

The Struggle Is Beautiful

On the Aesthetics of Leftist Politics

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ABSTRACT Aesthetic discourse has always openly or secretly been linked to political projects. According to some main strands of aesthetic discourse modern aesthetics mirrors the structure of social and political emancipation and key elements of aesthetic discourse coincide with the political ontology of the left. Marxist and Post-Marxist critics have emphasized that the struggle for emancipation is indirectly present in the historical constitution of aesthetics as a discipline – although in a merely imaginary and displaced form. Therefore, however, it is also partly of the same structure as what is normally described as “aesthetic”. Against this background aesthetic attributes (‘beauty’) can be ascribed to forms of emancipatory politics as well.

KEYWORDS Aesthetic Ideology, Political Ontology, Politics of Aesthetics, Aesthetics of Politics, Post-Marxism

Beautiful things indicate that the human being fits into the world

IMMANUEL KANT

1. Politics and Beauty

‘The struggle is beautiful’ – this is the central line in a song of the English post-punk band Killing Joke.¹ The beauty of struggles, however, is far from being obvious. Struggles have been violent and those of the left have (more often than not) even more violently been defeated – from the Paris Commune to the leftist opposition under Stalin and the *Unidad Popular* in Chile. Their history is a history of sadness and loss. Struggles do therefore not necessarily appear to be beautiful. Yet there is something suggestive about these lines, about the beauty of struggle.

They particularly make sense against the background of recent discussions of the aesthetico-political, in which militant politics and artistic practices are considered to be structurally analogous to some extent (as in Alain Badiou’s understanding of the conditions of philosophy), or where emancipation is thought to be pre-structured by the logics of the *aesthetic revolution* (as in Jacques Rancière’s model of the *aesthetic regime of art*).

The question of beauty, however, is not necessarily connected to politics. One might even assume that aesthetics in general, and beauty in particular, is quite different from politics – especially the politics of the left. Politics appears to be *heroic*, challenging one’s own social position – as particularly in extra-parliamentary forms of politics, where one has to be

prepared to do things for the 'good cause' that one might normally not be inclined to do (like camping on public squares or taking the risk of physical confrontation). Or it tends to be *bureaucratic* – as in parliamentary forms of politics, involving all kinds of formal regulations that change the driving impulses into something non-recognisable. These forms do not seem to have much to do with beauty or aesthetics, but rather with moral rigorism.

When serious confrontations are involved, politics might even turn *ugly*, as the young Marx mockingly remarks about the revolutionary uprisings in France: "The February Revolution was the beautiful revolution, the revolution of universal sympathy, because the antagonisms, which had flared up in it against the monarchy, slumbered peacefully side by side, still undeveloped, because the social struggle which formed its background had won only a joyous existence, an existence of phrases, of words. The June revolution is the ugly revolution, the repulsive revolution, because things have taken the place of phrases, because the republic uncovered the head of the monster itself, by striking off the crown that shielded and concealed it."²

But if the 'serious part' of politics cannot affirmingly be described in aesthetic terms, then the link between aesthetics and leftist struggle faces a problem. From the perspective of leftist politics, aesthetics was therefore regarded to be, at best, a secondary issue, an epiphenomenon of historical struggles, if not pure ideology, *kitsch*, "flowers on the chains". Why should aesthetics then be of any importance for the political struggles of the left?

One answer seems obvious: Because aesthetic desire has much to do with the formation of desire for specific forms of life, practices and politics. Aesthetics has always been an implicitly political discourse. There are unavoidable correlations between aesthetics and all kinds of political projects. The rightist tradition has its own aesthetics (with the fascist sublime and the aestheticisation of fixed forms of politics, with national mythologies, with identitarian ideas of community etc.). The political projects of liberalism have been aestheticised (beauty as a symbol of individual morality, the celebration of difference, the *sensus communis* as the classical form of deliberative democracy etc.). The leftist tradition has always had its own interpretation of the history of aesthetics (the symbolic reconciliation of social struggle in the work of art, the critique of the commodity form by the purposelessness of aesthetic form, the anticipation of utopia in aesthetic semblance etc.) and its own aesthetics, too (from popular realism to political interventions). This is how the

question of the inherent beauty of political movements, of real political struggles – of its forms, means and its ends – arises. But my argument goes further: Leftist politics is not only linked to leftist aesthetics (that would be tautological) but also to general strands of aesthetic discourse, which it inherently reflects. It is in this sense that it appears as aesthetic.

