

A Comparative Study among Politics, Aesthetics, and Freedom

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Abstract. With the current prevailing wave of nationalism and the rise of power politics, numerous uncertain factors have become the new background of international relations and political studies today. Compared to Francis Fukuyama's verdict in 1992, "the end of history", the claiming of "the return of the political" has occupied the contemporary, and constantly calling for new approaches to politics. It is in this way that the interdisciplinary studies between political philosophy and the multiform of arts are yielded. Through a comparative study of Jacques Rancière's political aesthetics and Michel Foucault's aesthetics of existence, this piece will make a tentative rethinking of the mutual immanence of aesthetics and the political, as well as the philosophical connotation of aesthetics/arts for liberation and freedom of the political, politics, and humanity.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, political aesthetics, Michel Foucault

1. Introduction

The pursuit of perfect existence (of the world) in aesthetics and the pursuit of perfect existence (of humankind) in le politique (the political) predestine the two to be ontologically consubstantial. With the current prevailing wave of nationalism and the rise of power politics, numerous uncertain factors have become the new background of international relations and politics today, just as what Chantal Mouffe, the left leaning political theorist, claims, "we are in a conjuncture where the incapacity of liberalism to apprehend the political could have very serious consequences" [1]. Against Francis Fukuyama's verdict in 1992, "the end of history", the more contemporary claim of "the return of the political" constantly calls for new approaches to politics, thus yielding a wide range of interdisciplinary studies between political philosophy and the multiform of arts. While in the beginning of the 20th century, the political content of aesthetics was a topic that must be defended - as Walter Benjamin did in his defense of "tendentious art" [2] - the mid-20th and early 21st centuries see aesthetics, or arts in its technical sense, has undeniably been a forum for the political. In this piece, sorted and postmodernism-related philosophies about political aesthetics, especially those of Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, serve as the base point, by which the author makes a tentative rethinking of the mutual immanence of aesthetics/art and the political, as well as the philosophical connotation of the former for liberation and freedom of the meta-politics/humanity.

2. Consubstantiality of Aesthetics and Politics/the Political

From Plato and Plotinus to the Middle Ages, “beauty” remained to be considered as the perfection of the supreme being, and the revelation of the archetypal world. The ontology of classical aesthetics initially takes place in Plato's division of the “visible/perceptible world” and the “intelligible world”; the existence is the object of rationality (the meanings, the signifié), and is transcendent and more real than the empirical world [3]. It is in this sense that the concept of the “perfect state”, which is initiated by Plato and in which political concern lies in its centre, becomes the original territory of aesthetics. Nevertheless, to equate aesthetics with politics thus seems to consign the political to a degree of nihilism. It is true that the ultimate goal of political/institutional operations is the perfect creation and knowledge of the anthropic “wholeness” - the perfect relationship between human and the world, human and each other, and human and the self - but the real existence of politics is not its substance, but its craft of rationality, which is a far cry from aesthetics that takes spiritual experience and perceptual knowledge as dimensions. The question, then, is whether the arts contributes to the political in a way as multiple policies, street movements and general elections might.

Gabriel Rockhill classifies two prevailing forms of commitment in the recent history of defense on politicized aesthetics and aestheticized political. The first might be identified as “content-based commitments”, built on representation of politicized topics. In postwar France, content-based commitment is often thought of in the context of Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1948) in which he affirms the duties and responsibilities of intellectuals in politics and the political. Another example is Roland Barth's *The Zero Degree of Writing* (1953), a critique of Sartre's existential defence on aesthetics and the political, which has been the publication that turned politicized arts towards a more formalized commitment, eventually leading to what is now known as the French Structuralism and post-structuralism. The second, which might be called the “formal commitment”, places the political dimension of art pieces in the model they might be represented or expressed rather than in the subject matter it represents and expresses [4]. For this commitment, “resistance” is the most important way of aesthetics' effect on the political, in which concept the Frankfurt School represented by Theodor Adorno is the most persuasive one, who might regard arts as the promise of political liberation by assuming the “self-discipline” of real arts [5]. Both of these commitments locate the relationship between aesthetics and the political on the issue of the former's “intervention” to the latter, namely the direct and indirect intervention of arts. However, neither the direct intervention of artistic works to the narrow sense of political implementation nor the indirect change of the existing power system through their subtle dissociation are free from the dualism proposing such a nature that political is outside aesthetics.

As for the above either metaphysical or dualistic suspension, Jacques Rancière opens up the thinking of the consubstantiality of the political and aesthetics. Rancière's semantic position of “politics” and “aesthetics” is not the meaning we usually refer to. The “politics” mentioned by Rancière is exactly the “antonym” of politics - governance and institutions - which disrupting and dismantling such governance on the premise of equality, and “is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order” [6]. While “Police” refers to all existing orders, “politics” (*la politique*), which has no substantive connotation, is the reconfiguration of the unequal distribution caused by police, and thus a concept completely dependent on it. Rancière's semantic use of “police” is largely inherited from Michel Foucault's “discipline”, the concept defined as “the tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, and all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical” by which “the general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle was supported” [7]. Foucault's argument is that “discipline” determines the hierarchy of human beings and also that of “human and non-human”; it constructs

order and the “docile body”, and lies in everything and everywhere. Enunciation of the term discipline is further developed in Rancière's police order, which not merely implicates the abstract order of power (legal or institutional), but the order of the body, visible and speakable, in which the bodies are assigned to particular positions and tasks, whose configuration between mode of actions, mode of existing, mode of speaking, and mode of seeing is thus determined [6]. What is signified by “Mode” is demarcation of public order, the order of “distribution of the sensible”. It is the opposite of politics, and must be disturbed, rebelled, and redeployed by the latter.

