



Aesthetics and Politics

*Theodor W. Adorno , Walter Benjamin , Bertolt Brecht , György Lukács , Ernst Bloch , Fredric Jameson
(afterword)*

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No other country and no other period has produced a tradition of major aesthetic debate to compare with that which unfolded in German culture from the 1930s to the 1950s. In Aesthetics and Politics the key texts of the great Marxist controversies over literature and art during these years are assembled in a single volume. They do not form a disparate collection but a continuous, interlinked debate between thinkers who have become giants of twentieth-century intellectual history.

Discussing expressionism / Ernst Bloch

Realism in the balance / Georg Lukacs

Against Georg Luckacs / Bertolt Brecht

Conversations with Brecht / Walter Benjamin

Letters to Walter Benjamin / Theodor Adorno

Reply / Walter Benjamin

Reconciliation under duress ; Commitment / Theodor Adorno

Reflections in conclusion / Fredric Jameson

Aesthetics and Politics Details

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From Reader Review Aesthetics and Politics for online ebook

Jee Koh says

Compact introduction to the Frankfurt School on the relation of art to politics. If one must take a side, always choose the side of the artist creator over that of the critic interpreter.

vi macdonald says

3.5

Wendy Liu says

This book combines two recently-discovered favourites of mine: literary theory, and Marxist theory. Of course, the two have obvious overlap, but I'd never seen them united and so beautifully woven together until I read this book. The chapters here are mostly essays or letters by the people mentioned on the title page, and you'll get more value out of this book if you've read their longer texts first, but it's not necessary; you can always read them afterwards if you want to better understand the context.

My favourite things about this book: the peeks into Benjamin and Brecht's relationship as provided by Benjamin's wonderful diary entries; the absolutely savage but no less cultured way these men attack each other's theories (I wish MY critics addressed me the way Adorno does his friends--it's like getting stabbed with a stunningly elegant knife, which of course still hurts but at least you can admire its beauty); the remarkable ease with which aesthetic concepts are merged with political ones in their arguments. I now want to read everything related to the Frankfurt School that I can get my hands on.

On a completely tangential and very personal note, I'm so jealous of the people who were introduced to this kind of stuff in college or, *a fortiori*, earlier in life, through parents or teachers. The closest I had teacher-wise was a high school IB English HL teacher who pointed us in the direction of the deconstructionists but never went so far as to actually deconstruct, so to speak, their theories for us. (They weren't required knowledge for the IB assessment, so I remember learning the phrase "death of the author" and leaving it at that.) Parent-wise, mine had completed the unimaginably difficult task of immigrating from the depths of rural China to the West and thus had, understandably, very little interest in Western philosophy or politics. My dad did happen to be a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of China, but of course that means something very different when that party is actually the ruling party (and really only party) of the country you live in, rather than a fringe movement that appeals mostly to disaffected youth. In any case, I got the impression it was more of a shrewd career move than a sincere political belief.

All this to say that I had little exposure to anything remotely approaching critical theory until very recently. About a year ago, I was two years into a presumed life sentence at a tech startup whose premise I had absolutely zero faith in. I was completely unhappy with what I was doing and could no longer see something to look forward to with my career. Everything that I had put so much effort into for the last two years was melting into air, and I was lost, resigned, adrift in an ocean of meaningless customer acquisition targets. It felt like I was at one of those sushi places with a conveyer belt but, like, the kitchen was closed, and I was

just sitting there watching the conveyer belt go round and round, hoping against hope that the dish I wanted would turn up but instead seeing the same unappetising options displayed over and over.

So I started to rediscover an old passion: books. At first it was merely a refuge from the exigencies of a stultifying 9-5, but I soon realised I was hooked. Two main paths emerged: David Foster Wallace (and literary criticism thereof), and critiques of the current socioeconomic system. The latter path began with the fairly milquetoast *mea culpas* of mainstream economists wringing their hands over the 2008 crisis, but I have now reached the wonderful heights of critical theory. Surprisingly, at least to me, the two paths intersected quite a bit, in terms of vocabulary used, philosophers mentioned, and ideas explored. Both paths brought me, more or less simultaneously, to Frankfurt School theories, which, so far, seems to me like the apotheosis of both paths.

