

Here and Now: From ‘Aestheticizing Politics’ to ‘Politicizing Art’

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The fusion of art, law, and politics achieved critical mass in the 1930’s—one need only think of the calculated exploitation of aesthetic forms of authority in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy; but Soviet Realism, despite its radically different ideological orientation was not far behind in cultivated the inter-relationship of political, aesthetic, and legal discourses. As will be seen, in Mexico, too, a post-revolutionary nationalist ideology recognized the work of artists as a crucial tool of its legitimacy. It hardly comes as a surprise then, that Walter Benjamin, whose ability to detect the faintest breeze of the *zeitgeist* was so uncanny and so keen, should choose to write on the subject.

This article takes as its point of departure Benjamin’s celebrated 1936 essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility’, and draws it into a dialogue with two exemplary events that occurred around the same time, shedding a new light on his work and on the conjoined discourses at its heart. The year before, the Mexican mural movement—most notably in the work of Diego Rivera—was excoriated in a debate that strikingly prefigures Benjamin’s central themes and concerns. The year after, the Paris World’s Fair perfectly exemplified Benjamin’s thesis and his prognosis. But with a twist. For both these episodes invite us to reconsider any simplistic opposition between ‘fascism’ and ‘communism’, the former characterized by an ‘aestheticizing politics’ and the latter by ‘politicizing art’. The examples of Mexico and Soviet Russia should lead us to be wary of this reductive conclusion. Rather, the interplay between 1935, 1936, and 1937 reflects a much more universal conflation of aesthetics, nation, politics and law.

The true distinction lies in how the work of art relates to *Jetztzeit*, ‘*here and now*’, a term first used by Benjamin in ‘The Work of Art’, and then in ‘The Concept of History’. The ideological appropriation of art involves situating political representations in a mythological framework, outside of place or time. This rhetoric

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of eternity attempts to shield political claims from scrutiny or context. Even the work of as fine an artist as Diego Rivera fell too often into this trap. Art that resists that ideological appropriation, it will be argued, works precisely in the *opposite* way, testing political mythology against its precise contexts, times, and consequences. 'Aestheticizing politics' turns visual representation into something a-temporal and u-topian; 'politicizing art' on the contrary, involves returning the image to the temporal and spatial specificities of its origin, with a vengeance. Thus is made possible an art that can hold politics to account rather than simply exult in it. All this would have been apparent to a *flâneur* trawling the Champs-de-Mars in Paris, in 1937. For it was not just the grandiose pretensions of Soviets and fascists that were on display there. In the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic stood the greatest piece of political art of the era—Picasso's *Guernica*.

≈1936≈

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', Walter Benjamin pens the obituary of the artwork: the death of its presence and the implications of its absence.¹ For Benjamin, this loss is a consequence of its reproducibility. But his argument is more complicated than that.

That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. [...] Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. (Benjamin 2006b, 254.)

Terry Eagleton (1981, 176) to the contrary, this argument is not technological determinism. On the contrary, the reproducibility of photography and, even more importantly, of film, is '*symptomatic*' of a broader process 'whose significance points *beyond* the realm of art'. Indeed, elsewhere he describes the notion of 'art for art's sake' as a doomed response to a much earlier crisis in the relationship of aesthetics and politics, 'a crisis which was by no means occasioned exclusively by photography but rather *in a relatively independent manner* by the appeal of art works to the masses' (Benjamin 2006b, 264). Mass media, mass production, and 'mass movements' are both fruits and seeds, not just of a technological but a social revolution.

