as the internal limit of ideology.

More recently, the two most instrumental books in popularizing the term “aesthetic ideology” were Paul de Man’s *Aesthetic Ideology* and Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.⁷ In their symmetrical opposition, they reproduce the two paradigmatic options of the prehistory of the category. While de Man moves from a critique of aesthetics as a philosophical discourse toward politics, Eagleton moves from a set of political convictions toward an aesthetic theory of art. In spite of all their differences, however, their discourses are structured by the same opposition: materiality (in Eagleton’s case the materiality of the body, in de Man’s the

materiality of the signifier) is opposed to ideology. In this respect, they are both heirs to the Althusserian redefinition of ideology, since the problem of aesthetics and ideology has to be discussed in relation to the very constitution of experience. What concerns us the most, however, is that they both effectively claim that the basic paradigm of ideology is a kind of aesthetic distortion. If ever so indirectly, they both argue that ideology as such is inherently aesthetic.

De Man's "non-phenomenal linguistics" locates the problem of "aesthetic ideology" at the heart of a recognizably Kantian problematic, that of the "phenomenality of the non-phenomenal."⁸ As a result, the aesthetic cannot be equated with art, as it unavoidably leads to phenomenological questions about the constitution of objectivity as such. As de Man insists, since for Kant the function of the *Third Critique* is to establish the link between theoretical and practical reason, aesthetics assumes a double role: on the one hand, it is a particular philosophical discipline devoted to the study of art; on the other hand, inasmuch as aesthetic theory also fulfills a more general mediating role, it is also "critical philosophy to the second degree, the critique of the critiques."⁹ Thus, "aesthetics" simultaneously functions as a theory of art and an attempt by "a universal system of philosophy" to establish its very own systematicity.¹⁰ As a result, it is "a phenomenality of a process of meaning and understanding, and it may be naïve in that it postulates (as its name indicates) a phenomenology of art and literature."¹¹ At the same time, "ideology" names the tropological movement whereby something essentially nonphenomenal is given a sensible form. In de Man's famous definition, ideology "is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenality."¹² But this confusion of linguistic reference and phenomenological intuition is essentially of an aesthetic nature: "Intuition implies perception, consciousness, experience, and leads at once into the world of logic and of understanding with all its correlatives, among which aesthetics occupies a prominent place."¹³ Therefore, aesthetics is inherently ideological simply because it is concerned with the phenomenology of art; and ideology is inherently aesthetic, as the confusion of reference and intuition is the constitutive move of aesthetic discourse.

For Eagleton, the category of the aesthetic functions as the condition of impossibility of bourgeois ideology and its corresponding definition of the subject. As a condition of impossibility, this ideological definition of the work of art simultaneously renders possible the hegemony of bourgeois ideology and establishes the preconditions of its radical critique. From this perspective, the single most important quality of the aesthetic in the age of its complete commodification is its "autonomy," which becomes the ultimate model of the freedom the bourgeois subject. The latter, however, is

best understood as the internalization of the law (the historical move from the primacy of physical coercion to spiritual consent and willing subjection to the law). Therefore, the aesthetic remains an essentially contradictory category which, on the one hand, functions as “a genuinely emancipatory force,” on the other hand, signifies “internalized repression.”¹⁴

In this respect, Eagleton’s reading of the Kantian aesthetic judgment is revealing. As is well known, for Kant the peculiarity of aesthetic judgment lies in the fact that it is simultaneously subjective and universal without the mediation of concepts. For Eagleton, this is precisely the structure of ideological mystification, since the latter displaces a purely subjective judgment to the level of a universal law which, nevertheless, cannot be formulated with the conceptual clarity of reason:

The aesthetic, one might argue, is in this sense the very paradigm of the ideological. For the peculiarity of ideological propositions might be summarized by claiming, with some exaggeration, that there is in fact no such thing as an ideological proposition. Like aesthetic judgments for Kant, ideological utterances conceal an essentially emotive content within a referential form, characterizing the lived relation of a speaker to the world in the act of appearing to characterize the world.¹⁵

At this moment, the political ambiguity of the aesthetic surfaces again. On the one hand, the spontaneous universality of aesthetic judgment promises to establish a noncoercive community of aesthetic consensus. On the other hand, however, under the guise of this spontaneous universality, the aesthetic justifies a specific form of coercion. This ambiguity, however, also means for Eagleton that “aesthetic ideology” carries no inherent political value, and as the condition of impossibility of bourgeois ideology, it can simultaneously establish and transcend what it renders possible.

Thus, aesthetic ideology enters history at the moment when the autonomy of the aesthetic and the ideological can no longer be maintained. The coming of age of aesthetic ideology is dependent on the perception of a certain tautology: aesthetics is inherently ideological because ideology is essentially aesthetic. But the question of the heteronomy of these two fields remains a crucial problem. While an Althusserian position would argue for their relative autonomy in the name of a “determination in the last instance,” a properly post-Althusserian position will have to start with the assumption of what Étienne Balibar called the “heteronomy of heteronomy” (that is, the ultimate impossibility of reducing the moment of heteronomous determination to an a priori given, in itself autonomous moment).¹⁶ From this moment, critique is the investigation of the institution of the field of the interactions of ideology and aesthetics without the normative prioritization of any of the two terms in an a priori fashion.

The Distribution of the Sensible

What sets Jacques Rancière's work aside in the contemporary debate about aesthetics is precisely his unequivocal rejection of what he calls "this great anti-aesthetic consensus."¹⁷ He is clearly unapologetic in his efforts to recover a different meaning of the term: "Aesthetics is not the fateful capture of art by philosophy. It is not the catastrophic overflow of art into politics. It is the originary knot that ties a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community."¹⁸ With a single stroke, the prehistory of "aesthetic ideology" is brought to an end. In place of "an aestheticization of politics" or "a politicization of aesthetics," we are proffered the "originary knot" that makes the interactions of art, thought (pure concept or mere ideology), and politics possible in the first place. It is this displacement of the problem that renders Rancière's work especially relevant for us.

