

## *Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity*

*Certain of the most fundamental categories used for thinking about artistic creation in the twentieth century, namely the categories of modernity, the avant-garde and, for some time now, postmodernity, also happen to have a political meaning. Do these categories seem to you to have the slightest interest for conceiving, in precise terms, what ties 'aesthetics' to 'politics'?*

I do not think that the notions of modernity and the avant-garde have been very enlightening when it comes to thinking about the new forms of art that have emerged since the last century or the relations between aesthetics and politics. They actually confuse two very different things: the historicity specific to a regime of the arts in general and the decisions to break with the past or anticipate the future that take place within this regime. The notion of aesthetic modernity conceals – without conceptualizing it in the least – the singularity of a particular regime of the arts, that is [27] to say of a specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter.

A detour is necessary here in order to clarify this notion and situate the problem. With regard to what we call *art*, it is in fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition, three major regimes of identification. There is first of all what I propose to call an ethical regime of images. In this regime, 'art' is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in. The question of images of the divine and the right to produce such images or the ban placed on them falls within this regime, as well as the

question of the status and signification of the images produced. The entire Platonic polemic against the simulacra of painting, poems, and the stage also falls within this regime.<sup>6</sup> Plato does not, as it is often claimed, place art under the yoke of politics. This very distinction would have made no sense for Plato since art did not exist for [28] him but only arts, ways of doing and making. And it is among these that he traces the dividing line: there are true arts, that is to say forms of knowledge based on the imitation of a model with precise ends, and artistic simulacra that imitate simple appearances. These imitations, differentiated by their origin, are then distinguished by their end or purpose, by the way in which the poem's images provide the spectators, both children and adult citizens, with a certain education and fit in with the distribution of the city's occupations. It is in this sense that I speak of an ethical regime of images. In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities. This question prevents 'art' from individualizing itself as such.<sup>7</sup>

The poetic – or representative – regime of the arts breaks away from the ethical regime of images. It identifies the substance of art – or rather of the arts – in the couple *poiēsis/mimēsis*. The mimetic principle is not at its core a normative principle stating that art must make copies resembling their models. It is first of all a pragmatic principle that isolates, within the general domain of the arts (ways of doing and making), certain particular forms of art that produce specific entities [29] called imitations. These imitations are extricated, at one and the same time, from the ordinary control of artistic products by their use and from the legislative reign of truth over discourses and images. Such is the vast operation carried out by the Aristotelian elaboration of *mimēsis* and by the privilege accorded to tragic action. It is the *substance* of the poem, the fabrication of a plot arranging actions that represent the activities of men, which is the foremost issue, to the detriment of the *essence* of the image, a copy examined with regard to its model. Such is the principle guiding the functional change in the theatrical model I was speaking of earlier. The principle regulating the external delimitation of a well-founded domain of imitations is thus at the same time a normative principle of inclusion. It develops into forms of normativity that define the conditions according to which imitations can be

recognized as exclusively belonging to an art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate: partitions between the representable and the unrepresentable; the distinction between genres according to what is represented; principles for adapting forms of expression to genres and thus to the subject matter represented; the distribution of resemblances [30] according to principles of verisimilitude, appropriateness, or correspondence; criteria for distinguishing between and comparing the arts; etc.

I call this regime *poetic* in the sense that it identifies the arts – what the Classical Age would later call the ‘fine arts’ – within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations. I call it *representative* insofar as it is the notion of representation or *mimēsis* that organizes these ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging. Once again, however, *mimēsis* is not the law that brings the arts under the yoke of resemblance. It is first of all a fold in the distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in social occupations, a fold that renders the arts visible. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts. A regime of visibility is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also what links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making. This is what I evoked earlier concerning the logic of representation, which enters into a relationship of global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations. The representative primacy of action over characters or of narration over [31] description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the very primacy of the art of speaking, of speech in actuality, all of these elements figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community.

