Irony, Montage, Alienation: Political Tactics and the Invention of an Avant-Garde Tradition

Since the 1990s, neo-avant-garde representations have strongly re-emerged in the political arena. In the 1920s, artistic groups became politicized and supported the revolutions of their times via aesthetic means. Conversely, the 1990s political movements emphatically adopted aesthetic tactics, borrowing from the “classical avant-garde” to make them a central distinguishing feature. This not only applies to democratization movements in eastern Europe such as the anti-Miloševic movement in Serbia, which consciously inscribed itself in such an avant-garde tradition, but also to the contemporary queer movement and branches of the alter-globalization movements, such as the culture jam movement or the Italian Tute Bianche. The 1960s was in this respect a transformative period in which artistic and political movements were somehow still distinct, even as art movements such as Expanded Cinema, New Objectivity, actionism, and body art were already closely intertwined with political protest. These movements can thus be seen as indicators for the increased adoption of aesthetic styles, as well as aesthetic provocation and the spectacular as an effective means for political mobilization and artistic manifestations of protest.

All of the abovementioned contemporary movements regard aesthetic tactics as potentially “subversive,” “transgressive,” “progressive,” and “democratic.” Thereby they usually single out parody, irony, montage, and alienation from a wider framework of communicative practices and define them as “tricks,” which—like legerdemains—are able to completely transform the political in surprising and provocative ways. Furthermore, these groups consistently distinguish between their own “subversive” practices and those of others, which they usually describe as “dominant,” “hegemonic,” “repressive,” or “manipulative.” We can thus find correlations among neo-avant-garde political and artistic groups in the assertion that certain aesthetic tactics can be used to achieve politically delegitimizing effects—a “thesis of the political effectiveness of form” embodied in these practices. What in the 1960s was still sometimes linked to reception histories of the avant-garde of the interwar years or the writings of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin thereby made itself independent in the 1990s, generating a variety of adaptations of similar patterns.

These examples show that the practices and statements developed this way fascinated and involved others; various generations of audiences emerged that handed down such a “thesis” of form as a politically effective tool through various historical periods and geographical regions, as well as through areas of artistic and political action, which entailed further experimentation as well as a repetition of practices. To use Eric Hobsbawm’s term, we can conceptualize this reception history and the passing on of political-aesthetic tactics and patterns of judging them over time and space as the “invention of tradition.”

This process of establishing an avant-garde aesthetic lineage thus exhibits important features definitive of “traditions, including invented ones,” such as invariance, fixation, and formalization, and significant ritual and symbolic function of practices, as well as reference to the past, even if only by imposing repetition.

At the same time, every movement inscribes itself into this tradition in reaction to a specific historical situation. In doing so, it usually alters and re-signifies the overall avant-garde narrative in which it participates. For example, the neo-Dada activities of Expanded Cinema and actionist groups in 1960s Germany and Austria were characterized by a “shock-aesthetics” that used destruction of convention, sex, the body, and its fluids and excrements to reject not only capitalism and certain bourgeois moral and religious values, but also to fight the repression of sexuality closely associated with Nazism. They presented their activities not only as “liberating” but “anti-fascist.” (In contrast, the neo-Dada actions of American Fluxus and Expanded Cinema activists contained references to Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and other esoteric rituals less aggressively aimed to shock and attack their audiences.)

The causal relationship between the form of an aesthetic intervention and its political effects, so often emphasized by these groups, also became the target of a deconstructive critique that started to be formulated in the 1970s. Theorists such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy focus on issues brought up by the traditions investigated here: irony, the artist’s intention, the performance of art-making, and the relation of aesthetic practice to significant events of perception.

De Man, for example, argues that irony lies in the eye of the beholder; irony happens during communicative processes, which means that it must be “discovered,” and is usually accompanied by surprise. If irony occurs, then, according to de Man, deviation, dissolution of assigned meanings, and the spreading of doubt are present as well. He insists that irony is not to be pressed into a concept, but is, on the contrary, exactly what escapes definition and makes comprehensive speech difficult. Thus, irony is disarmed when declared a concept. De Man confronts such attempts at disarming irony with a view he has taken from Friedrich Schlegel, who had already shown that even if irony is able to effectively disrupt a system, it is still a possible disruption that remains uncontrollable. Like Schlegel, de Man assumes that in order to demonstrate that one should not erect a system with respect to irony, one already needs a model—that of the ever-present potentiality for disruption.

Furthermore, de Man is also concerned with showing how if such disruptive events of irony happen, they not only irritate the “ideologies” and “myths” through which we organize our worldviews,
but are usually accompanied by a re-inscription within a cognitive system—what he calls a “relapse” or a “regression” from the facts of the event. This is, however, not a reversal. By acting, narrating stories, inventing new notions, or appearing transformed, we re-signify such events, and in doing so, our sense of self, others, and our surroundings is modified. Such events bind inarticulation and articulation together and act as passages between discourses. The question of how such events of irony operate in history requires complex analyses that account for this potential plurality.