The central category of Rancière's program is the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), which is best understood as a politicized version of Kant's "transcendental aesthetics."¹⁹ It is based on a singular definition of both politics and aesthetics. As Rancière explains: "Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them."²⁰ Rancière calls this level of political engagement "primary aesthetics" and opposes it to actual "aesthetic practices."²¹ Thus, politics as the primary aesthetics of the social is above all of the counting of the "parts" of the community, "which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount."²²

Rancière's definition of politics is, therefore, fully dependent on this miscount which disavows the radical equality of all speaking beings. The miscount is based on the "double use of logos" which means that speech carries a double burden: on a basic level, speech is communication between speaking beings who are acknowledged to be such by a particular distribution of the sensible; at the same time however, speech is also an account of speech in the sense that it also defines the very limits of the access to speech.²³ Rancière designates the lot of those who are not counted as capable of speech as the "part of those who have no part."²⁴ Thus, the distribution of the sensible allows for two alternative logics of being together: the policing of a given order of the sensible (of the sayable and nonsayable, the visible and the invisible, etc.) is contrasted with the redistribution of the sensible through the interruption of the normal order. For Rancière, however, only the latter constitutes a proper political act: politics occurs when the disavowed radical equality of all speaking beings interrupts the normal

flow of things. In a genuine political act, a mass of men without qualities identify with the whole of the community in the name of the wrong done to them (the miscount that reduced them to the part of no part). The *demos* is the nothing that wants to become everything. This is the “all or nothing” logic of the miscount of democracy.

As Rancière argues, critiques of aesthetic ideology are often based on the mistaken assumption that the relations among artistic practice, a generalized concept of art, and the philosophy of art are necessary (rather than contingent). Even those who acknowledge this contingency tend to assume that the role of “aesthetics” was precisely to misrepresent this relationship as necessary. But Rancière reverses the traditional sequence according to which an artistic practice is followed by its conceptualization when he argues that the latter is actually constitutive of the former. Aesthetics, therefore, is not the philosophical appropriation of an artistic practice, but one of the “conditions of possibility for what artistic practices can produce and for what aesthetic gazes can see.”²⁵ This move from a philosophy of art to a condition of possibility means that aesthetics is now part of what Rancière calls “a general regime of art,” which consists of three components: “modes of production of objects or of the interrelation of actions; forms of visibility of these manners of making or doing; and manners of conceptualizing or problematizing these manners of making or doing and these forms of visibility.”²⁶ Creation (or, in a more general sense, production), perception, and thinking are tied together at their roots in a system of mutual determinations.

The fact that aesthetics is redefined as a condition of possibility, however, does not mean that it is impossible to speak of historical determinations of the aesthetic. For example, Rancière claims that the specifically modern “aesthetic regime of art” is brought about by the birth of an idea: “the idea that the sensible is the presentation of an in-sensible which, strictly speaking, is the thought of thought.”²⁷ This new regime is constituted by a division within the field of the visible: in Hegelian terms, mere seeming (*Schein*) must be distinguished from the appearance (*Erscheinung*) of the idea (the in-sensible). The assumption is, of course, that the field of human perception mostly consists of objects that are mere sensations. But the identity of certain special objects can be split between their sensible forms and what these sensible forms render visible. This way, visibility is split (or redoubled) between mere visibility and the visibility of the invisible. But if thought (the invisible) can appear in a sensible form, the act of appearance divides the field of the intelligible as well as that of the sensible: appearance separates the sensible from the in-sensible as well as thought from nonthought. Within this aesthetic regime, as Rancière argues, the function of art is precisely to provide the sensible surface where this double split can take place.

The historicity of the “originary knot” of aesthetics and politics is, thus, described by Rancière in the following terms: “It retains the principle from the Kantian transcendental that replaces the dogmatism of truth with the search for conditions of possibility. At the same time, these conditions are not conditions for thought in general, but rather conditions immanent in a particular system of thought, a particular system of expression.”²⁸ As we can see, this double move concerns the very status of the transcendental: “I thus try at one and the same [time] to historicize the transcendental and to de-historicize these systems of conditions of possibility.”²⁹ As a result, the central problem of a critique of “aesthetic ideology” is to locate “the originary knot” as an immanent condition in a particular system of expression.

At this point, however, the question emerges: How can we separate this “primary aesthetics” from actual “aesthetic practices”? A quick way to describe Rancière’s theoretical project in general would be to call it a political phenomenology of the disavowed conditions of the constitution of the social. Rancière’s central presupposition is that the function of “the distribution of the sensible” is a given of human existence: since there is a constitutive limit in human experience, it is always configured through the legislation of the boundaries separating the visible from the invisible and the sayable from the unsayable. But it is not entirely clear how we can distinguish this inalienable function from its actual manifestations. And here we encounter a decisive complication of Rancière’s thought: although he seems to insist on the difference between the two levels, at the same time his whole thought is predicated upon the categorical rejection of the languages of classical metaphysics and ontology. As a result, he does not present a systematic attempt to account for the emergence of the “ontological function” of the distribution of the sensible.

Thus, it is an important fact that Rancière’s defense of “aesthetics” is based on an equally passionate critique of “political philosophy.” Rancière identifies three basic forms of the philosophical misappropriation of politics: archipolitics (Plato), parapolitics (Aristotle), and metapolitics (Marx). These three categories represent three different ways of misappropriating the true meaning of the political. In the case of archipolitics, true politics is rendered impossible by the idea of the realization of the essence of the community. Archipolitics is the complete achievement of the *phusis* as *nomos* in the tangible coming into being of the community’s law, the complete realization of the *arche* of the community. It provides a logical solution to “the part of no part” and thereby replaces the democratic institution of politics with the saturation of the social without a remainder.³⁰ As its name suggests, parapolitics displaces the political onto other non-political activities. For parapolitics, it is not the *arche* but the original division of the *arche* of the community that must be realized as its *nomos*, but

in such a way that the properly political nature of this division is masked. Metapolitics, in turn, defines politics as a social “symptomology” (as ideology critique) that detects a sign of untruth in every political distinction.³¹ As the truth of the “lie of politics,” metapolitics aims to go beyond politics (primarily through a scientific complement) and therefore its aim is the final elimination of politics. The three prefixes (*arche*, *para*, and *meta*) represent three different logics of the disavowal of politics: one is “below” politics (in the sense that it is its origin); the other is on the same level but “on the side of” or “beside” politics; and the third is “beyond” politics.