There are, however, several conditions for such an argument to make sense. Such an approach is first and foremost plausible only if aesthetics is not conceived of as the philosophical reflection of representational forms but as a form of rationality that can just as well be detected in real life practices (which, admittedly, already gives the interpretation of a general tradition a certain leftist turn). If the aesthetic is not only about as-if-representations (that do not directly interfere with real practices) but rather about the inherent organisation of formal processes in general (as a mediation of the sensuous and the material, as a critique of abstract and static representation and as a manifestation of free forms of connectivity), then it transgresses the realm of imagination.³

At this level a number of possible relations arise that allow us to characterise the structure of leftist politics as beautiful. That goes both for the specific means of leftist struggles (such as encampments, barricades, or strikes)⁴ as for the composition of its members (and the way in which they are transformed through struggle) and the anticipation and structure of its goals on a more general level.

The aesthetics of leftist politics is in the mediation between passionate (Dionysian) *force* and disciplined (Apollonian) *form*, between (utopian) *semblance* and (a pragmatic sense of) *reality*, between *multiplicity* (of gender identities, of cultures) and *unity*, between the promise of *sensuous plenitude* and *ascetic reduction*, between the radically *contingent* (of revolutionary events) and brute forms of *necessity*, between *passive matter* (the ‘noise’ of the alleged *riffraff*) and *active speech* (of legitimate political agents) etc. The most classical way of putting it: Beauty is a playful mediation between *nature* and *freedom* (Schiller). Such an approach embraces a number of classical descriptions of the aesthetic, many of which are not only part of the leftist tradition.

As a problem of political organisation – and thus, not only as a question of a utopian idea but its real manifestation in empirical struggles – this question is elaborated in Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács strongly emphasises the dialectical relation between the *spontaneity* of proletarian action and *discipline* (of the revolutionary organisation) as one condition of the leftist project. “What is essential”, he writes, “is the interaction of spontaneity and conscious control.”⁵ Lukács does

not explicitly call this relation aesthetic. But the “freedom in solidarity”⁶ clearly alludes to classical figures of the aesthetic, of integrated totality or the mediation between the general and the particular in the organic work of art.

In some ways inspired by Lukács’, the situationists understood their interventions (famously and influentially for contemporary artistic practices) as an attempt to unite aesthetics and revolutionary politics, to introduce a form of aesthetic practice that “cannot be separated from the history of the movement engaged in the realization of the totality of revolutionary possibilities contained in the present society”.⁷

In more recent years Jacques Rancière has famously suggested an in some ways comparable understanding of the aesthetic, in which the very structure of social and political organisation is explicitly reflected with regards to its inherently aesthetic structure, its distribution of subject positions and its specific forms of relating the sensuous to the intellectual, nature to freedom etc.⁸

According to Rancière there are some necessary correlations between emancipatory political struggles and key elements of the traditional aesthetic discourse. There is an inherently aesthetic dimension to the emancipatory project of the left (I will come back to his argument later). Some key figures of aesthetic discourse serve the politics of emancipation, or even more boldly put: *some key elements of the aesthetic are necessary conditions for leftist politics.*

2. Killing Jokes, or: Who likes these Struggles?

Aesthetics as a scholarly discourse (with certain institutional, disciplinary and political regulations) is politically ambiguous and therefore subject to struggle itself. There is no unambiguous aesthetic discourse, no univocal aesthetic tradition. There are many different forms of aesthetic politics and political aesthetics. Therefore, and in this respect, attempts to possess the aesthetic is to engage in struggle. *Beauty, in other words, is itself subject to struggle (discussion, contestation, historical change etc.).*

The band name and the title – Killing Joke, the struggle is beautiful – give a hint. In some languages one can die laughing. Monty Python made sense of this idiom in a famous *Flying Circus*-sketch, in which the British army use a *killing joke* (under most complicated laboratory conditions) against Nazi-Germany to kill the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* with an absolutely lethal joke. Both the sketch and the title suggests that a joke, and, if you will, aesthetics (*to arouse a certain feeling, or here: to make others laugh*) can be a weapon.