Wow, so this review turned out to be a lot longer than I thought it would. So yeah, my message to anyone who sees this: read more, and don't be afraid of going down rabbit holes. You just might discover a part of yourself you'll want to nourish.

Ainjel Stephens says

A great book on theories of aesthetics, art, and the role of politics in the literary and the visual. The reader is easy enough to read, with great translations and background information provided in the introductions to the sections. I loved how the text was presented as a "dialogue," as the selections chosen were those of authors responding to each other's works critically and insightfully. A great read for anyone interested in the Frankfurt School of theory.

Andrew says

This volume could easily be subtitled "dispatches from a lost world." The writings here are generally far less interesting in their subject matter than what they have to say about the context they were written in, the authors' relationship to each other, and the shattered/shattering Mitteleuropa culture of the day. Bloch the optimist, Brecht the wit, Lukacs the failure, Benjamin and Adorno the transcendent geniuses. I could do without the conclusion by noted bloviator Fredric Jameson, though.

Matt says

This is my third time actually going through this text. I borrowed it on curiosity from a friend of mine and tried to give it a good going-over. I think I understood what I was reading well enough but the aracana and the historical jargon was a little distancing. I find a lot of marxist theory can be like that, frustratingly so.

I'd like to learn it more, be more conversant in it, my sympathies are definitely on that side of the spectrum-at least, in the realm of politics and history. I'm not so very certain there is a non-mystical, hermetically sealed way to read history without bumping into huge Hegelian discourses about the World Spirit and Weltanschaung and what-you-will. I find that interesting material, certainly, but thinking along those categories is better as a solitary discipline than a broadening appraisal. Otherwise it's too Germanic, too

murky, too heavy on the specialization to be used effectively and pragmatically. Thus to Marx, to materialism. I like the way it levels the playing field of discourses, too, in that it unearths the constructions which are (as someone said of Chaucer's irony) 'too large to be seen.' I like the empirical understanding of the making, working, fashioning, selling dialectic going on all the time. It's fruitful and penetrative when dealing with large structures and mainstream dialogue: yeah, ok, big shot but who's the guy in the basement shoveling coal into your furnace? Cuts out a lot of the bullshit about market opportunities, transitional labor forces, neo-democracy, whatever. Nuts and bolts, people.

When it comes to aesthetic theory, though, the nuts and bolts approach begins to falter. Let's not politicize our art and especially our artists- underlined even more so when it comes to doing it as it were from the outside. If one decides a certain kind of literature or literary style is more or less politically expedient that's of course one's right as a reader. but all too often I think it's about putting shoes on a horse. Ideology might empower and engage an artist, certainly, but I think by its very nature art contradicts ideological pretenses by being an aspect of the human consciousness, the human presence.

We are too frisky, as beings, for all that. It's very hard to accurately pin down someone within a matrix, assuming that their experience on this planet is in any level sufficiently realized and vivid. A dot moving on a horizon has a universe within it, yet it would be mighty hard to perceive that universe in all its variety and depth unless it begins to speak or be confronted by...art! Art is or should be our way of creating an added provocation to our everyday life. It's an enhancer, an enricher, the way that color on a wall changes the way you perceive the wall itself. So when we start to theorize about the arts it's really no more than art appreciation- non gustibus debutantum est, naturally, which is why it's so much fun to argue about. But there's no really totalizing theory of art, or can be, so long as people's consciousness is consistently at play. New forms emerge, they can't help but do so. Theory is made to be broken. Who would want a world where art is made to suit theoretical priorities? Well....

