

Ross Shields: READING THE AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

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The Aesthetics of Resistance. Already the title demands interpretation. Depending on whether the preposition ‘of’ is interpreted as a subjective or as an objective genitive, it could refer either to ‘the aesthetic position upheld by those fighting for the resistance’ or to ‘the aesthetic aspect of resistance as such.’ As one might expect, Peter Weiss’s novel supports both readings, insofar as it concerns a group of resistance fighters who conceive of art—whether ancient, aristocratic, bourgeois, or proletarian—as closely related to their own political activity: “If we want to take on art, literature, we have to treat them against the grain, that is, we have to eliminate all the concomitant privileges and project our own demands into them.”[1] The aesthetic position of those fighting in the resistance is that art is eminently political. But the first person plural is misleading, and introduces an additional ambiguity concerning the novel’s message: does “we” stand for the unnamed narrator and his comrades in the 1930’s, for Weiss’s milieu in the 1970s, or for the international readership of the perpetually advancing present?

A complete answer to this question would have to embrace all three options: Weiss certainly projected his own interests and concerns onto his protagonists, and it is impossible for contemporary readers to avoid projecting their own interests and concerns onto his/their reflections. In my case, ‘we’ stands for the researchers and staff of the *Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung*, who selected the novel for our 2019 *Klausurtagung*—a two day affair devoted to intensive discussions of a single text. For us to take on Weiss’s novel means to treat it against the grain, to project onto it the demands of the contemporary political juncture.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Margaret Thatcher’s dictum that “there is no alternative” has been transformed from a political slogan into a metaphysical principle. One of its chief contemporary intellectual proponents is Yuval Noah Harari, whose three most recent books are not only global best sellers, but have garnered public endorsements from the likes of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. In 2018’s *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Harari is blunt in his support of Thatcher’s neoliberal ideology: “At the end of the day, humankind won’t abandon the liberal story, because it doesn’t have any alternative. People may give the system an angry kick in the stomach but, having nowhere else to go, they will eventually come back.”[2] The grounds for this claim are laid out in Harari’s previous book, which articulates a philosophy of *Dataism* or the supposedly scientific consensus that everything from great works of art to metabolic processes to economic exchanges can be understood in terms of data processing and decision making. According to Harari, “free-market capitalism and state-controlled communism aren’t competing ideologies, ethical creeds or political institutions. They are, in essence, competing data-processing systems.”[3]

To illustrate the different modes of data processing at stake in capitalism and communism, Harari considers how the price of a loaf of bread is determined within either system. Under communism, a central agency determines the amount of bread that is produced every day, how it is distributed, and how much it costs; under capitalism, the price of bread is decided by the individual bakers, and individual people are allowed to choose whether they will purchase it or not, and from whom. Under communism, decisions are made from the top down, and are unable to keep pace with the rapid flows of information that characterize the contemporary world; under capitalism, decisions are made from the bottom up, and therefore identical to the information they process. The neoliberal economic theory of Friedrich A. Hayek looms large over Harari's argument, according to which bottom-up data processing is simply more effective than the top-down sort:

“Capitalism did not defeat communism because capitalism was more ethical, because individual liberties are sacred or because God was angry with the heathen communists. Rather, capitalism won the Cold War because distributed data processing works better than centralized data processing, at least in periods of accelerating technological change.”[4]

To rub in the point, he makes a collage of two pictures: on the left, the aging leadership of the Soviet Union, sitting in wicker chairs with arms outstretched in a feeble salute. The sky above Moscow is faded, lending the whole composition an air of nostalgia—as if the chairman and his council were waving goodbye to a futureless past. On the right, a pair of young stockbrokers on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, with arms upraised in the energetic gesture of a sporting event. The camera's shallow depth of field blurs the electronic tickers in the background, which seem to display the streaming symbols of *The Matrix*.