These three politics correspond to three different aesthetics, which we could call by analogy: *archi*-aesthetics in Plato, *para*-aesthetics in Aristotle, and *meta*-aesthetics in modernism. To be more precise, Rancière distinguishes three different regimes of art: the ethical regime of images (Plato), the poetic or representative regimes of the arts (Aristotle), and the aesthetic regime of art (modernism). The ethical regime is best exemplified by the Platonic ban on art as simulacrum (the mere imitation of imitation). As Rancière argues, in Plato’s case we cannot speak of “art” in the same way we use this term today, because the arts meant for him simply “ways of doing and making.”³² Therefore, the opposition of the true arts (imitation of ideas) and mere simulacra (imitation of imitation) reduces the aesthetic to an educational function. This also means that art is supposed to participate in the realization of the *arche* of the community. The regime of representation is based on the *mimesis/poeisis* opposition. As in the case of Aristotle, the arts are now submitted to a hierarchy through a number of rules in such a way that the autonomous concept of “art” is still not possible. Rancière calls this “a regime in which art in general does not exist but where there do exist criteria of identification for what the arts do, and of appreciation for what is or is not art, for good or bad art.”³³ Finally, aesthetic modernity emerges in Rancière’s scheme as a form of “meta-aesthetics,” since it establishes a peculiar paradox: art’s autonomy (or, its radical singularity summarized by the statement: “art is art”) becomes a form of heteronomy (“art is nonart”). To be more precise, modernity simultaneously asserts the unique nature of art and attempts to identify it with life.

In Rancière’s formulations, however, we always lose something: none of the three political philosophies allows us a proper articulation of the political or the aesthetic. In other words, the question of “primary aesthetics” cannot be raised by any of the regimes in the proper form.³⁴ In a certain sense, we could think of these three political and aesthetic regimes as three different logics of the disavowal of the ontological function within particular ontic domains. At the same time, however, we have to be careful not to establish too tight a correspondence between these political and aesthetic logics. Rancière’s point is not to set up a direct correspondence

between these domains. Rather, we get here a first glimpse of the possible articulations of the way a “primary aesthetics” is institutionalized in different forms of political and aesthetic practices. The proper object of a critique of aesthetic ideology is, then, precisely this move from the originary knot to particular aesthetic and political regimes.

What could be the best term for this move? We have seen that Rancière categorically rejects formulas heralding the aestheticization of politics. But is there anything that he offers in place of aestheticization? One possible answer to the question is the “autonomization of aesthetics”: “There never has been an ‘aestheticization’ of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle. But the autonomization of aesthetics as a new nexus between the order of the logos and the partition of the perceptible is part of the modern configuration of politics.”³⁵ It is important to point out that Rancière’s rejection of the “aestheticization of politics” does not mean that he is blind to the interactions of politics and aesthetics. Rather, as he argues, “The core of the problem is that there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. This has nothing to do with the claim made by some people that art and politics should not be mixed. They intermix in any case; politics has its aesthetics, and aesthetics has its politics. But there is no formula for an appropriate correlation.”³⁶ As we can see, these arguments form three essential steps. First, on the ontological level, Rancière reasserts the “primary knot” of aesthetics and politics and claims that “politics is aesthetic in principle.” Then, he claims that although politics and aesthetics are separate fields on the ontic level, they always interact. Finally, however, he adds that the actual content of this relation on the ontic level (constant interaction) cannot be logically deduced from the ontological function. As a result, “there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics.”

What does this seemingly contradictory rejection of the “aestheticization of politics” and the simultaneous assertion of the unavoidable intermixture of aesthetics and politics show us? First, it makes clear that the process of “aestheticization” is not the interaction of two independent domains (a process in which one overtakes the other), but the activation of an inherent potential *within* politics itself. Aestheticization only makes sense if it is internal and not external to politics. At the same time, we can also see that the autonomization of aesthetics (which falls within the field of politics itself) remains a contradictory project: aesthetics becomes an independent domain from politics, but for Rancière this very process of autonomization is a political problem. As a result, Rancière argues that the autonomization of aesthetics is its very own cancellation: “the contradiction constitutive of the aesthetic regime of art . . . makes art into *an*

autonomous form of life and thereby sets down, at one and the same time, the autonomy of art and its identification with a moment in life's process of self-formation."³⁷ Simply put, if autonomization is the undoing of the originary knot (since it falsely represents two fields tied together at their origins as if they were independent), it nevertheless remains an interminable project.

Following Rancière's lead but moving outside the proper limits of his project, we could define our terms in the following manner. Let us call the process of autonomization the move whereby an ontological function is divided and then disavowed in the form of its very own institution as an apparently independent ontic field. In this sense, for example, the institution of particular aesthetic practices will always imply the misrecognition of what Rancière calls "primary aesthetics." Similarly, the institution of a particular political regime in the form of a "police" order will always amount to the disavowal of politics proper. At the same time, let us call aestheticization and politicization the move from the ontological function to an ontic actualization. In other words, let us argue that these two categories do not define "horizontal" relations between already established autonomous fields with clearly defined identities, but rather a "vertical" movement *within* the objects of the respective fields. This is why, for example, Rancière insists that nothing is political in itself but anything may become political.³⁸ For us, this means that an inherent ontological function can be realized in any object, but then politicization takes place within the object and not between an object and an already established autonomous field. Thus, while both autonomization and aestheticization/politicization imply a move from an ontological to an ontic level, there are some crucial differences to consider. While autonomization is an attempt to establish an independent field and therefore it establishes relations *between objects*, aestheticization/politicization take place *within objects*. Furthermore, autonomization works by way of a disavowal of an ontological function, aestheticization/politicization function as reactivations of the same function.

The Distribution of the Insensible

In order to introduce the category of representation to this discussion, let us consider Alain Badiou's critique of Rancière's *Disagreement*. First, we should note that Badiou readily admits that his own project shows important similarities with Rancière's. In fact, it is precisely because of these similarities that, in the final analysis, Badiou's critique of Rancière turns out to be so categorical. For Badiou, the irksome problem is that the similarities hide essential differences. Badiou summarizes Rancière's

argument by calling it “a democratic anti-philosophy that identifies the axiom of equality, and is founded on a negative ontology of the collective that sublates the contingent historicity of nominations.”³⁹ But while Badiou speaks about their common ontological premises (their shared interest in counting, the void, the whole, nomination, etc.), he faults Rancière for reducing these ontological insights to “a historicist phenomenology of the egalitarian occurrence.”⁴⁰ As a result, Rancière’s project is neither properly philosophical (since he does not explicitly formulate his ontology), nor properly political (since he fails to provide an effective definition of politics in the present).