Benjamin is interested, on the one hand, in the way techniques of mechanical reproduction (as far back as the lithograph) undermine an artwork's uniqueness in space and time, opening it up to new forms of mass production and consumption (Ibid., 252). He is equally interested, on the other hand, in the ways that film techniques—montage, slow-motion, or close-up—'bring things closer spatially and humanly' (Ibid., 255) to a vast field of spectators. In what we might now recognize as a prophetic Foucauldian move (see 1970, 1966), he concludes that 'thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing

¹ Benjamin 2006a, 101-133. As is conventional, quotations are, unless otherwise indicated, taken from the slightly modified Third Version, in Benjamin, 2006b, 251-283.

importance of statistics' (Benjamin 2006b, 256). In other words, changes in aesthetics both constitute and are constituted by broader changes in 'the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life'. Improved methods of reproduction make the image radically more accessible to vast numbers of people but, correlatively, make vast numbers of people radically more accessible to the image-makers. This is what Benjamin is getting at when he distinguishes between 'a person who concentrates before a work of art [and] is *absorbed* by it', and 'the distracted masses [who] *absorb* the work of art' (Ibid., 268). The presence or aura of the former mode of production of art exerts an intensive power; its absence in the latter exerts instead an extensive power. A concentrated drug exerts a powerful influence, for those who take it; but a highly diluted drug can infiltrate whole water supplies.

Dada, Benjamin (Ibid., 266-267) argued, was engaged on the same project—the annihilation of the aura of the artwork—from within the fine arts but for essentially the same reasons: in the name of the masses and of political instrumentalization, and against art as a cult object. Marcel Duchamp blurs the distinction between original artwork and reproducible commodity, showing its dependence on context or perception, producing something which can be defined neither as one nor the other (Duchamp, 1994). Dada attempted to accomplish by satire what the film achieved by technology.

The twentieth century's mass movements—most notoriously but not exclusively fascism—seized upon art's potential to serve not ritual but political purposes. The emotive paraphernalia of fascism—propaganda films, marching troops, flags, insignia, and the rest—clearly recognized the potential that aesthetics held to marshal collective experience as a powerful social force (Mosse 1996; Strathausen 1999). What a remarkable development. Benjamin observes (2006b, 270) that, by using aesthetics to mask or indeed to exacerbate the underlying social tensions in society, the inevitable outcome of fascism must be war. He concludes with a clarion call: 'Such is the *aestheticizing* of *politics* as practiced by *Fascism*. Communism replies by politicizing art.'

It is misleading to take this contrast between fascism and communism at face value. Fascism, as Benjamin makes clear, was merely exploiting widespread aesthetic trends. Marinetti's futurist manifestoes embraced the world war as a 'cleansing purge', 'the most beautiful Futurist poem to date'. 'Take out your pick-axes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly' (Benjamin 2006b, 269-270; see also Braun 2000, 31-32; Affron and Antliff 1997). George Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* ([1908] 2004; see Affron 1997, 134-140) offered a more intellectual account of the same visceral desire, blaming the atomized individual and materialist culture for a widespread social malaise, and advocating instead an intuitive, collective, psychological—in other words mass and aesthetic—consciousness. The World War only intensified these links between violence, suffering, and redemption. Sorel's contribution was to shift the discourse from class conflict to 'national regeneration' and from reason and history to psychology and myth. His definition of myth as 'a system of images' gave art a central role in the revolution to come (Braun 1997, 101;

see also Gentile 1997, 36-38).

As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out (1999, 3-5), the disjunction between aesthetics and politics, which (before the First World War and then more emphatically after the Second) has come to seem inevitable, can equally be viewed as a sign of how far art has lost its way. He blames Kant, who fatally identified aesthetics with disinterest, thus sundering creativity and taste, the passionate artist and the dispassionate spectator. But it was not ever thus. For Plato, art menaces the Republic precisely because of its political *interestedness* (Ibid., 3-8). In the eighteenth century and through the French revolution, for example, aesthetics and politics were inseparable expressions of the same underlying ideology.² Benjamin's essay on mass movements and modern art does not identify the birth of an alliance, so much as detect its resurgence under the altered conditions of twentieth century life. What distinguishes his analysis is the recognition that the constitution of mass publics and collective interests changes both the forms this alliance takes and the functions it fulfills. At stake is none other than the implications of thinking of aesthetics as the handmaiden of politics.