The dialogue here is very intense, complex, and cultivated. We've got an assembly of heavyweights here- I think it might be fair to say that between them you've got at least a large chunk of the nucleus of 20th Century intellectual thought. The arguments come fast and quick, build and finish. The first time through, you start to feel that the person who has just finished speaking has pretty much nailed it outright- they have taken up all the different critiques into their statement, developed the thesis sufficiently enough that it nails home the issue at hand for all time. Then- the next one comes through and lo and behold Lukacs has told Bloch precisely where to stick it. Then Adorno cleaves Lukacs' reductive, pompous, partisan smirk right off his face. Benjamin makes luminous sense in his own right, of course, but doesn't go for the kill- as if he ever did.

The meat of it for me at least is in one of the buttressing 'Presentations'- where the unnamed editors describe the upcoming debate for the reader, and say essentially that Brecht is going to outline a position with a lot of experiential value but one that also happens to be theoretically weak. Adorno (I think it's him, at any rate) has a stronger theoretical stance, but doesn't have as much application to match it up. Riiiight.

Great, well you know if you're going to come up with theories about artistic engagement with the political sphere, how we can enact positive changes in the body politic through the mass accessibility of our art, well then maybe the insights of the ACTUAL ARTIST in the bunch might be a little more pressing than those of partisans or theoreticians. Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin never wrote anything creative that I've ever heard about. Brecht's literally putting on plays for the workers in the flesh and gauging their reactions.

Not to discount the importance of theory- without an intellectual framework there is a lack of justification for things. Plus it inspires people, pushes the discourse further, it changes language, thought, etc. OK sure.

Theory is important. But I have to take issue with the idea that artists who are engaged in the social arena along clearly expressed political sympathies might have something more valuable to say than what theory might dictate on a blackboard.

Brecht takes a sarcastic ease in addressing the challenges of the other theorists, explaining at point how for him as reader and as a writer it isn't so much important how you get there as an artist, or what you want to depict- people do it in different ways, that's all. Workers don't give a shit if the play they see is culturally within the field of their discourse as much as if it moves them, speaks to them, penetrates into their inner world. If politics comes back out of the other side, so much the better, but let's not put the theoretical cart before the horse by condemning things people do who are in an entirely different arena. Everyone's a critic, and everyone should be allowed to be, but not all criticism is created equal.

David says

Still surprisingly apt, even with so much time that has passed. This is a well-constructed collection of letters and papers on the role of art and its interaction with political thought/action. If you think art matters, but sometimes have a hard time articulating how or why, this book provides some nice theoretical exploration of just those issues.

Special appreciation must be given to the written introductions to each exchange, establishing the stakes and particular points of disagreement. Fredric Jameson's Afterword is an excellent summary, and also explains clearly why these discussions still matter.

It's a forbidding title, but the book's contents make it almost a page-turner.

Dont says

Like many of the reviewers on here, I have always found this book extremely useful in how it establishes the terms of debates around Marxist aesthetics for key European critics. This reading, however, I did something different from how I've approached the book in the past. Eschewing the lovely Germans and their feistiness, I opted instead to read Jameson's introductory notes as one continuous essay. This helped to foreground a few very important distinctions that often get missed, particularly by the contemporary reader.

First, it's important to remember that this book came out in 1977, at a moment of tremendous transition from the radicalism of the post '68 generation and the postmodernism of the '80s. Jameson, as we know, would play a key role in theorizing that transition. In many respects, his notes in this volume set the stage for exactly that project.