A critical advance of Derrida’s went in a similar direction. In a text first published in the early 1970s, Derrida shows that speaking and showing are “performative acts,” which implies that the communication of a movement, an operation, and the calling forth of an effect are not the conveyance or transmission of meaning. Such acts have their referent outside themselves. They produce and transform a situation by bringing forth surprising, unforeseeable impacts. Derrida is concerned with the fact that the artist’s or activist’s intention cannot control all the actions and expressions inherent in our interventions. Even if he is not dealing explicitly with avant-garde practices, his reflections can be applied to the aforementioned tradition. Hence, the aesthetic-political actions practiced by the various movements and schools presented here can be regarded as “performative acts.” Seen this way, they do not appear as communicative actions transporting something akin to unchanged intention, but rather as agents of what Derrida calls “dissemination,” i.e., an evocation of effects that then spread further in various directions of reception. Intention still holds its place in this explanatory model, but no longer fully dominates the system of expression. Concurrently, the notion of “context” becomes problematic in a new way, since it too appears as a dimension that cannot possibly be determined extensively and exhaustively, and is always linked to uncertainty and indeterminability. There is not a single, stable context of aesthetic production. There will always be “other contexts” and every production will cause new and different effects. For the aesthetic tactics negotiated here—parody, irony, and alienation—this means being double-edged; even if they are designed to challenge and contradict other political positions and/or common sense, they elude the control of acting subjects and enter unanticipated articulations. There is no a priori guarantee that their “reception histories” will embark on directions determined beforehand. The various groups and movements discussed here do exactly that: they not only assume that their actions cause effects, but also postulate that they will produce certain “subversive” effects. They too equate the intentions of the interventionists with the effects of the efforts.

The uncertainty characterizing our public deeds has also been taken up by Nancy. He focuses on events of perception, but starts with what he calls the “liveliness of the sense.” Unlike philosophers, Nancy writes, artists are not concerned with creating a system but with providing us with sense, or further, exposing us to the sense by interrupting its flow by hinting at something. For him, an artistic action can be described as a “calculation” or a “counting” of non-calculable moments of perception. However, the goal in the specific case of the movements investigated here is not only to calculate the “vivid sense” but, in particular, the “political sense.” In contrast to an artist like Friedrich Hölderlin, whom Nancy used as a measurement for his poetics and who is in particular concerned with the aesthetic sense, all the exponents of the “avant-garde tradition” are trying to use their works and public interventions to challenge how we inhabit and conceptualize our common world. By “calculating” such significant events, however, artists and political activists enter into a struggle with other agents such as advertising or official public reform programs, which are also concerned with grasping, evaluating, and using such events in order to expand their radius of action.

In parallel to such a deconstructive critique set out by theorists such as de Man, Derrida, or Nancy, since the 1970s a discourse has been preserved that disseminates the abovementioned thesis of the political effectiveness of aesthetic form in a fixed and schematic way. Sometimes, more playful versions of this tradition coexist with more formalized ones—which shows that with respect to the
handing down of certain concepts and practices, we are dealing with a process deeply marked by parallel histories and “non-simultaneousness.”

But especially in new research areas established in the 1980s such as cultural studies, film theory, and gender studies, schematic formulations of “subversive” aesthetic tactics versus “hegemonic” aesthetic regimes have experienced an enormous diffusion, particularly in western Europe, the United States and, in the late 1990s, in eastern Europe. An example of this is the writing of performance theorist Philip Auslander, who, in his analysis of postmodern performances, identifies a “resistant political-aesthetic practice,” which “works to reveal counter-hegemonic tendencies within the dominant discourse.” Under this, he subsumes “distancing mechanisms,” which “were implicit and contextual, which is to say resistant, rather than explicit and textual,” or digital sampling and textual appropriations, which present “a resistant challenge to the individualistic concepts of cultural production and textual ownership that underpin the market in cultural commodities.” While extracting such “strategies” from performances of contemporary theater groups and actors, he presents them as vehicles through which certain political effects can be achieved. In Gender Trouble (1999), Judith Butler identifies parody as a “strategy” to interrupt and to “denaturalize” traditional gender performances. She too transforms the potential of aesthetic-political intervention into the feminist political position. Even though she implicitly deconstructs her “performance thesis” in her later work and replaces the former proclamation of “subversive strategies” with a much more cautious conception of political-aesthetic acting as non-controllable deeds, the older, more programmatical views of her work remain influential. This led to a further explosion of readings singling out irony, parody, montage, and alienation as a “strategy of empowerment” for marginalized groups, especially in the newly emerging queer movement and accompanying theories.

The political efficacy of certain aesthetic tactics has been asserted in such a variety of areas that Linda Hutcheon could call this a “mainstream concept” of political groups with an oppositional self-image. This was further accentuated in the new millennium when Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt adopted Butler’s performance thesis for the description of what they called “multitude,” a notion they use to refer to a carnivalesque practice of “the many,” employing irony, parody, and aesthetic alienation, which is set in distinction to a “dominant” formation, called “empire.” Here, too, there are no contingent constellations—linkages, changeovers, neutralization, stalemate—between “multitude” and “empire” emerging. Rather, the multitude assumes an almost essential politically subversive dimension.