≈1935≈

Benjamin was not, however, the first person to note and critique this problematic relationship. The question had already been raised—not in Berlin or Paris or Moscow but in 'faraway Mexico', as Leon Trotsky put it. Forget Soviet art, he wrote (well he would, wouldn't he):

The official art of the Soviet Union—and there is no other over there— resembles totalitarian justice; that is to say, it is based on lies and deceit. [...] Do you wish to see with your own eyes the hidden springs of the social revolution? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. (Trotsky 1950, 61-64.)

Despite their aesthetic sophistication and emotional power, Rivera's murals have left an ambivalent legacy.³ In the aftermath of the fratricidal revolutionary war that shook Mexico from 1910-1920, the post-revolutionary government of Alvaro Obregón and its successors took their own legitimacy as inheritors of the revolutionary mantle as a central concern. Inspired by José Vasconcelos Calderón, the so-called 'cultural *caudillo*' of the revolution, a highly ambitious program of publicly funded art was placed at the very heart of the government's nation-building project. The Mexican mural movement was supported not as a cultural foray but under the aegis of the Ministry of Public Education. It was conceived as a secular religion that fused art, politics, and the nation, in the minds of the people (Folgarait 1998; Coffey 2012). As

² See Eagleton 1991. See also Postle 2005; Barrell 1986; Reynolds 1992; Eitner 1971. See also Manderson, forthcoming.

³ See Craven 1997; Rochfort 1987; Craven 2001; Coffey 2002; Lopez, Rochfort, Vaughan and Lewis 2006; Paz 1967; Folgarait, 1998; Anreus, Folgarait and Greeley 2012; Coffey 2012.

Octavio Paz put it, ‘that was the way in which a mistake began which ended with the perversion of Mexican mural painting: on the one hand, it was a revolutionary art, or one that called itself revolutionary; on the other, it was an official art’ (Coffey 2012, 1).

The funding of the muralists and their installation in vast government buildings fused the concepts of nation, revolution, and government. From the vast murals he completed at the Ministry of Public Education itself (1923-28), to the imposing *History of Mexico* triptych at the Palacio Nacional (1929-35; 1942-51), Rivera’s work gives an aesthetic form to the ideology of the government of Mexico, which would eventually travel under the name of the ‘Party of Institutionalized Revolution’—an oxymoron that reveals very clearly how the rhetoric of national revolution masked increasingly ossified and authoritarian institutions.

In an essay entitled ‘Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road’, the mural artist David Siqueiros expressed his concerns in no uncertain terms (1934; see also Siqueiros 1975, 332-334). Indeed, the conflict between the two artists exploded in a three-day public brawl at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in 1935. In a *denouement* worthy of the show trials they eerily foreshadow—Siqueiros the committed Stalinist, Rivera the friend of Trotsky—the accused was coerced or persuaded to sign an artistic *mea culpa*, conceding that his ‘art has served the demagogic interests of the government’, and that it was ‘an error to realize murals almost exclusively in the interiors of grand buildings’ (see Jolly 2012, 75-92; Coffey 2012, 38-42; Manjarrez 1996). Notwithstanding its edge of menace, Siqueiros’ critique was astute. He condemned murals for showing little sensitivity to their specific sites. He attacked Rivera’s conventional, even folkloric, representational style and traditional materials. And he criticized the romanticized treatment of the past. In these ways, his critique draws attention to the very dynamic that Benjamin was to address the following year.

In Rivera’s murals in particular, two elements stand out. First, the priority he gives to the nationalist and liberal movements from 1821–1911 portrays the government and the nation as the natural outcome of nineteenth century liberalism. Hero figures such as Father Hidalgo, Miguel Morales and Benito Juarez were co-opted to shore up the legitimacy of the modern State. Rivera represses the murderous internecine conflicts of the Revolution, still more the underlying tensions they reflected. Secondly, while Rivera articulates an explicitly socialist and radical agenda for the Revolution, his utopian imagery juxtaposes a non-existent past and an unrealizable future, offering the viewer no way of connecting these dreams to the challenges of modern Mexican society. Yoking the vision of ‘*mexicanidad*’ to a utopian socialist dream allowed the government to claim it for its own, but without having to do anything about it (Folgarait 1998, 122, 194; see generally 86-136).