Since the foundation of this critique is an ontological disagreement, let us first consider this aspect of Badiou’s thought. One of the fundamental categories of Badiou’s ontology is “presentation”: “being is what presents (itself).”⁴¹ Although it is not part of Badiou’s terminology, we could argue that the central category of his ontology is actually “failed presentation.” By failed presentation, however, I do not mean that presentation fails to achieve its goals and therefore nothing is ever presented. Contrarily, the point is that presentation is successful to the degree that it also presents something unrepresentable. Thus, the failure of presentation simply means that presentation also presents the unrepresentable. Rather than being an external limit (which would imply that presentation fails to present something representable), this failure is actually an internal limit of presentation in the sense that the field of presentation is always riddled by the void.

We can derive all of the basic categories of Badiou’s ontology from this internal limit of presentation. Let us, then, distinguish three levels of this ontology: the void (the unrepresentable), the multiple (presentation), and the one (representation). The philosophical problem is to establish the relations of these three terms. But while in the ontological sense we move from the void toward the one, in the phenomenological sense we have to reverse this movement and work our way back from the one to the void. In other words, while the rigor of Badiou’s thought in *Being and Event* is such that he can literally deduce everything from nothing, he also argues that in reality our starting point is always a fully structured situation and, therefore, we have to deduce the existence of nothing from our experience of the world.

Let us first briefly outline the “phenomenological” line of reasoning. When we speak of “everything,” we mean here a fully structured situation under the sway of what Badiou calls the “state of the situation,” which establishes the principle of counting the elements of the given situation as one. But, as Badiou argues, we always know that the “one” is an effect of an operation. Therefore, we have to suppose that what the state of the situation represents under the rule of the one was once merely presented on the level

of the structure of the situation and must have been multiple. This is how we can move from the phenomenological experience of representation to the level of presentation. This move involves the retroactive deduction of the existence of the multiple from the fact that the one fails to constitute itself in a consistent manner. But then the question emerges: Why is the reduplication of the logic of presentation necessary in the first place? Why is the presented also necessarily represented? This is where the supposition of the void appears: representation is necessary because there is something in presentation that must be covered up. And what needs to be covered up is precisely the failure of presentation, the void (the unrepresentable). From this perspective, then, our phenomenological starting point will always have to be the failure of representation, which should ultimately lead us to the retroactive presupposition of the void.

But the phenomenological primacy of the failure of representation corresponds to the ontological primacy of the void (the failure of presentation). This is why Badiou has to show that “the absolutely primary theme of ontology is therefore the void”: “*the sole term from which ontology’s compositions without concept weave themselves is necessarily the void.*”²⁴² The problem is that although being is what presents (itself), it is irreducible to what is being presented. Being is neither the multiple nor the one. Rather, being is subtracted from existence (the domain of presentation and representation). The void, “the unrepresentable of presentation,” is only accessible as the “proper name of being.”²⁴³ This means that in spite of the fact that being is unrepresentable, it is still not alien to thought. However, it is only accessible through a declarative act of nomination. Since Badiou’s ontology is based on the assumption that everything is a multiple and that any multiple is always a multiple of multiples, the question emerges whether it is possible to institute a foundational act of counting which would put an end to this infinite regression. Badiou’s answer is straightforward: “But where to start? What is the absolutely original existential position, the first count, if it cannot be a first *one*? There is no question about it: the ‘first’ presented multiplicity without concept has to be a multiple of nothing.”²⁴⁴ The void, therefore, is the foundational term of all ontology, since “it is the first multiple, the very being from which any multiple presentation, when presented, is woven and numbered.”²⁴⁵ It is in this sense that Badiou’s ontology can derive everything from nothing.

If our ontological starting point is always “nothing” (which is subtracted from presentation as the unrepresentable of presentation), we can also assert the centrality of failed presentation. We can see that the void, as the unrepresentable, is always a retroactive deduction from the failure of presentation, while the one is the anticipated closure of failed presentation in representation. In other words, the void is the supposed cause of the

failure of presentation, while representation is the remedy to this failure. This is why Badiou's system consists of three levels of constitution: the pure multiple, the structure of the situation (consistent multiple), and the state of the situation. Pure presentation presents multiples without a count. But as we have seen, the failure of presentation also institutes the first count of nothing. As a result, there is no situation without a count and every presentation is always already structured. But the structure of the situation is at odds with the void, the failure of presentation: "The apparent solidity of the world of presentation is merely a result of the action of structure, even if *nothing* is outside such a result. It is necessary to prohibit that catastrophe of presentation which would be its encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency as such, or the ruin of the One."⁴⁶ The problem is that something escapes the count that institutes the structure of the situation: the count itself. Therefore, as Badiou argues, the count itself needs to be counted on the level of a metastructure (the state of the situation): "In order for the void to be prohibited from presentation, *it is necessary that structure be structured.*"⁴⁷ This is how both the necessity and impossibility of representation can be derived from the ontological fact of nothing.

Based on the centrality of failed presentation, we can now map out Badiou's typology of being which consists of four basic categories: the void (neither presented nor represented), normal terms (both presented and represented), singular terms (presented but not represented), and excrescent terms (represented but not presented). Badiou calls these categories "the most primitive concepts of any experience whatsoever."⁴⁸ We can see then that "representation" functions here as the internal division of presentation, since it enacts the very institution of Badiou's threefold typology. Without a split between presentation and representation, we could not speak of normalcy, singularity, and excrescence. But without the errancy of the void we could not speak about representation either. And since it is representation itself which institutes the internal division of experience, it is also the principle of representation which achieves the distributions of these very terms. It is by counting certain terms as normal that the state of the situation establishes the principles of singularity and excrescence. At the heart of representation, therefore, we have to locate a constitutive exclusion. Contrasting this system with Rancière's, we could speak of this exclusion in terms of a distribution of the insensible.