One of the two main strands in the history of political aesthetics is about precisely that strategic function of aesthetics. This line of tradition (from Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to the approaches of Pierre Bourdieu and, for instance, Tony Bennett) has tended to denounce aesthetics (as a normative discourse, which is uncritical about its social function and origin) as a symbolic investment in the struggle for social domination and the generalization of particular social and political perspectives. This tradition of political aesthetics has sought to unmask the false claims to universality made in the name of aesthetics critiquing the socially dominant classes' justification of their power as natural.

In his *Outside Literature* Tony Bennett has explicitly argued that normative aesthetics with universal claims "has an undeniable political use-value [...] only for the right".⁹ Bennett's claims have to be read against the backdrop of 1980s minority politics and the critique of all attempts of ideological closure. For Bennett the generalizing gesture of universalised aesthetics would be a way of veiling the particular perspective of the dominant social groups. And the leftist task would therefore be to unmask the false claims to universality.

This somewhat reductionist critique of ideology from the perspective of (an, again, reductionist understanding of) Bourdieu's critical sociology of the normative has some plausibility. As Peter Weiss, in the *Aesthetics of Resistance*, has his narrator comment on the barbarism implied in art: "Art served to give their ranks, their authority the appearance of the supernatural."¹⁰ Benjamin's concept of aura, effected by and perpetuating the exclusiveness of glamour, emphasised the same idea. Where bourgeois aesthetics is predominant, these theorists suggest, there should rather be politics – anything else can be utilised for the hardening of social dominations, for the political struggles of the right.

Even from a hegemony theoretical approach it seems problematic to simply leave the universal to the right. Universality itself is a field of struggle. Unmasking the power of universalising rhetoric and of the hegemonic value of aesthetics is but one side of the coin. But the aesthetically persuasive powers of emancipatory politics have to be defended, too. Such a political dimension of the universalising gesture of philosophical aesthetics is the other side of the coin. Benjamin and Bourdieu were well aware of this: *To argue for leftist aesthetics is an attempt to interfere within the inherent logics of hegemonic struggles (to enter the struggles about the valence of symbolic capital).*

3. They Do Not Know It But They Like Us

Can there still be “an Aesthetics of Resistance” – as suggested by Peter Weiss’ novel of that title – that would support the political project of the left? The second strand of political aesthetics unites Schiller with (ambivalent as he is) Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno, Marcuse, and, more recently, Jacques Rancière. This line of tradition emphasises the universality of the aesthetic, the possibility of an emancipated society, notwithstanding the undeniable origin of aesthetics in the specific context of bourgeois ideological struggles. Aesthetic discourse contains (or mirrors), it seems, the dream of an egalitarian society.

Most influentially, Jacques Rancière has argued for such a position. According to him, universalising claims of aesthetics are not only *not contrary* to emancipatory politics, but in fact *elementary* to it. This understanding of aesthetics characterises the second main strand in the history of leftist attempts. What Rancière reconstructs as the “aesthetic regime of art” (which signifies, to some extent, the modern discourse of aesthetics), is a regime which promises fundamental equality, and installs practices of undermining all kinds of symbolic and representational hierarchies.

Rancière develops these arguments to justify aesthetic autonomy in its ambiguous relation to political heteronomy, of *art* in its constitutive tension with *life*.¹¹ But he also gives at least two *intrapolitical* arguments, in which aesthetic evaluations are applied: First, the idea of aesthetic equality and second, the aesthetico-political idea of subjectification.

A short sketch of the first argument: Rancière interprets aesthetic play – one of the core principles of German aesthetic discourse ever since its beginnings in the 18th century – as the principle of an egalitarian articulation where the passive and the active can change roles and any pre-stabilised harmonies of the division of labour will be disrupted. The very possibility of equality is constantly brought into play by this aesthetic configuration. Aesthetic equality is but another name for the politics of *aesthetic autonomy*.