Rivera thus recuperates the paradox of an ‘institutionalized revolution’, justifying the first in the name of the second and deferring the second in the interests of the first (Ibid., 122; Coffey 2012, 14). The image of the perfected revolution provides a justification for Mexico’s one-party rule at the same time as it postpones any realization

of those ideals to some faraway future. In short, a wholly *mythic* resolution is forged between ideals and reality (see Barthes 2000, 109-155; Manderson 2015). This ideological strategy, resolving the challenges and tensions of real human societies in aesthetic terms while endlessly deferring them in political terms, Siqueiros branded 'counter-revolutionary', and Benjamin described as 'aestheticizing the political'.

In all the great artists of Mexican mural renaissance—Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco—mythology substitutes for critique. This is what distinguishes 'the aestheticization of the political' from 'the politicization of art'. The mythic register of the Mexican muralists postulates a rhythm that swells up from out of the deep past, and that still endures (Coffey 2012, 33, 64). Myth knots together the past and the present into an eternal truth, treating history and politics as epiphenomenal. It is a question of the treatment of time.

This is certainly true of the work of José Clemente Orozco. Political action is depicted as a kind of futile striving that is incapable of modifying the mythic structures of the land or the people (Rochfort 1998; Greeley 2012, 158). The dark stains of violence, death, and corruption are never far from the surface in his work, and no amount of scrubbing will remove them. Many of his works lift their subjects out of a particular historical moment and use them as the medium to deliver a timeless message. What makes *The Trench* (1926) so moving, for example, is the way it abstracts from a specific soldier or war to make a statement that transcends the particulars of a battle. Some have read the three overlapping figures as a freeze-frame that traces the fall of a body in time and space. But it seems to me that Orozco's point of reference here is not so much slo-mo, but montage. The three men represent not a single human being falling, but three positions of abjection, all devoid of face or identity, all lost, three snapshots from the eternal tragedy of war. The murals in the Palacio de Gobierno in Guadalajara likewise treat ideology, whether Christian, communist, or fascist, as equally destructive and eternally at war (Rochfort 1998, 161-184). Even when he portrays specifically historical figures, such as *Hidalgo* (1949), he tends to surround them with the trappings of myth and work them loose from their social and political context. The juxtaposition of Father Hidalgo, brandishing a burning torch (a reference to a famous act that touched off the war of independence in 1811) alongside communist and fascist warmongers from a century later, implies that the apocalyptic fire he lit still burns.

The timelessness of myth is not a distance but a presence; not a lesson of change but of the illusory nature of change. As Roland Barthes puts it (2000, 142, 155), myth transforms historical intention into a natural justification, 'making contingency appear eternal' and reducing human decisions to 'the simplicity of essences'. 'For the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order'. This universal order is of course the very opposite of politics which treats the established order as contingent and seeks to intervene in it. A *political* reading of Hidalgo would think about what he did that changed history; Orozco thinks about what he did that didn't.

In Diego Rivera, above all, time is not continuous but fractured, made up of

a series of unbridgeable abysses. Take the *History of Mexico* series, comprising the large triptych on the ground floor of the Palacio Nacional and eleven vignettes on the patio balcony above. Here we have three different temporal frameworks, but each of them suffer from the same kind of problem. On the right-hand wing of the triptych, and in the scenes above depicting pre-Columbian life, the Aztecs are associated with femininity, craft, and harmony with nature.⁴ Labor is never presented as coerced but as social. (The contrast with his treatment of modern Mexican workers in the SEP's Courtyard of Labor, is stark.) The violence associated with the Aztecs, their imperial ambitions, ritual sacrifices and authoritarian social structure, are completely ignored (e.g. Rochfort 1998, 81). This is not so much myth as legend. A legend does not transcend time, like a myth; on the contrary, it is *trapped* in it. A legend belongs to a specific time and place; it may well be based on real historical figures or events. As opposed to a myth then, the legend does not continue to exist; it is expressed as loss or displacement. Myth is epic; legend is elegaic. Here too then, all temporal links are severed. This is precisely the function that Rivera's native peoples serve.