We can see that representation primarily manifests itself in the form of the distribution of different terms within the field of presentation. But if every situation has its own state, we are always already within a regime of representation. As a result, experience is always already divided between presentation and representation. This division of the field of experience

suggests that properly speaking only two terms fall immediately within the field of representation: normal and excrescent terms. At the same time, we can suppose that beyond or below representation, we find the void and singular terms. This dual division of the field of experience, however, leads to a set of related questions. The most important of these is whether it is possible to distinguish presentation from representation *from within* the field of representation? To put it differently, does the metastructure of the situation render visible anything other than the normal terms of a situation? This question has two important components. On the one hand, we have to ask if it is possible to distinguish normal and excrescent terms within the field of representation. On the other hand, if it is not possible to distinguish presentation from representation, how could we separate singular terms from the void itself? Ultimately, the question is whether we imagine the relationship of presentation to representation as a radical break (complete externality) or rather as a more refined “dialectical” relation of sorts.

In order to draw the consequences of this separation of presentation and representation, let us first examine Badiou’s critique of the classic Marxist theory of the State. This problem involves a more consistent separation of the ontological state of the situation from the State of a historico-social situation. As Badiou argues, Engels’s argument could be paraphrased by claiming that the bourgeoisie represents normalcy (since “it is presented economically and socially, and re-presented by the State”), the proletariat represents singularity (because it is presented but not represented), and the State represents excrescence (because it is always in excess of the situation).⁴⁹ According to this logic, then, Engels has to define politics as the universalization of singularity in order to do away with excrescence (the State) as such. The goal of politics is, then, to establish presentation without representation. Badiou, however, shows that this argument is fundamentally flawed:

The two major parameters of the state of a situation—the unrepresentable errancy of the void, and the irremediable excess of inclusion over belonging, which necessitate the re-securing of the one and the structuring of structure—are held by Engels to be particularities of presentation, and of what is numbered therein. The void is reduced to the non-representation of the proletariat, thus, unrepresentability is reduced to a modality of non-representation; the separate count of parts is reduced to the non-universality of bourgeois interests, to the presentative split between normality and singularity; and, finally, he reduces the machinery of the count-as-one to an excrescence because

he does not understand that the excess which it treats is ineluctable,
for it is a theorem of being.⁵⁰

It appears that Engels confuses ontological functions with concrete ontic contents. As a result, politics cannot be properly defined in relation to the dialectics of void and excess, since Engels cannot distinguish singularity (non-represented) from the void (unrepresentable). Furthermore, he can only define the (antagonistic) relation of the normal and the singular as an empirical accident that assumes the form of a “false universality” (and which, therefore, can simply be “corrected”). Finally, since he cannot properly separate representation (the count-as-one) from one of its forms (excrement), the difference between normalcy and excrement itself is made ambiguous. Ultimately, this confusion leads to a mistaken sense of politics, which believes that it can do away with a structural moment (excrement) in the name of pure presentation.

Engels’s erroneous identification of ontological functions with ontic contents, however, leaves us with a few questions. Would it be possible to assume that Engels’s mistake is ideological? That is, can the fact that his three terms (the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, and the State) cover the totality of the field of experience be an effect of a particular regime of representation? Were there really no other possible elements in the situation analyzed by Engels? If there were, we could argue that these three categories themselves are results of a particular regime of counting. This, however, would mean that besides particular contents, the *positions* of normalcy, singularity, and excrement are also marked *within* the field of representation. In other words, in Engels’s system, besides being a normal element, the bourgeoisie comes to represent normalcy as such; besides being a singular element, the proletariat comes to represent singularity as such; and besides being an excrement element, the State comes to represent excrement as such. To put it differently: when the proletariat is identified with singularity as such, its name comes to signify within the field of representation the *possibility* of singularity. This conclusion, however, raises a new question: Although singular elements fall outside the field of representation, would it be possible to claim that the possibility of singularity is marked within representation by the split identity of one of these singular terms?

Let us consider the name “proletariat.” The singularity of the proletariat does not mean that, for example, in nineteenth-century England the proletariat was effectively invisible, only that it was represented as the element whose exclusion was constitutive of bourgeois order. It was the very exclusion of the proletariat that rendered the presentation/representation split possible in the first place. To be more precise, the proletariat was represented as incapable of representing itself. Therefore, it was represented

as inherently unrepresentable without an external agency (since it did not belong to its essence that it be represented). This shift of emphasis implies that in spite of the fact that it was without representation, the singularity of the proletariat was actually marked within the field of representation by a name: it was counted as “one” even if it was the one that does not count. The problem is that radical singularity means that the singular terms have absolutely no access to the field of representation. But if the possibility of singularity (the possibility that certain elements remain outside representation) is always marked within the field of representation, it becomes possible to represent elements *as* singular elements. Another way of saying the same thing would be to claim that the split between normalcy and singularity must be marked within the field of the normal: the field of representation institutes itself through an act of exclusion (some presented elements of the structure are not counted again by the metastructure), but the exclusion must be represented within the totality that is created by this act of exclusion.

This conclusion, however, has important consequences for our definition of representation. The principle of representation can be summarized by the following statement: since there is an inherent limit to presentation, experience must be divided. Although representation apparently introduces a new unity (“the one exists”), it actually divides the field of failed experience so that the one can at least appear in a restricted field. In order to exorcise the field of presentation of its void, representation divides this field (between normal and singular terms) and introduces an excessive dimension (mere representation without presentation). The fact, however, that representation is primarily the configuration of the field of experience in such a way that the inherent failure of presentation cannot manifest itself does not mean that we could define representation as an additional layer of presentation superimposed over the primary order of presentation (the natural state of things). Rather, representation is the act of division that produces an excess to cover up the void.

But how do we know that this exclusion is constitutive? It is precisely Badiou’s distinction between the “natural” and the “historical” situation that establishes this point. Since for Badiou the natural situation is the domain of pure normalcy (“Nature is what is normal”), the historical situation is constituted by the division of normal, singular, and excrescent terms.⁵¹ History comes about as a result of the separation and dislocation of presentation and representation (which no longer fully overlap as in the case of Nature). Therefore, there is no historical situation without an excess of representation over presentation, which also means that there is no history without exclusion. The primary target of this exclusion is, of course, the void. The objective is precisely to render the appearance of the void

within presentation impossible: exclusion is supposed to make up for the failure of presentation by restoring it to itself in the field of representation. The problem, however, is that the void as such cannot be excluded, since it does not have an a priori determined structural location. In this sense, exclusion is always a failure. In fact, the only things that can be effectively excluded are particular elements of the structure of the situation that, in themselves, have no special relation with the void. This is why the exclusion of the void has to assume the form of a substitution: in place of the void, a presented term must be excluded which assumes the role of the embodiment of the void. Engels's mistake, then, appears in a new light: it is indeed a theoretical mistake to reduce the void to presentation, but it is a political necessity that one particular element embodies this void.