In the reorganisation of the field of legitimate speech, in the moment of falling out of one’s position, the second moment of Rancière’s emancipatory aesthetics comes in. The confrontation of different logics of the aesthetic will allow for a subjectification that surpasses the pre-stabilised harmony of social positions. The concept of aesthetics and the concept of emphatic politics converge here. Politics will be defined as the redistribution of the temporal and spatial order of legitimate speech, the distinction between legitimate subjects (who have the symbolic capacities, the time and the

positions to be political) and the allegedly unpolitical *riffraff*. "Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front-up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements."¹²

Such a politics reorganises the social regulations of perception and of articulation. And it operates in and through several media and semiotic regimes. This is not only a linguistic (cognitive, epistemic) practice; it is also *aesthetic*; it concerns the idea of aesthetic universality by procedurally (and potentially) forming a form of aesthetic democracy. This event-like breakthrough of unforeseen subject positions is but another name for the politics of *novelty*.

With Rancière, read in this respect, the history of aesthetics as a philosophical discourse with all kinds of universalising claims appears to be a justification of leftism more than something inherently rightist. In fact, Rancière very clearly attributes beauty to specific structures of leftist politics. *Leftist struggle*, Rancière suggests, *is beautiful*.

This universalising moment of aesthetics that might serve the political struggle of the left is already present in the idea of a killing joke. The killing joke that the British forces use against Nazi Germany is (dangerously) funny even to those, against whom it is strategically employed. The *Wehrmacht* soldiers *die laughing* and, thus, agree involuntarily on the aesthetic value of that joke. Killing Joke's lyrics claim accordingly that the struggle *is beautiful* and not only that some political interest groups might simply find it somewhat beautiful.

Leftist politics is, as it were, not necessarily detached from or opposed to the classical tradition of aesthetics. Nor is this relation dependent only on a strictly leftist tradition within the aesthetic tradition: Aesthetics as such has been introduced with the rise of capitalist modernity and can be used against its main representatives, too.

Rancière extracts a specifically leftist structure of aesthetics from a long tradition of bourgeois aesthetics (Kant, Schiller and their aftermath). Classical bourgeois aesthetics, he suggests, has constantly implied a logics of emancipation. It has provided a space for the reconciliation of social contradictions in an experimental and structurally open form – a reconciliation of active and passive, of the material and the intellectual etc. Autonomous aesthetics provides a space for equality, novelty, possibility, for free forms of connectivity and for emphatic forms of truth. In this sense the classical discourse of aesthetics has always implicitly been connected with forms of emancipatory struggle.

This link between (the classical paradigm of) bourgeois aesthetics and

emancipatory politics was problematic in some respects – it allowed for reconciliation merely in a displaced and compensatory form.¹³ But at the same time aesthetics has constantly implied a secret (however repressed) desire for the politics of the left. Or, to phrase it differently: *They* (rightist humanists) *do not know it but they like us* (the left).

4. The Proper Place of a Displaced Discourse

That is the big political strength of Rancière's efforts in aesthetic theory: Aesthetics can be mobilised for the political struggles for emancipation. It is immanently linked to leftist politics. There is one question, however, that Rancière fails (and refuses) to answer: How and why does this "aesthetic regime of art" actually come into play? How come that it coincides with the history of bourgeois society? What about its ideological implications?

Benjamin's concept of phantasmagoria might suggest a solution: In light of Benjamin's notion of phantasmagoria, aesthetic discourse appears as a dream-image and a projection, a symptom of the specific society of its time. More than a mere transposition of material reality, a phantasmagoric projection is, as Margaret Cohen has emphasized,¹⁴ "mediated through imaginative subjective processes", through which it also gains a distorting power, which, although itself a product of ideological displacement, can be re-appropriated for ideological critique and employed in political practice.

More concretely, aesthetic discourse comes to the fore as an imaginary displacement effected by the collapse between the promise of emancipation and quality and the repression of real emancipation and real equality in the further development of capitalist society. As such a displacement, however, it comprises a critical potential; it harbours various desires and imaginary potentials.