On the other hand—the left wing of the triptych, to be precise, entitled 'Mexico Today and Tomorrow'—Rivera presents the 1911 Revolution as an incomplete event, whose promises of development, prosperity, and equality have yet to be fulfilled (Rochfort 1998, 81-160). But the Utopia of a unified national community in which the capitalists have been overthrown and a peaceful Mexico prevails, lacks any sense of specificity, any precise political program, or any sense of the conflicts and differences that might need to be addressed along the way. Rivera's Utopia is no less fanciful than his Paradise. In the case of legend, the connection between past and present has been severed; in the case of utopia, it is the connection between present and future. Both myth and utopia 'immobilize the world' and 'mimic a universal order' (Barthes 2000, 142, 155) the former by constituting an inescapable presence, the latter an unbridgeable distance. In each case what Benjamin might have identified as politics disappears.

Between Paradise and Utopia lies *History*, which commands the vast central stage of Rivera's triptych. But here too the iconography is so dense with episodes from the nation's past as to be strangely dispiriting. A parade of great men and great events march past, but its spectators are given no role except that of passive approbation. The images are flat and crowd the canvas, made into such a complex set of overlapping icons that one can do no more than recognize and name them. The static poses, the flat surface and the two-dimensionality of the representation together produce a sense of a 'chronological itinerary', as Siqueiros put it (Coffey 2012, 42)—an inexorable movement towards ever greater unity, progress, and modernity, culminating in the national triumph of the Revolution (Folgarait 1998, 110-115). In the highly critical words of Leonard Folgarait, 'The figure now functions as a juridical emblem and itself becomes flat, disembodied, and glyph-like. Writing has labelled and supervised the behaviour of its subordinate. Its ownership of the

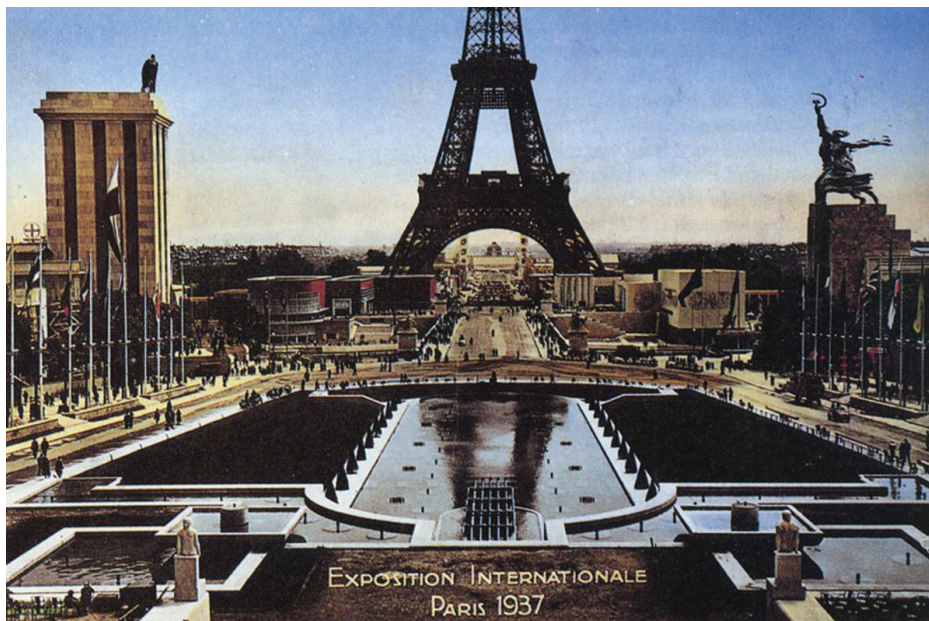
⁴ See for example, *The Aztec World*, right hand stairwell of *History of Mexico*; *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*; *Totanc Civilization*; *Huastec Civilization*; *The Papermakers*, and others, all in patio corridor.

image is both juridical and economic' (Ibid.).