“Distribution of sensibility” is equated with aesthetics in Rancière's later essay “The Aesthetic Heterotopia”, as he argued, “Aesthetics is a reconfiguration of sensible experience. At this stage the author will define sensible experience in very simple terms as a relation between a power that provides a sensible datum and a power the makes sense of it” [8]. In this context, aesthetics refers to Baumgarten's “perceptual knowledge”, and is given the meaning, on the basis of Kant's “aesthetic community”, as the theoretical starting point of politics. “Distribution of the sensible” is always directed at members within the community, sets the position for them and delineates the boundary of sensible distribution, which determines the voices heard and rational actions, while members outside the boundary are “insensible”, becoming “the part of those have no part” called by Rancière. The existence of aesthetics lies in that it changes the monodirectional knowledge power and distribution of the sensible through constructing a sensible virtual community, where the boundary is uncertain and is constantly shifting, by which human freedom is offered with the possibility of release.

Thereafter, aesthetics is formally defined as the lieu in which politics takes place. Presupposing the universal equality, “politics” is precisely to question the disciplined sensory experience and opens up the boundaries of the sensible; its form of experience is to produce “disagreement” against the police order within the power, as Rancière claims, politics itself is the aesthetic practice [9]. Moreover, the reconfiguration of the “distribution of the sensible” unprisons the topic of freedom and liberation, which had been suspended since Foucault, to come into the discussion again.

3. Aesthetics, Politics, and Freedom

Although Foucault has been obsessed with the “aesthetics of existence” since the late 1970s, he failed to give a precise enunciation about how humankind may constrain discipline to liberate the passive bodies. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault refers to self-concern and free practice by ethics - the genealogy that is not about “morality”, the external norms, but a set of non-compulsory criteria, which evaluates words and deeds according to how we live [10]. Foucault's interpretation of ethics is just comparable to the readings of poetics - the individual's life should follow the guidance of aesthetics and become a work of art with its own style - in which sense the body's resistance reduce to excessive individualism. Similarly, one may not find out discussion about freedom from the perspective of liberation in Foucault, but somehow a pessimism in his perception of liberation. It seemed to him that striving for rebellion and liberation is itself futile; since the body is always constructed by and under the surveillance of power, should the so-called absolute rid of power be realized, new power relations would befall and take up the authoritative position. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to conclude that Foucault denies the freedom of the subject. Rather, he argues that the relationship between freedom and power is a pair of symbionts competing but interdependent, that is, the power relations are to be established only when there is at least some degree of freedom [11]. What one might see here is Foucault's presupposition of free-will in his genealogy of power/discourse, at the heart of which lies the aesthetics of existence whose ultimate purport is to complete the very limited self-creation, the freedom of self-fashioning under the premise of conscious awareness of external discipline.

As for liberation and resistance above, although Foucault embraces the intervention of aesthetics in politics, his discussion on the passivity and initiative of human is extremely unbalanced. To fulfill Foucault's unfinished liberation, Rancière introduces the premise of equality into the struggle between the body and discipline, between freedom and power. To illustrate the role of reconfiguration of "distribution of the sensible" in aesthetics and politics to equality and democracy, Rancière invokes the experience of Gabriel Gauny, a worker being interviewed by the newspaper during the French Revolution:

"As long as the floor work was not finished, he believed it was his home, and he loved the way it was arranged. If the window opened onto the garden, or looked out over the picturesque landscape, he would stop his work for a moment and let his imagination soar over the vast landscape. He is enjoying it more than the property owners." [12]

Gauny's enjoyment of the picturesque scenery is in line with Kantian utilitarian aesthetic appreciation. At that moment, he did not arouse any class hatred towards the garden which is the private property of capitalists, but liberated himself from the police order of labouring through enjoying the sensible beauty just like what the owners would do. The realization of equality here is quite obvious. In the visible field created by aesthetics, the existence of the worker becomes a work of art, whereby the marginalized subject of labor is transformed into the subject of aesthetics, being offered with freedom and liberation. This is the equality in aesthetics, the "aesthetics of existence", and is what Rancière calls "politics".

4. Conclusion

The political and aesthetics appear to be completely different disciplines; the former emphasizes rational calculation and takes power and interests as the criterion, whereas the latter imagination, sensibility and beauty. What, however, is at the deepest heart of both is the philosophical perception of humanity, humanitarian, and futuristic contemplation. Among various philosophical criticisms on the consubstantiality of politics and aesthetics, Rancière's is one of the most postmodern with equality and making the marginal perceptible as the common principles of arts and politics. It is true that aesthetics and the political are both the philosophical inquiries of humanity transcendently, and aesthetics may indeed offer the promise of universal equality that politics cannot achieve. However, the author of this piece, like many critics in academia, still remain skeptical towards the true significance of aesthetics to political practice. Also, on the other hand, although this piece briefly clarifies the criticism of political aesthetics represented by Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière, comprehensive philosophical research on other schools is in the blank, especially those of the Frankfurt school, existentialist philosophy, etc. Such a gap needs to be filled in the future to complete a more profound interdisciplinary study of aesthetics and politics.

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