Exclusion and the Limits of Representation

As we can see, we are moving in the direction of a definition which holds that representation is fundamentally an *exclusion* of the void and the simultaneous *division* of the field of presentation. However, given the fact that "representation" is an overdetermined philosophical category, it might be necessary to introduce a few distinctions here and address the difference between the object and the signifier. A potential source of this complication is that, in its common usage, the term "representation" can refer to the constitution of the field of objectivity by a subject as well as to the process of signification. In order to locate the structures of the constitutive exclusion and the concomitant reflection on the limits of representation on both levels, I will cite here Slavoj Žižek's concept of the "sublime object" and Ernesto Laclau's definition of the "empty signifier." In spite of their differences, these two theories show that both the object and the signifier are products of a fundamental exclusion.

What renders Laclau's work especially relevant for this discussion is his thesis according to which there is no totality without exclusion. Simply put, for Laclau, subjectivity and objectivity are always articulated through the signifying practices of a discursive totality. Already in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe defined their theoretical project as a radicalization of the Althusserian concept of totality. The problem with Althusser was that the theoretical possibilities opened up by the concept of overdetermination were short-circuited by his concept of "determination in the last instance."⁵² In other words, while Althusser reduced totality to a determination by the economy, Laclau and Mouffe wanted to extend the logic of overdetermination to include all identities. This emphasis on overdetermination means that the problem is not only the logical deconstruction of the relation between the elements of a totality but the

deconstruction of the very identity of these elements as well. What had to be affirmed was the “incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity.”⁵³

The centrality of the category of “discourse” means that for Laclau “every object is constituted as an object of discourse,” and “every subject position is a discursive position.”⁵⁴ “Discourse” here designates a relational totality that articulates elements into moments of a structure. But since the process of articulation is never entirely fulfilled, the transition from elements to moments is never complete. Consequently, objectivity and subjectivity always partake of the constitutive openness of discourse. The impossible closure of discourse is guaranteed by the overdetermination of all identities and assumes the forms of a constitutive antagonism. This, however, does not mean that the closure of totality is entirely missing. Rather, Laclau argues that it is present as an absent fullness, which can be embodied by impossible objects. This is the logic of hegemony, which implies that a particular object will assume a role incommensurate with its particular identity and start to function as the embodiment of the absent fullness of a particular totality.

In fact, we could even argue that in Laclau’s works the constitution of objectivity and signification as totalities follow a similar logic. On the level of signification, Laclau’s seemingly contradictory starting point is that an empty signifier is a signifier without a signified, which nevertheless remains a sign. How is this possible? The answer concerns the limits of signification. Laclau summarized his argument in five points, which are the following.⁵⁵ First, if we follow Saussure in assuming that language is a mere differential system of signs, we have to assume that the meaning of a particular sign will always be dependent on the system it forms a part of. In that case, however, the totality of the system of signification is actually involved in every act of signification. Second, in order to conceive of this totality, we have to define the limits of signification, because what institutes a totality is precisely its difference from its outside. The problem is that this externality cannot be conceived as yet another difference internal to the system of signs. Third, if this outside cannot be conceived in terms of a neutral difference, the limit of the system has to assume the form of a radical *exclusion*. But this exclusion initiates a subversive dialectic between equivalence and difference: with regard to the excluded element all the differential identities within the totality appear to be equivalent. Fourth, this means that totality is always a locale of a tension between equivalence and difference. Rather than a positively given fullness, we are dealing with a failed totality, an impossible but necessary object. Finally, although this impossible object is beyond conceptual determinations, it is not beyond representation: a particular difference within totality can assume the role

of representing totality as such. It is precisely this hegemonic articulation that is performed by an empty signifier. Laclau concludes: "With this it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground."⁵⁶ Thus, every totality is a result of a hegemonic articulation.

We could say that while at the heart of Laclau's argument we find a critique of the Althusserian definition of totality, Slavoj Žižek's works are explicitly framed by a critique of the Althusserian definition of ideology. Žižek redefines the Althusserian subject as well as the Althusserian object. Concerning the subject, Žižek argues that we need to move beyond the logic of interpellation (which can only address the levels of imaginary and symbolic identification and thus only deals with the lower half of Lacan's graph of desire) toward the logic of fantasy, which covers up the constitutive lack in the Other, "pulsating around some unbearable surplus enjoyment."⁵⁷ To put it differently, what is missing from the Althusserian theory of the subject is a reckoning with the Lacanian real. As a result, this subject before subjectivation cannot be reduced to being mere substance, since its very being is constituted by the failure of substance to constitute a consistent field of objectivity. The logic of the "sublime object" implies that the domain of objectivity cannot establish its consistency without the supplement of an excessive dimension, that of the "object a" (the object more in the object than the object itself). For Žižek, then, what is missing in Althusser is the subject beyond subjectivation as well as the object beyond objectification. The point is that neither the field of subjectivity nor that of objectivity can be articulated in their ontological consistency without the intervention of an ideological operation.

In fact, one of the most important philosophical building blocks of Žižek's works consists of the reversal of classic definitions of the subject/substance relationship. As Žižek's Hegelian argument goes, as a first step, the subject comes to recognize the constitutive split between essence and appearance and conceives of essence as irretrievably withdrawn from the field of "mere" appearance. As a second step, however, we have to recognize that the split between essence and appearance is not a mere external obstacle, which denies us access to essence, but belongs to the very essence of essence. This way the split between essence and appearance is internalized in essence. But as Žižek argues, this second step is still misleading because it reduces appearance to a moment of the internal mediation of essence. Therefore, the crucial final reversal ("determinate" reflection) consists of the recognition that essence is nothing but the internal split of appearance: "*essence' itself is nothing but the self-rupture, the self-fissure of the appearance.*"⁵⁸ This means that the essence/appearance split itself has to appear in the field of appearance: one particular phenomenon has to

embody the nullity of phenomena. These points are relevant for us because they show how we can move from the ontological presupposition of failed presentation to the idea that “totality” always exists in the form of a particular element (a part) representing an absent fullness (presentation without the void).