The problem of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is essentially one of time—a problem not of vision but of transition. The Mexican mural renaissance found no good way of establishing any continuity between past, present, and future. Whether as legend, myth, apocalypse, or utopia, the very connections or transitions that would have helped realize their political ambitions were severed.

≈1937≈

The year after the publication of Benjamin's essay, the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*, was held in Paris.⁵ It offers an exemplary opportunity to apply Benjamin's analysis. Benjamin now lived there, working on the Arcades Project (Benjamin 2002) he would never finish. So there is no doubt Paris was on his mind. Although he was in San Remo for most of that summer, and in July 1937 wrote in a letter to Gershom Scholem that he was 'yet to set foot on the grounds of the world's fair', (Adorno and Scholem 1994, 540) he returned to the city in September. His main concern seems to have been how the exhibition contributed to rising accommodation costs. No doubt at some time over the next few months, however, he joined the hundreds of thousands of *flâneurs* wandering the site from the Trocadero to the Eiffel Tower. As he did so, what must have struck him was how closely the displays confirmed his predictions of a dramatic shift in the dynamics of art and politics. It is not just the form of art that is transmuted by modern technology; on the contrary, despite—indeed, perhaps because of—their overwhelming employment of traditional media, the art of the pavilions at Paris 1937 exemplify a far deeper shift. Art served as the sensory vanguard for ideological visions of the nation.



Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, Paris 1937.⁶

⁵ 25 May–25 November, 1937; see Herbert 1997. See also Kargan 2015; Greenhalgh 2011; Mattle 1998.

⁶ Author unknown, editor La Photolith, © Wikimedia Commons [editors' note].

Across the *Champs-de-Mars*—a battlefield by any other name—loomed the rival goliaths of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. On one side, Albert Speer's outsized neo-classical monument to Nazi power was crowned by the eagle and the swastika. On the other side, the Soviet edifice, equally imposing, was topped by the dynamic image of a male worker and a female peasant, hands clasped together, thrusting forward into the future clutching a hammer and a sickle. The Italian pavilion featured *Fascist Work*, a vast mural by Mario Sironi, again expressing the kind of archaic timelessness beloved of fascist fantasy, its oversized figures apparently stamped out of the primordial clay (see Braun 2000, 198-200). The Paris Exhibition presents us with an aesthetic rivalry that surely portends the military one soon to come; or to put it another way, it dramatized how central were the aesthetics of the nation to the furtherance of ideological disputes. All these regimes shared a belief in the key role of the artist in mobilizing mass social change: perhaps ironically, and despite their ideological differences, all sought both to engage the artist politically and to reconstitute him as a humble worker for the betterment of the masses, rather than as an individual aesthete.

The question of reproducibility marks for Benjamin less a technological than an ontological crisis for art. As James Herbert explains, it is precisely the presence or, dare we say it, the 'aura' of nations which was *lost* at the World's Fair, in its efforts to 'recreate' 'replica states' in miniaturized form, and thereby shrink them to a form capable of apprehension, consumption and purchase (Herbert 1997, 40). 'In a few hours we have just completed a genuine world tour!' gushed one critic (Ibid., 4). The whole principle of the pavilions followed the logic of reproducibility—the annihilation of singularities of time and space, compression into the genre of montage, and the amusement of a mass public. The paradox of the idea of *la France* as a culture of universality and peace, represented through an implicitly violent and hegemonic national competition, only intensifies the fragility of the pluralism of the World's Fair, which was punctured by a political reality it only temporarily managed to sublimate.

Two additional displays outside the grounds of the International Exhibition suffered from the same problem. Against '*La vie moderne*' (the theme, it will be recalled, of the Exhibition) is juxtaposed two apparent 'others', *le moyen âge* on the one hand, and the rest of the world on the other. *Musée des monuments français* did not offer up original architectural features, but merely reproductions, shrunken copies that reduce even the cathedral at Rouen to yet another spectacle for mass consumption (Herbert 1997, 41-70). Benjamin's thesis is even better on display at *Musée de l'homme*. Here, 'primitive' cultures from around the world were distilled into specimens and artefacts contained in long lines of identical vitrines (Ibid.). These objects existed not as unique individual artworks but as samples or types, for which many others could easily have been substituted. One mask signifying 'Africa' is much like another. Their function may have been ritual, cultic, or aesthetic in their own cultures. But in the museum environment, as Benjamin put it—a year before, you will recall—'the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead

of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics' (Benjamin 2006b, 257). 'The abstraction of material things (*objets*) into forms of knowledge (*documents, temoins*)', says Herbert (1997, 64), offers political or social *knowledge* as a substitute for aesthetic or social *experience*. In the words of Jacques Soustelle, the Assistant Director, this knowledge is presented to a mass public as 'a collective good,' as opposed to limiting it to an 'elite' as a private good (Ibid., 62). Ethnography, like statistics, is a modern human science—converting ritual into use, individuals into masses, and the production of presence into the reproduction of information. What is on offer is the objectification of archaic others in the interests of the modern subject.

The *Musée des monuments français* and the *Musée de l'homme* attempt to do away with the constraints of time, in the first case—*la France* through the ages—and space, in the second—around the world in eighty minutes. This is what makes them emblematic of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Herbert quotes André Warnod:

As soon as you pass through its gates [...] you are [...] in a land that is located nowhere and everywhere at the same time. A land where all notions of distance and time are confounded. (Ibid., 6, 14.)

Benjamin (2006b, 253) points us to these dimensions as key to the withering of the aura. 'In even the most perfect reproduction *one* thing is lacking—the here and now [*Jetztzeit*] of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place'. The nation, the Middle Ages and the people, are the three dimensions of time and space that the Fair sought to bring to Paris; but in each case they show only that, by 1937, the task was impossible. But the abolition of the conditions of presence, as we have seen, imports a compensatory power of absence, of influence by dissipation, dissemination, and distraction. Arts' form and function are reframed by and for mass movements, directed towards political lessons, and constructed by machines—by films and displays if possible, and with bombs where necessary. With eery foresight, Benjamin (2006a, 122) had observed of fascist war in 1936: 'instead of promoting power stations across the land, society deploys manpower in the form of armies. Instead of promoting air traffic, it promotes traffic in shells', before concluding that, against the fascist strategy of rendering politics aesthetic, 'communism responds by politicizing art'.

And this is exactly what Benjamin would have witnessed on the *Champs-de-Mars*. In the very shadow of this aesthetico-political battlefield, the pavilion of the doomed Spanish Republic unveiled the greatest mural of them all, *Guernica*, created by Picasso in barely four weeks in response to the carpet-bombing of the Basque town by German and Italian airplanes on May Day 1937.⁷ Indeed, when he came to revise 'The Work of Art' two years later, Benjamin changed the passage above and inserted a specific reference, with Franco's *Guernica*, and Picasso's, clearly in mind:

⁷ Picasso 1937. See Opler 1988; Clark 1941; Berger 1965; Arnheim 1980; Chipp and Tusell 1988.

‘Instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities’ (2006b, 270).

Only Picasso succeeded in anchoring our senses in a time and place from which the mythic forms of modernist aesthetics pretended to float free. Here the sensory experience of the destruction of a nation is condensed into a single ‘here and now’. This is not just a matter of an artist’s representation of—or worse still, information about—an event. It is rather that Picasso’s treatment of form provides a direct sensory, almost visceral, experience. On the one hand, his cubist forms dismember the body in a manner that exactly complements the effects of the incendiary bombs dropped over the city. As Berger says,—‘what has happened to them in being painted is the imaginative equivalent of what happened to them in sensation in the flesh’ (Berger 1965,169; Opler 1988, 271). On the other hand, *Guernica* references the black and white photo-journalism of the newsreels, with its appeal to an objective and disseminated reality. The violent cuts and rapid compression of montage are a necessary point of reference if we are to understand its poly-perspectival composition. They also provide a further layer that chillingly parallels political and aesthetic violence. The shrapnel’s cut and the cubist cut—and now the director’s cut.