The aesthetic regime of the arts stands in contrast with the representative regime. I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. The word aesthetics does not refer to a theory of sensibility, taste, and pleasure for art amateurs. It strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of

the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, *logos* identical with *pathos*, the intention of the unintentional, etc. This idea of a regime of the sensible that has become foreign to itself, the locus for a form of thought that has become foreign to itself, is the invariable core in the [32] identifications of art that have configured the aesthetic mode of thought from the outset: Vico's discovery of the 'true Homer' as a poet in spite of himself, Kantian 'genius' that is unaware of the law it produces, Schiller's 'aesthetic state' that suspends both the activity of the understanding and sensible passivity, Schelling's definition of art as the identity between a conscious process and an unconscious process, etc. The aesthetic mode of thought likewise runs through the specific definitions that the arts have given to themselves in the Modern Age: Proust's idea of a book that would be entirely planned out and fully removed from the realm of the will; Mallarmé's idea of a poem by the spectator-poet, written 'without the scribe's apparatus' by the steps of an illiterate dancer; the Surrealist practice of producing work that expresses the artist's unconscious with the outdated illustrations in catalogues or newspaper serials from the previous century; Bresson's idea of film as the film-maker's thought withdrawn from the body of the 'models' who, by unthinkingly repeating the words and gestures he lays down for them, manifest their proper truth without either the film-maker or the models knowing it; etc.

It is pointless to go on with definitions and examples. We need to indicate, on the contrary, the heart of the problem. The aesthetic regime [33] of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself. Schiller's *aesthetic state*, which is this

regime's first manifesto (and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable), clearly indicates this fundamental identity of opposites. The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself. Moreover, it is the moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity.

From this perspective, it is possible to understand the functions served by the notion of modernity. The aesthetic regime of the arts, it can be said, is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label 'modernity'. However, 'modernity' is more than an incoherent label. It is, in its different versions, the concept that diligently works at [34] masking the specificity of this regime of the arts and the very meaning of the specificity of regimes of art. It traces, in order either to exalt or deplore it, a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative. The basis for this simplistic historical account was the transition to non-figurative representation in painting. This transition was theorized by being cursorily assimilated into artistic 'modernity's' overall anti-mimetic destiny. When the eulogists of this form of modernity saw the exhibition-spaces for the well-behaved destiny of modernity invaded by all kinds of objects, machines, and unidentified devices, they began denouncing the 'tradition of the new', a desire for innovation that would reduce artistic modernity to the emptiness of its self-declaration. However, it is the starting point that is erroneous. The leap outside of *mimēsis* is by no means the refusal of figurative representation. Furthermore, its inaugural moment has often been called *realism*, which does not in any way mean the valorization of resemblance but rather the destruction of the structures within which it functioned. Thus, novelistic realism is first of all the reversal of the hierarchies of representation (the primacy of the narrative over the descriptive [35] or the hierarchy of subject matter) and the adoption of a fragmented or proximate mode of focalization, which imposes raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequences of the story. The aesthetic regime of the arts does not contrast the old with the new. It contrasts, more profoundly, two regimes of historicity. It is within the mimetic regime that the old stands in contrast with the new. In the aesthetic regime of art, the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly restages the past.

Those who exalt or denounce the 'tradition of the new' actually forget that this tradition has as its strict complement the 'newness of the tradition'. The aesthetic regime of the arts did not begin with decisions to initiate an artistic rupture. It began with decisions to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes: Vico discovering the 'true Homer', that is to say not an inventor of fables and characters but a witness to the image-laden language and thought of ancient times; Hegel indicating the true subject matter of Dutch genre painting: not in stories or descriptions of interiors but a nation's freedom displayed in reflections of light; Hölderlin reinventing Greek tragedy; Balzac [36] contrasting the poetry of the geologist who reconstructs worlds out of tracks and fossils with the poetry that makes do with reproducing a bit of agitation in the soul; Mendelssohn replaying the *St. Matthew Passion*; etc. The aesthetic regime of the arts is first of all a new regime for relating to the past. It actually sets up as the very principle of artisticity the expressive relationship inherent in a time and a state of civilization, a relationship that was previously considered to be the 'non-artistic' part of works of art (the part that was excused by invoking the crudeness of the times when the author lived). The aesthetic regime of the arts invents its revolutions on the basis of the same idea that caused it to invent the museum and art history, the notion of classicism and new forms of reproduction... And it devotes itself to the invention of new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been*. When the Futurists or the Constructivists declared the end of art and the identification of its practices with the practices that construct, decorate, or give a certain rhythm to the times and spaces of communal life, they proposed an end of art equivalent to the identification of art with the life of the community. This proposal is directly dependent on the Schillerian and Romantic reinterpretation of Greek art as a community's mode of life, while also communicating, [37] in other respects, with the new styles introduced by the inventors of advertising who, for their part, did not propose a revolution but only a new way of living amongst words, images, and commodities. The idea of modernity is a questionable notion that tries to make clear-cut distinctions in the complex configuration of the aesthetic regime of the arts. It tries to retain the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by separating them from the context that allows for their