This is why, at the center of Žižek’s theory of ideology, we find the notion of the “sublime object.” His starting point is the Hegelian critique of the Kantian theory of the sublime. The core of this debate concerns the constitutive limits of representation. From Hegel’s perspective, the problem with Kant’s sublime is that it defines the beyond of representation as a positive reality. The Thing-in-itself is beyond phenomenality and is only accessible through the effects that it produces within the field of representation, but “in-itself” it is nevertheless a positive piece of reality. The limit of representation assumes the form of a transcendental surplus beyond phenomenality. For Hegel, however, the excess over representation does not present anything other than itself: it is pure negativity embodied in an object. The internal reflection of essence implies that the limit of phenomenality is not a fully constituted essence outside of phenomenality (since essence fails to constitute itself in an unmediated immediacy), but an internal blockage of representation that embodies the internal split of essence. The sublime object, therefore, hides nothing: it embodies the “determinate nothing” which is the failure of essence.

What concerns us the most here is that the *limits* of representation assume the form of *objects*. These are the objects that Žižek calls “object in subject.”⁵⁹ The point is that the fields of subjectivity and objectivity are both constituted by the failure of representation. As Žižek argues, the positive condition of the constitution of the subject is the failure of its representation (the subject is the retroactive effect of the failure of its own representation) which also means that “the failure of representation is the only way of representing it adequately.”⁶⁰ But this is precisely the alienating failure that must be already reflected within substance as the failure of the full constitution of objectivity. The failure of the full constitution of objectivity, however, is not external to its field, since it is always embodied by particular objects. Thus, the ideological constitution of the subject is impossible without certain objects that embody the very limits of representation. In this regard, Žižek speaks of three different types of objects, which correspond to the three basic orders of Lacanian theory (the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic). First, he speaks of the real as *object a*, the absent object (the Hitchcockian MacGuffin) which is pure semblance in that it is a void in the symbolic order. Second, we have the symbolic object characterized not by its absence but its presence as an object of exchange. This object embodies the lack in Other. Finally, Žižek discusses the imaginary objectification

of the real in the form of an oppressive object that embodies enjoyment. Thus, his typology allows us to speak of the limits of representation in terms of objects that are themselves representations.

In spite of their differences, then, Laclau's theory of totality and Žižek's theory of ideology do have something in common: in both cases failed presentation (the lack in Being or the impossible self-constitution of essence) provides the negative ontological foundation for the institution of particular totalities by way of an excess that marks the internal limits of representation, and an impossible object stands in for an absent fullness. This also means that our earlier categories (normalcy, singularity, and excrescence) remain operational. When representation institutes itself in the form of a cut within the field of failed presentation, the exclusion of the singular terms leaves a trace in the field it makes possible: this trace is excrescence itself. In other words, if exclusion creates the possibility of the excess of representation over presentation, excrescence is the very effect of the exclusion of the singular. But the way to imagine this excess is not as some sort of a transcendental dimension, but rather as an internal torsion of representation. The split between presentation and representation institutes a totality which, in order to constitute itself as a totality, has to mark its own limits. In order to do so, it has to produce "pure representations" marking these limits. The problem of excrescence can be located on this level: the internal limit of representation assumes the form of a representation without presentation.

The common psychoanalytic foundation of Laclau's and Žižek's theories surfaces here. For isn't the best example of excrescence the Freudian Thing or the Lacanian object *a*? Imagine the ontological status of the lost object: as a *lost* object, it is without presentation (because it is lost forever); but as an object, it is still internal to the field of representation. This is why Laclau argues that the "logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical. . . . The only possible totalizing horizon is given by a partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythical totality. In Lacanian terms: an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing."⁶¹ Using Laclau's terms, we could say that whatever is excluded from a particular hegemonic articulation appears from the perspective of this articulation as a singular term. In case some of these elements successfully enter the chain of equivalences composing this hegemonic articulation, they will become normal terms. They are both presented and represented in the sense that their identity is always split between their particularity and the hegemonic universality that counts them as one. Excrescence is the dimension of this mythical totality (the universality of the "one") which only exists by way of an internal fold of representation.

In order to draw some of the consequences of these points, let us return for a moment to Engels. We could say that when Engels identified the proletariat with singularity, the bourgeoisie with normalcy, and the State with excrescence, his mistake was that he did not recognize these categories as results of hegemonic articulations. To put it differently, we all know that “the proletariat” was not the only element excluded by the bourgeois state. Therefore, other singular entities must have been present in the situation besides the proletariat. But the fact that the proletariat could appear as the very embodiment of singularity meant that it assumed a hegemonic position. Similarly, we could argue that all three categories follow the same logic: the proletariat is one singular term that represents the universality of the excluded; the bourgeoisie is one normal category that represents the universality of the count (of normalcy); and the bourgeois State is one excrescent element that can represent the universality of the community (and represents excrescence as such). As Laclau argues, from the point of view of a hegemonic totality, one excluded element will have to assume the role of “pure negativity” (proletariat), while the system has to represent its own systematicity, “pure being” (the State).⁶² Thus, we can always expect a similar threefold distribution of names (proletariat as pure negativity, bourgeoisie as being, the State as pure Being), since we could argue that the role of ideology is precisely the designation of these names in order to establish a particular totality.⁶³

The Aesthetic Unconscious

So what can we conclude on the basis of these discussions? Most important, it was the history of “aesthetic ideology” that has revealed to us the necessity of a theoretical shift of perspectives: today, we must turn from popular discussions of the “political unconscious” to what we could call, without insisting on terminological orthodoxy, the “aesthetic unconscious.”⁶⁴ This new category will allow us to question some of the most pervasive implications at the heart of the current uses of the “political unconscious”: namely, that the unconscious *is* politics (rather than potentially politicized); that politics is always unconscious (rather than partially determined by the unconscious); and that politics and aesthetics can be clearly separated on the level of the unconscious (rather than forming an “originary knot”).