Whether or not Harari's brand of pop-cybernetics is useful to describe socioeconomic structures, his insistence that there are only two kinds of data-processing systems—centralized or distributed—is symptomatic of the widespread ideology that presents neoliberalism as the only option, for both present and future. Equally problematic is how he tacitly correlates these economic structures to particular modes of political organization:

“Like capitalism and communism, so democracies and dictatorships are in essence competing mechanisms for gathering and analyzing information. Dictatorships use centralized processing methods, whereas democracies prefer distributed processing.”[5]

Of course, the terms of his analogy might as well be inverted. Capitalism could be said to display an tendency toward centralization, insofar as the accumulation of wealth in a handful of banks and corporations transfers decision-making power from democratically elected governments to CEO's and boards of directors, and often to disastrous political consequences. Nor is it certain that communism necessarily involves the centralization of decision-making power in a totalitarian government, even if this was the tragic outcome of the Soviet experiment. One could object that capitalism requires extensive international

regulation to open up the space for its 'free' market, or insist that the unrealized dream of communism is not to control value but to abolish it. But an immanent critique of Harari's neoliberal apology would accept the terms of his informatic metaphor while addressing its problematic dualism: the notion that there are only two possible forms of data processing: inefficient centralized processing and efficient distributed processing. Aesthetics—which has always concerned the processing of data, or that which is given to the senses—rejects this binary opposition, and so gives the lie to Harari's argument.

Aesthetics would seem to be the last place to turn for an alternative. The harmonious relation of part to whole conceived by classical aesthetics has been criticized for projecting the ideal of a nonviolent (and apolitical) integration of individual and collective. At best, the theory of aesthetic autonomy, according to which the work of art is a self-contained whole, offers an ideological retreat from the dominant logic of capitalist rationalization: what Adorno has called a "nature reserve for irrationality."^[6] At worse, it advances a model for what Benjamin has criticized as the fascist "aestheticization of politics."^[7] As politics is converted into a spectacle, art is repurposed as propaganda. Prompted by these misgivings, theorists in the wake of Benjamin and Adorno have developed a critical aesthetic theory that rejects the totality of classical aesthetics in favor of openness and fragmentation, with the aim of reintegrating art into daily life.^[8]

Instead of aestheticizing politics, the critical work politicizes aesthetics by transforming art into protest: against the art institution, against the art market, against the very ideal of aesthetic autonomy. And yet, following Harari's line of argumentation, one could object that the position of critical aesthetics unwittingly reflects and even celebrates the capitalist structure of commodity exchange, along with the network of atomized individuals supporting it. There is no better emblem of decentralization than a Dadaist collage, where an inscrutable logic circulates among images and text torn from disparate spheres of social reality. That this is more than a facile analogy is indicated by the extent to which the avant-gardist aesthetic has been absorbed into the culture and advertising industries, which routinely borrow from the repertoire of its various -isms. Nor has the movement been able to maintain the critical attitude that necessitated its emergence: what Bürger has described as the "failure of the avant-garde"—the fact that the avant-gardist protests against the art institution are now accepted as works of art by that institution—is a marvelous success from the point of view of investors, who tend to be more interested in the activity of other collectors than in the form or content of the art collected.^[9] Despite its intentions, the avant-gardist negation of aesthetic value has paved the way for the unprecedented valorization of art as capital.

Once again, aesthetics seems to be the last place to turn for an alternative to neoliberal ideology. The classical work of art may resist commercialization, but can be criticized for its totalitarian character; the critical work may reject the latter, but bears a formal and material affinity with capitalist structures of commodity exchange. If, on the other hand, one were to insist on the irreducibility of art to either of these paradigms—if aesthetic experience can be reduced to neither centralized nor distributed data processing—then the work of art might be seen to reflect, in its formal structure, an alternative to both dictatorial communism and neoliberal capitalism. One of the strengths of *The Aesthetics*