Since the 1970s, our common urban rituals have appeared again changed. While collective political bodies in the public sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century appear to us as static and calculated, protest performances at the end of the twentieth century demonstrate ephemeral arrangements and a plurality of always slightly different creations, geared toward a sensory apparatus that is accustomed to spectacle and surprise. Photographs of demonstrations and other forms of public protest often depict situations of polarized conflict and direct confrontation. At the same time, they highlight spectacular performances of individual selves—and quite often feature commercial goods such as cars, television sets, Coca-Cola bottles, or luxury clothing—which indicate that lifestyle choice and participation in a consumer society are now part of political struggles. (In addition, political collectives usually
prefer images, music, sounds, and artistic performance instead of slogans and banners and avoid references to universal figures like “the people.”) In this fashion, movements communicate not only through their local public spheres, but sometimes, as in the case of the alter-globalization movement or the democratization movements in post-communist eastern Europe, with the “whole world.” To do so, they use an entire media complex—TV, print, radio, the internet, as well as mobile phones and live acts. One of the most distinguishing features of these movements is their adoption of avant-garde aesthetic practices that transform demonstrations into vibrant street parades. Contemporary movements are in this way similar to the workers or the women’s movement, entering into a struggle concerning the shape and the sense of the world. But by adopting aesthetic tactics borrowed from the artistic avant-garde, they inscribe their activities into this tradition too and absorb its prevailing concepts and conventions.

In the contemporary world, we encounter neo-avant-garde movements, as well as critics, political activists, and theoreticians who regularly conceal the unpredictability of their own procedures and actions. They not only describe themselves as heading toward a place full of “liberation,” “rupture,” “deconstruction,” “nonsense,” “myth,” and “ecstatic rapture,” but usually present themselves in statements, narrations, and actions as having already arrived there. By using schematic arguments that neatly divide “we” and “them” or “subversive” and “dominant” practices, these artists, critics, and activists reduce the plurality of contingent possibilities of what will result from a collective participation in a public event to a few outcomes. They usually present themselves as being sympathetic to certain—often leftist, anarchist, feminist, anti-conventionalist—visions and present the outcome of their activities as an unaltered affirmation of what they started. In stories and anecdotes they invent around their public presence, they transform the potentiality of engagement into the certainty of political position. I propose to call such a papering over of the incontrollability of the effects of their own interventions a “central seduction tactic” of the avant-garde and of neo-avant-garde artistic and political movements. It thus becomes obvious that these seduction tactics of the tradition investigated here meet with those employed by classical emancipation discourses. Because in this too, as Ernesto Laclau has shown, “the emancipated identities had to pre-exist before the act of emancipation as a result of their radical otherness vis-à-vis the forces opposing them.”

To some extent, the reinvention and application of such seduction tactics is inherent to the flow of political acting itself. The persistence of such tactics shows that one cannot “stay” or even “settle” easily on the thin borderline between the “old” and the “new” word—meaning that besides such claims, they do attempt to use everything at hand for the creation of their work and to achieve this end involve themselves even in destructive activities, such as deprivation and submission. In doing so, they assert mastery of their own position—success being also the support and encouragement of the whole system of art and networks of educational and cultural institutions. The tension and conflict between artistic creation and political deeds in which their activities are involved are hardly mentioned by the activists themselves. They regularly embrace the qualities of public action emphatically, downplaying the opus-
creating dimensions of their activities and arriving at a position equating the creation of art and political action.

Even if the activists come from the political arena, as in the case of the alter-globalization movement or the queer movement, they encounter the pitfalls of this shared artistic-political tradition. By embracing features from the artistic avant-garde, they supply their deeds with impulses and reference points as well as with durability and the authority of tradition. But at the same time they also inherit a set of conventions that obscure unexpected and unintended effects in the specific milieu in which they are immersed. They deduce a political position from the aesthetic means they use, claiming to act “subversively” by employing irony, parody, montage, or alienation.

In the course of this, handed-down patterns of judgment get in the way of being able to deal with the contingencies of their own actions. If one defines the political as an action that can start something but depends on others who can carry what has been started but can also contest or ignore it, then one can refer to such rigid schemata of judging and of distinguishing between “us” and “them” as “de-politicization” — a “de-politicization” that paradoxically can emerge despite any attempt to politicize everyday deeds. Besides, in adopting and exerting certain aesthetic tactics the individuality of acting out one’s own existence in the world comes to the fore, which again pushes the effects and plural negotiations of such deeds further into the background.

In the course of tracing and analyzing this avant-garde tradition, it appeared to be simultaneously motivating and inspiring for contemporary political movements as well as limiting political imagination due to the conventions and frozen concepts in which it has become trapped. It also became obvious that in acknowledging the fundamental tension between artistic and political deeds, a more explicitly multifaceted approach to every artistic-political intervention, and the plural reception histories this triggers, could enrich art, as well as make any involvement in political action more vivid and open-ended. In particular the aspect of invention and imagination in political action (and artistic-political creation) comes to the fore in this way—which allows us to abandon worn-out paths and discover different ones.

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