existence: history, interpretation, patrimony, the museum, the pervasiveness of reproduction... The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities.

The notion of modernity thus seems to have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience. The confusion introduced by this notion has, it seems to me, two major forms. Both of them, without analysing it, rely on the contradiction constitutive of the aesthetic regime of the arts, which makes art into an *autonomous form of life* and thereby sets down, at one and the same time, the autonomy of art and its identification with a moment in life's process of self-formation. The two [38] major variants of the discourse on 'modernity' derive from this contradiction. The first variant would have modernity identified simply with the autonomy of art, an 'anti-mimetic' revolution in art identical with the conquest of the pure form of art finally laid bare. Each individual art would thus assert the pure potential of art by exploring the capabilities of its specific medium. Poetic or literary modernity would explore the capabilities of a language diverted from its communicational uses. Pictorial modernity would bring painting back to its distinctive feature: coloured pigment and a two-dimensional surface. Musical modernity would be identified with the language of twelve sounds, set free from any analogy with expressive language, etc. Furthermore, these specific forms of modernity would be in a relationship of distant analogy with a political modernity susceptible to being identified, depending on the time period, with revolutionary radicality or with the sober and disenchanting modernity of good republican government. The main feature of what is called the 'crisis of art' is the overwhelming defeat of this simple modernist paradigm, which is forever more distant from the mixtures of genres and mediums as well as from the numerous political possibilities inherent in the arts' contemporary forms. [39]

This overwhelming defeat is obviously overdetermined by the modernist paradigm's second major form, which might be called *modernatism*. I mean by this the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of the arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil

a destiny specific to modernity. At the root of this identification there is a specific interpretation of the structural and generative contradiction of aesthetic 'form'. It is, in this case, the determination of art qua form and self-formation of life that is valorized. The starting point, Schiller's notion of the *aesthetic education of man*, constitutes an unsurpassable reference point. It is this notion that established the idea that domination and servitude are, in the first place, part of an ontological distribution (the activity of thought versus the passivity of sensible matter). It is also this notion that defined a neutral state, a state of dual cancellation, where the activity of thought and sensible receptivity become a single reality. They constitute a sort of new region of being – the region of free play and appearance – that makes it possible to conceive of the equality whose direct materialization, according to Schiller, was shown to be impossible by the French Revolution. It is this specific mode of living in the sensible world that must be developed by 'aesthetic education' [40] in order to train men susceptible to live in a free political community. The idea of modernity as a time devoted to the material realization of a humanity still latent in mankind was constructed on this foundation. It can be said, regarding this point, that the 'aesthetic revolution' produced a new idea of political revolution: the material realization of a common humanity still only existing as an idea. This is how Schiller's 'aesthetic state' became the 'aesthetic programme' of German Romanticism, the programme summarized in the rough draft written together by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling: the material realization of unconditional freedom and pure thought in common forms of life and belief. It is this paradigm of aesthetic autonomy that became the new paradigm for revolution, and it subsequently allowed for the brief but decisive encounter between the artisans of the Marxist revolution and the artisans of forms for a new way of life. The failure of this revolution determined the destiny – in two phases – of modernatism. At first, artistic modernatism, in its authentic revolutionary potential for [41] hope and defiance, was set against the degeneration of political revolution. Surrealism and the Frankfurt School were the principal vehicles for this counter-modernity. The failure of political revolution was later conceived of as the failure of its ontologico-aesthetic model. Modernity thus became something like a fatal destiny based on a fundamental forgetting:



the essence of technology according to Heidegger, the revolutionary severing of the king's head as a severing of tradition in the history of humanity, and finally the original sin of human beings, forgetful of their debt to the Other and of their submission to the heterogeneous powers of the sensible.