of Resistance lies in how it refutes the simple opposition assumed by Harari's informatic dualism. Although Weiss—who alludes to both Benjamin and Adorno—condemns the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy for being apolitical, he is equally critical of the avant-gardist “total annihilation of art” as something that could only appeal to those who were already “sated with cultivation [*Bildung*].”[10] Refusing both extremes, Weiss develops an interpretation of aesthetic modernism that emphasizes the formal ambiguity of complex compositions in which neither the whole nor its parts predominate: “Such surprising depictions, based not on a closed aspect but on a multivalence, supplied more details than static arrangement could about the mechanisms we lived among. Characteristic of that ambiguity was its ability to get the imagination to search for relations and analogies, thereby expanding the realm of receptivity.”[11] For Weiss, the aim of aesthetic cultivation is not—as it was for Schiller—the construction of an ideal “realm of beautiful semblance,” but the comprehension of the complex material relations that constitute the political and economic world.[12]

Weiss develops his concept of aesthetic cultivation through an interpretation of Picasso's *Guernica*, which locates the painting's relation to politics in the formal demands it makes on the viewer: “The picture challenged us to use the first impression merely as an impetus to take the givens apart and examine them from different directions, then to fit them back together, thereby making them our own. This confirmed the rule I was familiar with from my earliest artistic investigations.”[13] This rule is, of course, the conviction of the unnamed narrator and philosophical leitmotiv of *The Aesthetics of Resistance*:

“that there [is] no distinction between social and political materializations and the essence of art.”[14]

How are we to understand this statement? Evidently, it does not imply that we should all become artists in order to change the world (Hugo Ball, Joseph Beuys). Nor is it Weiss's contention that art has the power to defamiliarize experience and transform everyday life (Viktor Shklovsky, Jacques Rancière). In fact, the philosopher who comes closest to articulating Weiss's position may be John Dewey, who, though hardly an orthodox Marxist, was denounced by Hayek as “the leading philosopher of American left-wingism.”[15] In *Art as Experience*, Dewey relates aesthetics and politics as two modes of experience:

“The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an experience.”[16]

With Dewey, one can argue that Weiss's identification of sociopolitical manifestations with the essence of art is predicated on the affinity of political and aesthetic experience: both involve the critical examination of what is given, the recognition of latent structures, and the rearrangement of existing forms into novel constructions. On this view, art does not prescribe new political structures, but reflects the process through which they are created.

The analogy between art and politics should not be construed as ahistorical. Weiss's analysis of Picasso's *Guernica* is set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, where communists, socialists, liberals, and anarchists were challenged to stake out common ground against Franco's military dictatorship: "The whole of Europe was a field of antagonisms, different kinds of independent energies had to flow together in Spain and look for a synthesis. Each of us had the task of fusing divergences into a unity."^[17] This message took on a new significance in 1970's West Germany, where *The Aesthetics of Resistance* provoked reflection on the failure of the left and how communism could have been different.^[18]

In the contemporary political juncture, where the effects of capitalist expansion have not only led to a resurgence of right-wing nationalism, but are threatening to destroy the climate on which we all depend, this book will inevitably be received in a different light, according to the changing meaning of resistance. Today, the immediate task is not to fuse divergent political ideologies into a pragmatic coalition, but to direct international cooperation toward a well-defined global aim. Since the achievement of this aim will necessarily entail the limitation of individual, corporate, and national interests, it is foreclosed by the false choice between centralized and decentralized data processing, which identifies any checks against the supposedly free market with totalitarian rule. Weiss's reflections on the complex nature of aesthetic and political organization remind us that there is always an alternative.