With that in mind, it's useful to not lose sight of the still-smoldering urgency of the revolutionary milieu that began in the early 1960s and continued up until Reagan's election in 1980. The point was not that all art needed to engage the politics or that it needed to be Marxist. The point, at least for Jameson, was what is the role of art (and therefore, aesthetics) in the revolutionary milieu. Hence, the central figures in that debate would be Brecht and Lukacs -- both of whom participated directly in the internationalist movement of Europe and had a direct stake in the debate about Marxist aesthetics. To emphasize this point, Jameson reminds us that Adorno occupied a profoundly different position in the years of the Cold War. Although

nominally a Marxist, Adorno's place in a kind of Social Democratic Western Marxism had long abandoned any interest in or sympathy for the revolutionary milieu of either Brecht or Lukacs. A fact made all the more pointed when Jameson reminds us of how Adorno's own material conditions as an academic drew direct support from liberal anti-communist institutions, like the CIA.

For the revolutionary milieu, whose echoes could still be heard in 1977, the need for a radical aesthetics drove many to the debates between Brecht and Lukacs. In terms of the former, Brecht's essays on aesthetics had just been collected and published for the first time in 1967 on the eve of "the events." And Lukacs would make a tremendous impact on radical intellectuals through the publication of his *HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS* (1968, tr. 1971). For the contemporary reader, think about it this way; the whole of radical cinema (e.g. Godard and Third Cinema) and even certain artistic practices embraced Brecht's ideas as the key to formulating a radical artistic praxis. Conversely, radicals like Guy Debord and the Situationists adopted Lukacs's analysis of reification as the very basis of a critique of spectacle culture. Hence, the Brecht / Lukacs debate was, in fact, a lens through which artists and intellectuals like Jameson made sense of their present historical moment.

For that reason, in terms of a revolutionary aesthetics, the high-low culture debates of the 1950s and early '60s (in which Adorno figured prominently) seemed increasingly old hat and irrelevant.

It's also useful to keep in mind some of the historical blindnesses that inform Jameson's own analysis. As he readily admits, his own framework as a critic is clearly the West. Consequently, it is excruciating to read the extent to which that framework limits his own analysis. While one might appreciate the criticism that Brecht never theorized a general aesthetics beyond a justification for his own practice, it's hard to take seriously Jameson's claim that the political failure of Godard signals the failure of Brechtian aesthetics in general. I can only hope that sometime after 1977 Jameson encountered the Third Cinema movement which not only realized Brecht's ideas but dramatically surpassed them through a process of realist engagement just of the sort Jameson advocates. In fact, a useful follow up to *AESTHETICS AND POLITICS* would be a rigorous study of how the Lukacs / Brecht debate shaped the post-colonial and anti-imperialist practices of African and Latin American creators. In those contexts, the stakes of on-going revolutionary struggle approach the binary of Realism and Modernism not as opposing sides in a grand contest, but two terms in need to be dialecticized. This is, exactly what we find in much of Third Cinema.

Finally, one last note that really stood out for me by reading straight through Jameson's comments. In reviewing the different positions between Brecht and his critics in Adorno and Lukacs, Jameson makes the salient point that it is the former who has a far more clear idea of the role of aesthetics within politics. While the critics expect for the art object to fully demonstrate a radical aesthetics, Brecht is more modest. It is, after all, in the theater, with an audience and in relationship to a larger political context that the radicalism of any art object becomes apparent. But of course, accepting this fact means that the critic must not only consider the object in itself but also its context in time and place. But doing so escapes the traditional purview of aesthetics and begins too much to sound like sociology. Thus, the art critic has to invent the object in order to identify its failures in realizing a radical aesthetic. This is a lesson that critics to this day seem not to be able to learn. And, as a result, artists adopt the lie that the work of art must be political in itself if it is to pass for radical. Their own participation in politics, and the politics of the object in its social reception and activation, these considerations all too often fall from view. Jameson, of course, is not beyond entering into the same mistake. The insistence that a revolutionary aesthetic must engage the Realism versus Modernist abstraction debate, fails to raise the more pressing and, for artists, more practical consideration; how do these terms shape an aesthetics of reception?

John Levi says

lukacs has some points but he is very easy to misunderstand. lots of bs from adorno. the interludes were awesome. brecht was painfully clear-headed and sharp. benjamin knows how to ignore adorno. jameson's summary was awesome.