If Picasso exemplifies Benjamin’s prognosis that the aestheticization of the political must be countered by ‘politicizing art’, this is not a matter of political labels. Certainly the various monuments to ideology on show in Paris reveal the irrelevance of such distinctions. Rather, the distinction to which Benjamin might be alluding is between the supposed timelessness of mythology and the ‘here-and-now’, the *Jetztzeit* that juxtaposes rhetoric against events in the real world. An ‘aestheticizing politics’ is purposely unanchored in time and place. A ‘politicizing art’ *uses* the specifics of time and place in order to expose the concrete implications swept under the carpet by mythological thinking. It engages with the non-commodifiable specifics of time and place that ‘even the most perfect reproduction’ lacks.

There could be no better illustration of this opposition than the 1937 World’s Fair. As the story goes, a visiting German officer, after looking at Picasso’s painting, asks him ‘did you do this?’ ‘No, *you* did’, replies Picasso. The joke hinges on whether what is ‘done’ in the artwork is done by the artist or only represented by him, and done by others. And that is exactly what is at stake in the difference between aestheticizing and politicizing. The contrast between Picasso’s historical specificity and the overlarded bombastic pretensions of the Pavilions that surrounded it created exactly the kind of ironic juxtaposition that might have incited some real reflection from his spectators. By drawing attention to the historical and political context that the works around him steadfastly withheld, Picasso stimulates a critique of the mutual complicity of aesthetics and politics, and reminds viewers of the physical brutality hidden underneath the skirts of fascism’s transcendental aesthetics. Picasso’s *Guernica* is essentially ‘queer’ (e.g., Sullivan 2003; Butler 1990, 1993); it works not by how you look at the wall on which it is placed, but because it changes how you look at all the other walls, on which it is *not* placed. It queered the Paris World’s Fair, savagely critiquing its aesthetic ideology.

Picasso was, if anything, less sanguine than Benjamin. Benjamin still acknowledged a residual cult power in the art object, exerted by its singular aura. But by combining traditional artistic tropes, such as the *Pietà* and the *Madonna*—some might say, parodying them—with a personal psycho-symbolism he had recently explored in *Minotauromachy*,⁸ *Guernica* confronts the limit of art's capacity to represent or communicate suffering (Opler 1998, 207 (and see also 253-302); see also Zervos 1986, 206-09). Traditional aesthetics universalizes language to the point of banality, while the artist's mythopoesis personalizes language to the point of impenetrability. The mural leaves us wondering how close art can ever truly get to real life. Although trying to bring so close an event—the title itself points to it, identifying a particular place and a particular date—Picasso's *Guernica* can do no more than recall it from faraway (Wenders 1993). The more that Picasso tries to represent pain by citing the long tradition of the representation of pain in Western art, the more reality slips through his fingers. Picasso's black and white painting is an image made up of pastiches of other images; a painting, of a reproduction, of a newsreel, of a memory, of an event. It is infinitely mediated. It reaches out to a *Jetztzeit* that has already vanished.

In this sense Picasso takes Benjamin one step further; he is acutely aware of the limits of the critique and the limits of art. An artwork, be it ever so political, is still trapped within the frame of representation.⁹ In *Likeness and Presence*, Hans Belting argued (1996) that the Western imaginary changed when it ceased to think of the image as an icon of power, and instead treated it only as a re-presentation. Does a picture of a saint produce miracles or narrate them? Does a wafer embody Christ or symbolize Him? Art, as representation, is always already memory. As such, while it can 'politicize art', it cannot *become* politics. 'Did you do this?' sneers the German officer; 'no, you did,' retorts Picasso. But the soldier walks away and looks at another painting, another representation that strives and fails to *do* something. Perhaps, though, this weakness, this limit, is also art's strength, or at the very least, the source of its honesty.

8 Picasso 1935; see Opler, 100. See also Crichton-Miller 2013; Damian and Simonton 2011; Weisberg 2004.

9 Benjamin's emphasis on aura as a kind of 'distance' clearly recognizes this point, and indicates a suggestive connection in language and in concepts to Levinas. See Levinas 1987, 1-13; Schmiedgen 2002. See also Manderson 2007.

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