The concept of the political efficacy of art that I have won from *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is modest. I am not suggesting that art can overcome the impasse of neoliberalism, defeat the radical right, or fix global warming. As Sartre famously remarked, it is unlikely that *Guernica* won "one single soul for the Spanish cause."^[19] The resistance of aesthetics instead consists in the mode of experience that art affords, which promotes individual consciousness and political awareness by exploding the dualisms with which we tend to simplify things: centralization and decentralization, totality and fragmentation, communism and neoliberal capitalism, dictatorship and democracy. Although the formal complexity and ambiguous compositions met in works by the likes of Picasso, Woolf, and Schönberg most obviously support this sort of experience, it can be drawn out of all art to various degrees. Indeed, what distinguishes these modernists from the artists who came before and after them is how they set aesthetic experience (in the sense defined by Dewey) as the aim of artistic production.^[20] But no work of art can be reduced either to the whole or to the sum of its parts; either to systematicity or to formlessness. Strictly speaking, the opposing ideals of classical and critical aesthetics are not two distinct aesthetic positions, but the theoretical limits between which art unfolds. By analogy, totalitarian governance and social atomism are not oppositional political materializations, but the two extremes at which politics ends.

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[1] Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, transl. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 33; "Wollen wir uns der Kunst, der Literatur annehmen, so müssen wir sie gegen den Strich behandeln, das heißt, wir müssen alle Vorrechte, die damit

verbunden sind, ausschalten und unsre eignen Ansprüche in sie hineinlegen.” Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 51.

[2] Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Vintage, 2018), 24.

[3] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage, 2016), 430.

[4] *Ibid.* 434.

[5] *Ibid.* 435.

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2014), 499. My translation.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (2. Fassung); in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1980). My translation.

[8] Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, “Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik,” in: *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, Nr. 5 (1973), 38-73.

[9] Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2013), 53. My translation.

[10] *Aesthetics* 47; translation modified; “doch für den Ruf nach totaler Zertrümmung der Kunst hatten wir nichts übrig, solche Parolen konnten sich diejenigen leisten, die übersättigt waren von Bildung, wir wollten die Institutionen der Kultur erst einmal heil übernehmen, sehn, was dort vorhanden war und unserer Lernbegier dienstbar gemacht werden konnte.” *Ästhetik* 71. For Weiss’s critique of the “Eigenwert eines Kunstwerks,” see 228. Cf. Peter Bürger, “Exkurs zu Peter Weiss’ ‘Die Ästhetik des Widerstands,’” in: *Aktualität und Geschichtlichkeit. Studien zum gesellschaftlichen Funktionswandel der Literatur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 18.

[11] *Aesthetics* 295, translation modified; “Solch überraschende Darstellungen, die nicht von einem geschloßnen Aspekt, sondern von einer Vieldeutigkeit ausgingen, gaben tieferen Aufschluß über die Mechanismen, zwischen denen wir lebten, als die statische Anordnung es vermochte. Bezeichnend für sie war, daß sie die Phantasie dazu anleiteten, nach Beziehungen, nach Gleichnissen zu suchen und damit den Bereich der Aufnahmefähigkeit zu erweitern.” *Ästhetik* 416.

[12] Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 122. My translation.

[13] *Aesthetics* 295; “Indem das Bild uns aufforderte, den ersten Eindruck nur als Anlaß zu benutzen, das Gegebne auseinanderzunehmen und von verschiedenen Richtungen her zu überprüfen, es dann aufs neue zusammensetzen und es sich somit anzueignen, bestätigte sich die Regel, die ich von frühesten künstlerischen Untersuchungen kannte.” *Ästhetik* 416.

[14] *Aesthetics* 296; “daß es keine Trennung gab zwischen den sozialen und politischen Materialisationen und dem Wesen der Kunst.” *Ästhetik* 417.

[15] Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2006), 26.

[16] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), 42.

[17] *Aesthetics* 179; “Ganz Europa war ein Feld von Antagonismen, verschiedenartige, eigenwillige Energien mußten in Spanien zusammenströmen und nach einer Synthese suchen. Es war Sache eines jeden von uns, das Divergierende zu einer Einheit zu bringen.” *Ästhetik* 253.

[18] For the reception of Weiss’s novel, see Karen Hvidtfeldt Madsen, *Peter Weiss und Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 2003), 3f.

[19] Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 11.

[20] I have argued this point in my dissertation *Hanging-Together: Kant, Goethe, and the Theory of Aesthetic Modernism* (Columbia University, 2019).

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