Tse Guang says

If you think Marxism and art have nothing in common save propaganda posters, you're probably not going to want to read this book anyway. It's dense, and pitched as a battle amongst those modern Marxist aesthetes who shaped the debates on art as a political medium. Don't expect to find anything like consensus here - although Adorno seems to be the last word, it really is Benjamin whose thoughts seem most beautiful, lucid and free of intellectualism - in other words, most like an artist himself.

Charlsa says

Adorno's parts were entirely insufferable, especially because you had to be familiar with a dozen or so references on any given page, but the rest was oddly comforting. It's helped me understand why aesthetics remain important, or even gain in importance, when the whole world is going to shit. That being said, Benjamin's story was pretty heartbreakng, especially when he's frank with Adorno about his anxiety and loneliness and desperation. Also in the span of two years I've gone from thinking "Bloch is my sworn enemy and I will dedicate my life to defending social realism" to "should I get Bloch's name tattooed inside a heart on my wrist, or is that too clingy?" I am also questioning if it's normal to ask for academics' autographs because Jameson is popping up everywhere I turn to in my Weimar-era studies and I'm a fan.

Ehsan Sadraei says

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Kaya Tokmakç?o?lu says

30'lu y?llar?n önemli ekspresyonizm tart??malar?n? gündeme alan derlemeyi y?llar sonra bir kere daha okudum. Bloch'tan Lukacs'a, Brecht'ten Adorno ve Benjamin'e kadar iki dünya sava?? aras?ndaki en önemli siyaset ve sanat ili?kisi tart??mas?na Jameson?n yazd??? sonsöz derleyici nitelikte. Ünsal Oskay hocan?n çevirisi ne yaz?k ki çok iyi de?il, çeviri dilinde çok fazla tutars?zl?k, yabanc? sözcük ve ak?? sorunu var.

Buna ra?men "Das Wort" dergisinde ba?layan tart??man?n hâlâ a??lmad??n?, tükettilmedi?ini savunan biri olarak çubu?u fazlas?yla Lukacs'a bükmeden Brecht'e de kulak veren bir pozisyonun önemli oldu?unu dü?ünüyorum. Adorno'nun "liberalizmi" Bloch'un "ütopyac?l??n?" ne yaz?k ki bast?r?yor, görünmez k?l?yor. Daha çok okunmal?, daha çok tart??lmal?...

Catnaitab says

It is really interesting reading such opposing views about the role of communism in the arts. However some of them are such extreme views that seem to be very limited and not open to other interpretations of art or communism. It is also quite a hard book to understand if one does not have any background in art and artistic movements. Mainly focused on the debate between the legitimacy of realism vs abstract art in connection to the communist ideal. Depending on the views of the reader, certain chapters/ philosophers, might appeal more than others, but in general one will find interesting perspectives throughout the whole book.

Ben says

An interesting if not somewhat dated set of essays, letters, and articles about the political implications of aesthetic forms. Bloch and Lukacs argue about the nature of Expressionism, where Lukacs thinks that Expressionism's logical end is a fascist turn. Lukacs advocates very strongly for realism as a necessary progressive force, sometimes convincingly. When he delves into Marx and Hegel in his arguments he's interesting, but otherwise I find his ideas on art entirely too rigid. I've found Brecht much more enjoyable to read. His critique of Lukacs' realist rigidity is incisive and maintains a more robust advocacy of a popular realism that Brecht tried to realize in his plays and poems.

The Benjamin and Adorno pieces were surprisingly less interesting in my view, besides Adorno's last section against Sartre on 'commitment'. However, I think I would have drawn significantly less insight and relevant analysis from this compilation if it did not include Fredric Jameson's conclusion. His remarks on Lukacs' conception of 'decadence' (and reification) as well as Brecht's scientific Marxism provide the needed link between these 1930s pieces and today's Marxist discussions on aesthetics.