This meta-aesthetic claim embeds aesthetics in social history without reducing it to mere strategy. In the history of leftist meta-aesthetics there are three decisive texts that further develop that argument. The first one is Herbert Marcuse's *The Affirmative Character of Culture* (originally 1936). In his influential article Marcuse has argued that the inherent promise of bourgeois culture functions as a mere idealist promise (detached from the organisation of real life practices) of happiness and beauty.¹⁵ "Culture is supposed to assume concern for the individual's claim to happiness."¹⁶ And he goes on: "But the real gratification of individuals cannot be contained by an idealist dynamic which either continually postpones gratification or transmutes it into striving for the unattained."¹⁷

Marcuse underlines the inherent promises of bourgeois high art, the political potentials of the aesthetic. But according to Marcuse these potentials find their proper place only in a materialist project: “materialist philosophy takes seriously the concern for happiness and fights for its realization in history.”¹⁸ The utopian surplus of culture needs to be realised in political practice and it is a matter of ‘fighting’, of struggles. If bourgeois culture and the very ideal of beauty – the main examples in Marcuse are indeed the protagonists of German classicism – is a displacement of happiness, then materialist philosophy (and the emancipatory politics of the left) would be the proper place of the otherwise displaced.

The second decisive text in this context would be Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger underlines the immanent contradiction of bourgeois aesthetics between its critical and utopian function on the one hand and its compensatory (thus: ideological) function on the other. He writes: “Art is institutionalized as autonomous to act as a guardian of human emancipation in a society whose actual life processes do not allow its realization.”¹⁹

To Bürger (following Adorno) it is in the specific organisation of aesthetic semblance that we find an emancipatory surplus: The bourgeois conception of the autonomous artwork, Bürger claims, has two utopian dimensions: It reconciles the material and the rational and the general and the particular. But this emancipatory potential is only symbolically present. Bourgeois aesthetics reduces the anticipation of emancipation to *mere* semblance.

Bürger will make sense of the history of the avant-garde against this backdrop. Avant-gardist cultural politics, Bürger claims, is the attempt to bring the emancipatory potentials of autonomous form back into real life. His thesis has become influential and canonical as a definition of the avant-garde and emphasises a necessary moment of leftism inherent in the history of aesthetics: The aesthetico-political tension between the merely compensatory and the re-organisation of social life praxis – a *struggle* and a practice of active interventions

In his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, the third important text in this line of thought, Terry Eagleton has argued accordingly. When he analyses the main figures of aesthetic discourse from Baumgarten to Postmodernism he emphasises the ambivalent political use-value of the aesthetic. In Eagleton’s perspective aesthetics appears as a sublimation and displacement of politics.

Although aesthetics on the one hand appears as a manifestation and, thus, perpetuation of bourgeois subjectivity, it does, on the other hand,

also have a certain revolutionary dimension. Main elements of the aesthetic tradition are, thus, also main elements of leftist emancipatory struggles: The struggle for solidary community, the mediation between the particular and the general, between (egalitarian) form and content, the mediation of materiality and rationality, of manual and intellectual labour. The aesthetic, Eagleton writes, “represents on the one hand a liberatory concern with concrete particularity and on the other hand a specious form of universality. If it offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one another, it also blocks and mystifies the historical movement towards such historical community.”²⁰

Aesthetics gives the utopian image of a world. But it blocks and prevents it at the same time by being merely imaginary, a displacement of that very critical potential. Therefore it constantly runs the risk of turning into pure ideology.

The argument of Marcuse, Bürger, and Eagleton that idealist aesthetics (and the idea of beauty) is a displacement of its realisation in real life practices also implies that it is structurally analogous with the idea of an emancipated society. The *argumentum e contrario* would be as follows: *if beauty repeats the structure of the historical movement towards emancipation (in a disguised and displaced fashion) then emancipation is inherently beautiful.*

5. Struggle?

But how is this linked to struggle? In the tradition of bourgeois decadence the comparison of the beauty of art and the ugliness of the world – frequently leading to right wing conservative cynicism – presents precisely this incapacity to an aesthetics of struggle. If beauty shames the empirical reality with its inherent promise of a better life, the question is one of mediation. Walter Benjamin’s objection against fascist aesthetics (futurism in particular) interpreted along the lines of the *fiat ars – pereat mundus* was an objection of that kind: They were decadents because they could not mediate.