What is called *postmodernism* is really the process of this reversal. At first, postmodernism brought to light everything in the recent evolution of the arts and possible ways of thinking the arts that destroyed modernism's theoretical edifice: the crossing-over and mixture between the arts that destroyed Lessing's conventional set of principles concerning the separation of the arts; the collapse of the paradigm of functionalist architecture and the return of the curved line and embellishment; the breakdown of the pictorial/two-dimensional/abstract model through the return of figurative representation and [42] signification as well as the slow invasion of painting's exhibition-space by three-dimensional and narrative forms, from Pop Art to installation art and 'rooms' for video art;<sup>8</sup> the new combinations of painting and language as well as of monumental sculpture and the projection of shadows and lights; the break-up of the serial tradition through new mixtures between musical systems, genres, and epochs. The teleological model of modernity became untenable at the same time as its divisions between the 'distinctive features' of the different arts, or the separation of a pure domain of art. Postmodernism, in a sense, was simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a 'distinctive feature of art' by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture. There was not really a need, moreover, to make this late recognition of a fundamental fact of the aesthetic regime of the arts into an actual temporal break, the real end of a historical period.

However, it was precisely the next episode that showed that postmodernism was more than this. The joyful, postmodern artistic license, its [43] exaltation of the carnival of simulacra, all sorts of interbreeding and hybridization, transformed very quickly and came to challenge the freedom or autonomy that the modernist principle conferred – or would have conferred – upon art the mission of accomplishing. There was thus a return from the carnival to the primal scene. However, the primal scene can be taken in two senses, either as the starting point of a

process or as an original separation. Modernist faith had latched on to the idea of the 'aesthetic education of man' that Schiller had extracted from the Kantian analytic of the beautiful. The postmodern reversal had as its theoretical foundation Lyotard's analysis of the Kantian sublime, which was reinterpreted as the scene of a founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation. From this moment onward, postmodernism came into harmony with the mourning and repenting of modernist thought, and the scene of sublime distance came to epitomize all sorts of scenes of original distance or original sin: the Heideggerian flight of the gods, the irreducible aspect of the unsymbolizable object and the death drive as analysed by Freud, the voice of the Absolutely Other declaring a ban on representation, the revolutionary murder of the Father. Postmodernism thus became the grand threnody of the unrepresentable/intractable[44]/irredeemable, denouncing the modern madness of the idea of a self-emancipation of mankind's humanity and its inevitable and interminable culmination in the death camps.

The notion of the avant-garde defines the type of subject suitable to the modernist vision and appropriate, according to this vision, for connecting the aesthetic to the political. Its success is due less to the convenient connection it proposes between the artistic idea of innovation and the idea of politically-guided change, than to the more covert connection it establishes between two ideas of the 'avant-garde'. On the one hand, there is the topographical and military notion of the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement, embodies its forces, determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations.<sup>9</sup> In short, there is the idea that links political subjectivity to a certain form: the party, an advanced detachment that derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history. On the other hand, there is another idea of the avant-garde that, in accordance with Schiller's model, is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future. If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is on this side of things, not on the side of the [45] advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come. This is what the 'aesthetic' avant-garde brought to the 'political' avant-garde, or

what it wanted to bring to it – and what it believed to have brought to it – by transforming politics into a total life programme. The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all the history of a confusion, sometimes complacently maintained, at other times violently denounced, between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity: the archi-political idea of a party, that is to say the idea of a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change, and the meta-political idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come. There is, however, nothing accidental about this confusion. It is not the case, as today's doxa would have us believe, that artists' ambitious claims to a total revolution of the sensible paved the way for totalitarianism. It is rather that the very idea of a political avant-garde is divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception of the avant-garde. [46]