The basic shortcoming of the concept of the “political unconscious” is that it assumes a clear separation of the aesthetic and the political and argues that the political dimension of aesthetic production is to be situated in one particular location. This assumption is only partially true. The problem is that it endorses the standard view of the aesthetic: since

the aesthetic falsely believes that it is a pure apolitical field, its inalienable political dimension must be located in its unconscious. In case after case, discussions of the political unconscious prove that seemingly innocent aesthetic statements are in fact political. But they often fail to ask the other question: what if seemingly pure political statements are actually aesthetic? That is, the unconscious *of* the political itself (a different kind of political unconscious) can turn out to be aesthetic in nature. This claim, however, can hold water only if it refuses to be a mere reversal of the hierarchy. The deconstruction of the political unconscious implies that the aesthetic unconscious is not simply the secret aesthetic component of political statements; rather, it must designate the zone of indistinction in which the aesthetic and the political are both truly unconscious and not yet distinguishable.

It is in this sense that the concept of the aesthetic unconscious can be used to introduce at least two new dimensions to our discussions. On the one hand, it allows us to rethink the very concept of representation as a form of division. At the same time, however, it also allows us to move beyond Rancière's "distribution of the sensible," since we have found that this division consists of the exclusive-inclusion of the insensible within the field of representation. Thus, Badiou's ontology allows us to speak of the "distribution of the insensible" in terms of the institution of the field of representation over the terrain of failed presentation. As we have seen, in Badiou's system, the failure of presentation is the result of the operations of the unrepresentable void. The unrepresentable, therefore, accounts both for the failure of presentation and the necessity of representation (whose role it is to cover up the failure of presentation). The split between presentation and representation, in turn, defines the ontological foundations of the limits of representation. Yes, representation establishes the hegemonic universality of the "one" and therefore its primary function appears to be unification. But this is precisely the ideological effect of the one. What representation first accomplishes is a mere cut that divides the field of failed presentation and excludes certain elements with the intention of containing the void. The "distribution of the insensible" does not mean that representation can and will always be divided. It means that representation *is* first and foremost division.

In the language of psychoanalysis, this idea is best articulated by way of the concept of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*: the very field of representation comes about through the exclusion of an element that stands in for the impossible Thing. Therefore, the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* constitutes representation from nothing (the Thing is lost forever), by standing in for this nothing (and not by substituting for something), which renders the repetition of this lost thing (which is nothing) possible. Representation is not

the reproduction of a positive reality on another level, but rather the effect of the primary signification of the lack in being. Furthermore, based on Badiou's typology of being, what our discussion of Laclau and Žižek aimed to show was that the limits of representation are *internal* to representation. Or, to put it differently, the limits of representation are themselves representations. In other words, if there is nothing beyond the limits of representation, the effects of the exclusion that constitutes a given totality will have to appear inside the system. This is why we claimed that the distribution of ontological terms (normal, singular, and excrescent elements) will appear within the field of representation: the positions of their universality will be marked by names within the field of representation. These are the names that designate the constitutive limits of representation.

* * *

The following chapters will provide an extended examination of the way this theory of aesthetic ideology can be applied to a concrete historical situation: early Cold War America. Our central question will be the following: What is anti-Communist aesthetic ideology? As we have seen, this question immediately leads us to the problem of primary aesthetics. What we need to examine is the way the symbolic framework of American democracy had to be instituted so that "politics" and "art" (as autonomous fields) could immediately appear as expressions of the truth of anti-Communist ideology. The fundamental exclusion of anti-Communist ideology is, of course, directed against "the Communist." In other words, anti-Communist ideology establishes a field of social visibility in which particular entities can appear because "the Communist" assumed the role of pure negativity.

My thesis will be that this ideology marked the limits of representation by a set of clearly definable objects, which are the following: the world (totality), the secret (singularity), the enemy (normalcy), and the catastrophe (excrescence). The radical transformation of American politics after World War II led to its redefinition as a form of "world politics." The problem, however, was that this world could not be easily construed as a unity. We encounter here the inherent ambiguity of the term "world," which simultaneously means a particular ideological unit ("the free world") and the globe (which supposedly consisted of three worlds). In this sense, the ideological gambit of the Cold War was to simultaneously assert that although we live in one world, this world is divided into three worlds. The fields of normalcy, singularity, and excrescence had to be marked inside this new concept of totality. The problem is that none of these terms possesses an already given political value (that is, we cannot derive the

political meaning of a term from the mere fact that it appears as a singular term in a given situation). Therefore, all three domains became terrains of political contestation.

The field of singularity (presented but not represented) became simultaneously the underworld of subversive conspiracies and the locale of the core of American identity. This is where the problem of secrecy enters our argument. Secrecy was defined by anti-Communist ideology as simultaneously dangerous yet necessary. On the one hand, secrecy was the dangerous “beyond” of American democracy, the domain of subversive conspiracies. At the same time, it also functioned as the guarantee of the very democratic framework and the exclusive domain of sovereign power. While the secret could be defined as what is presented but not represented, the ideological figure of the catastrophe functioned as what is represented but not presented. In other words, the new global concept of totality led to an ambiguous construct of universality that simultaneously promised “doom or deliverance”: utter destruction or complete victory. In this sense, the image of the absolute catastrophe came to mark the condition of impossibility of the symbolic order as such. Finally, the enemy appeared on the level of normalcy in the crevices of the split between presentation and representation. A peculiarity of anti-Communist ideology was its obsessive concern with the problem of the simulacrum. The exclusion of the enemy from the field of representation had an ambiguous effect: if the enemy is capable of perfect imitation, it is impossible to tell the excluded element from normal elements.

Anti-Communist discussions of “art” followed a similar path. The visibility of true art depended on an exclusion. As is well known, one of the most striking features of the art criticism of the fifties was the politicized separation of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow cultures. In other words, in order for true art to become visible, a set of divisions had to be introduced to the field of artistic practices. Once again, the success of the constitutive exclusion was threatened by the logic of the simulacrum: between art (high-modernism) and non-art (mass culture) the domain of the mere simulacrum of art (kitsch) appeared. While high art was often defined in excess of representation (as a transcendence of realistic representations), mass culture was habitually dismissed for being too “low” for current standards of representation. Although the middlebrow tried to lay claim to the proper field of representation by renouncing both of these extremes, it was nevertheless undermined by the threat of the simulacrum. Once again, the normal and its mere imitation became hard to tell apart. The following discussions will focus on the way the anti-Communist ideology of the “the vital center” articulated these two exclusions (the political exclusion of Communism from the proper field of politics and the aesthetic exclusion of mass culture from the field of art) as parts of the same political program.