Although in a tamed fashion, the example of German compensation aesthetics hits the nail on the head. It denies neither the social potentials of aesthetics, nor its symptomatic dependency on the deficits of social reality. Aesthetics, according to the rightist Hegelian tradition of Joachim Ritter and his followers,²¹ heals the wounds of the social process in imagination but thereby leaves its structure intact. In line with the anthropology of Arnold Gehlen (human beings as deficient beings) this

tradition sees compensation as a necessary illusion that just as necessarily remains such an illusion. Compensation is, thus, just another word for the pre-established harmony between social process and aesthetics, between cause and symptom.

One can have numerous *political problems* with that construction and they have been expressed frequently.²² But the main deficit of compensation aesthetics is *aesthetic*. The tension between the symptomatically understood aesthetics and its social causes lead to struggle. It is precisely this struggle that compensation aesthetics represses. And it is this moment of struggle which bares an aesthetic quality.

In a little comment on the post 1989 political culture in Germany, Volker Braun accentuates precisely this aesthetic deficit of the incapacity to mediate. He describes a certain impression with merely compensatory aesthetics that links it to pornography, speaking about: "Das Gefühl, dass sich das ganze Leben in Pornographie verwandelt, oder, was ist das, wenn keine Kämpfe mehr stattfinden."²³

His sentence can be read as a programmatic statement about the aesthetics of leftist politics. Aesthetics without struggle, he suggests, would regress to pornography. Not only does it imply an interesting conception of pornography – it also points to an aestheticisation of struggle and a politicisation of the aesthetic. The struggle is beautiful, Braun suggests, and what is not related to struggle leaves the aftertaste of kitsch and pornography. Struggle is, in other words, beautiful, or, more precisely, a condition of beauty. The struggle of the left is beautiful in its attempt to bring the otherwise merely compensatory functions of the aesthetic back to life.

In line with Bürger's and Eagleton's critique of the compensatory function of bourgeois aesthetics as a form of kitsch or mere ideology, one could say: Aesthetics that has no claims to interfering with reality, aesthetics, in other words, that is devoid of all avant-gardist impulses, regresses to pornography. That is one dimension of struggle.

In a catchy song of the German socialist tradition (first introduced by the socialist choir *Schmetterlinge* in the 1970s) a second dimension is emphasised. The refrain of their song on the *Women of the Paris Commune* says:

Wie ihre roten Wangen glüh'n beim Barrikadenbauen –
Die bisher schönsten Frauen,
die Frauen der Commune,
die bisher schönsten Frauen,
die Frauen der Commune.²⁴

There are, the song suggests, inherent moments of beauty in leftist struggle as it introduces figures of change, as it changes the composition of subjects.

One could see this as a lame advertising strategy of the leftist project – reducing the women of the commune to mere ornaments of an apparently male project. But the idea of the song is the opposite: The women of the commune are so beautiful because of a fundamentally different subject position. Their beauty is inscribed in the moment of struggle and its inherent subjectification (as I have argued above with respect to Jacques Rancière). Differently put: The revaluation of previously silenced subject positions is an aesthetic event. Nothing is as beautiful as the mute, when it speaks; nothing is as beautiful as the powerless, when they struggle. *These struggles are beautiful.*

6. Conclusion

Let me conclude by emphasising the three main intuitions of this text in all briefness and simplicity: They concern the unavailability of a politics of aesthetics, and the two main forms of addressing it.

Aesthetics has always, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly been linked to specific forms of politics and specific forms of morality. It has supported various forms of desire for different kinds of politics. These are the respective political programs of the right (sublime political violence, fixed rules of politics, representation, and cultural identity), of liberalism (symbols of individualist morality and difference), and of the left (the politicisation of aesthetics in all various shades). In these respects aesthetic discourse is linked to political programs, which makes its systematic grounding all the more complicated and dubious.

Self-confidently put this can be turned into a political understanding of the practice of aesthetic theorizing as an element of hegemonic struggles. This, of course, also implies that it would be naïve at best to reject aesthetic discourse (as, for instance, a mere element of bourgeois humanist ideology) in its entirety. Aesthetic discourse is a battlefield.

The main reason for the falseness of such a rejection is, however, the fact, that there is something inherently emancipatory in the structure of modern aesthetic discourse. There is a certain strand in the symbolic politics of aesthetics, which makes some political projects appear more beautiful than others. In this line of tradition aesthetic discourse is, as suggested above, a space for a number of (at least indirectly) political promises that are linked to the politics of the left. Key elements of aes-

thetic discourse coincide with the very structure of social and political emancipation.

If, however, the struggle for emancipation is indirectly present in the historical constitution of aesthetics as a discipline – even as a displaced and (at worst merely compensatory) desire – then it is also partly of the same structure as what is normally called “aesthetics”, or, more specifically, beauty. The inherent structure of leftist struggles mirrors the structure of aesthetic discourse just as aesthetic discourse had originally mirrored the desire for emancipation. If aesthetics speaks about beauty, when it means emancipation, emancipatory struggles are *ipso facto* beautiful.

Notes

1. The song “The Struggle” first appeared in the 1990s *Extremities, Dirt & Various Repressed Emotions* album.

2. Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France: 1848–1850* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 57f. In spite of Marx’ sarcastic tone concerning the plausibility of beauty and aesthetic categories for the evaluation of political events, Mikhail Lifshitz has suggested that Marx’ own sense of beauty strongly overlaps with his conception of communist revolution – “removing not only the abstract contradiction between ‘work and pleasure’ but also the very real contradiction between the play of ‘the bodily and mental powers’”. *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (New York: Critics Group, 1938), 93f.

3. In *Works of Love* Søren Kierkegaard (clearly not a leftist thinker) invites his reader to think about the example of a man “who gave a banquet feast and invited to it the halt, the blind, cripples and beggars. Now far be it from me to believe anything else about the world than that it would find this beautiful even though eccentric.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 90. – Kierkegaard’s attribution of eccentric beauty is a perfect case in point – he forgets, however, that pure charity, as an institutionalized practice, is not eccentric and in its patronizing and thus affirmative connotations not even too beautiful.

4. As for the twofold (i.e. both tragic and comic) theatricality of the (undeniably anachronistic) ‘symbolic form’ of the barricade, its popular materiality and its specific grammar of interruption see Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris: A History in Footsteps* (London: Verso, 2010), 241f, 242–99.

5. Georg Lukács, “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation”, in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 295–342; 317.

6. *Ibid.*, 316.

7. Guy Debord, 2002, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art", in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom Donough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002), 159–66; 164.

8. Rancière does, of course, sketch the relation between aesthetics and politics as a relation of tension. The autonomy of the aesthetic realizes itself in playfully being linked to the heterogeneous field of politics. But that does not prevent Rancière from applying some of these logics to politics proper. Cf. Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes. Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy", *New Left Review*, 14 (March–April 2002), 133–51.

9. Tony Bennett, "Really Useless 'Knowledge': A Political Critique of Aesthetics", in *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990), 140–164, 146.

10. Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, vol. 1 (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

11. He also underlines that the aesthetic promise of equality were annulled if attempted to be realized. Cf. Rancière, *op.cit.*, 151.

12. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity 2009), 24.

13. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and the following paragraphs.

14. Margaret Cohen, "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria", *New German Critique*, No. 48 (1989), 87–107; 94.

15. Marcuse does indeed identify beauty and happiness – seeing pleasure as "the very essence" of beauty. Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture", in *Negations: Studies in Critical Theory* (London: Mayfly Books, 2009), 65–98; 85.

16. *Ibid.*, 71.

17. *Ibid.*, 74.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), 11.

20. Eagleton, *op.cit.*, 9.

21. Cf. Joachim Ritter, *Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974) and Odo Marquard, "Homo compensator. Zur anthropologischen Karriere eines metaphysischen Begriffs", in *Philosophie des Stattdessen: Studien* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 11–29; 13f.

22. Cf. Herbert Schnädelsch, "Kritik der Kompensation", in *Zur Rehabilitierung des animal rationale: Vorträge und Abhandlungen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 399–411.

23. ["The impression that the whole life is turning into pornography, or, what is

this, when there are no struggles anymore?"] Volker Braun, *Wir befinden uns so weit wohl. Wir sind erst einmal am Ende: Äußerungen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 8.

24. ["How their red cheeks are glowing as they are building barricades, / the most beautiful women so far / the women of the *commune*, / the most beautiful women so far the women of the *commune*."] The song, *Die Frauen der Kommune*, was part of the opera *Proletenpassion* [Proletarian assions] first performed in 1976, which was first released on vinyl on the album of the same title in 1977.