



American Journal of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies (AJGWSS)
Issue: Vol. 2; No. 1 April 2021 pp.22-25
ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Print) XXXX-XXXX (Online) Applied
Website: www.ajgwss.com
E-mail: editor@ajgwss.com

Labarthe's Reading of Heidegger: The German Myth and the Aestheticization of Politics

Boutheina Boughnim

Lecturer of English

Higher Institute of Applied Studies in Humanities

Tunis, Tunisia.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's exploration of the aesthetic/artistic essence of politics or political nature of art in his book "*Heidegger, Politics and Art*" is for the least striking. In his book on Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe insists that the essence of the political be broached in relation to art and aesthetics, in the same way as the essence of art does not fully reveal itself if not in terms of the political (or as religion). As a matter of fact, Lacoue-Labarthe notes the inextricable link between art and politics and vice-versa, as he attempts to figure out the reasons behind Heidegger's engagement with the German National Socialist Movement in the thirties, reasons which he knew were something other than ideological. At the end of his analysis, he comes to the startling inference that Nazism and more generally, racism, we may add by extrapolation, xenophobia or any other extreme rejection of the other which may lead to his/her extermination, are aesthetic modes of self-formation. They share the same incentive as nationally triggered festivals, as is the case with Wagner's *Bayreuth Festival*: a community's overpowering desire to accede to pure historic existence.

The "unseverable link"(78) between art and politics which Lacoue-Labarthe points up is according to him traceable to Platonism and the notion of mimesis. He chooses the tricky case of Heidegger and his commitment to German National Socialism triggered by something beyond the ideological bearings of this movement (as would be the case with another totalitarian trend like Stalinist despotism) (79). Being intrigued by the case of Heidegger, Labarthe starts by noting that the rise of German National Socialism coincides with a conjuncture of crisis which he identifies as "agonal history of Germany"(78). This "agonal" episode in the history of Germany is echoed in Nietzsche's book *Untimely Meditations* in which he summons the German to restart the Greek history anew, as Lacoue-Labarthe sustains (78). According to him, Nazism, the German programme of National Socialism, which Heidegger was one of the most prominent figures, was in its essence an instance of the "aesthetization of politics" (61). He quotes a statement of Dr Gobbels from a letter he wrote to Furtwängler in 1933: "Politics, too, is perhaps an art, if not the highest and most all-embracing there is." (61).

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the political model of the German National Socialism is the "Gesamtkunstwerk" (64). The latter is the ultimate political ambition aiming at transmuting Wagner's "Festspiel of Bayreuth", for Germany, into a sort of the "Greater Dionysia" represented for Athens or Greece in general into which all the people were grounded in perfect symbiosis with what they are as such (64). Lacoue-Labarthe contends that "art" and "polis" mutually affect each other: "Which does not mean that the work of art (tragedy, music, drama) offers the truth of the *polis* or the state, but that the political itself is instituted and constituted (and regularly re-grounds itself) in and as work of art." (64)

Keeping to his study case, German Nazism, Philippe-Lacoue Labarthe quotes the narrator of *Hitler*¹: "[...] I had a dream. The artwork of the state and politics and nation and each individual[...] A model for all others, according to the old pattern two thousand years [...] The 'Gesamtkunstwerk' of Germany. The model, I proclaim the death of light, the death of all life and nature, the end." (64). The extract Lacoue-Labarthe quotes pertinently sketches the aesthetics which underlies Nazism traceable to Hitler's "dream" of ensconcing the "Gesamtkunstwerk" by duplicating the Greek model of the state run by Platonic values where "each [individual] in his place".²

Lacoue-Labarthe identifies the mimetic, even competitive, way Germany relates to Greece as "agonistic" relation which was not exclusively relevant to Germany but also to the whole Europe, since the Renaissance, paving the way for the emergence of the "Modern itself" in the political thinking (78). What is it, then, that distinguishes the German model or "imitation"?

According to Lacoue-Labarthe the fact that Germany refused to endorse the “Neo-classical and Latin style” of that modern imitation crystallized into the Republican form that was to be substituted for by Germany’s development of a new philosophical thinking: “speculative idealism” (79). Another detail which intensified Germany’s “agonistic” history and its quest for a unique political model of its own, is her own “agonistic” relation with France. The latter is another “mimetic agon”, along with Greece, being classically associated with the cradle of culture, artistic and humanist movements, which Germany had to outshine (79). Hence, we come to understand the urging necessity for Germany, if it were to re-emerge historically in itself, to “invent” (79) (which implies newness) a Greece which has not been imitated, or as Lacoue-Labarthe calls it a “meta-Greece” (79). Under these conditions, the German *imitatio*, a “pure originality” (79), reveals itself as highly complicated, not to say unconceivable, which is to lead to the ensuing extermination perpetrated by the Nazi.

According to Lacoue-Labarthe, such “radicalized” (79) version of the German *imitatio* inherent in a pure “self-formation”, a pure historic existence implies the originality of these people’s “genius”³ is bound to clash with what Labarthe identifies as a “double bind” (79). Such double bind, is according to Labarthe traceable to first the fact that “genius” is endemically “unimitable”, and it is this particular fact of the unfeasibility of a pure innovation of a genius which made Germany lapse into a “sort of psychosis or historic-spiritual schizophrenia” it (80). Labarthe argues that the tragic outcome of this psychosis was due to the terrible double bind which defined Germany’s historic status which tied the only possibility of her existence to the agony of “not existing” (80). He cites two prominent figures of German thought, to name but a few, who succumbed to the inexorable schizophrenic effect akin to the unfathomable dilemma or double bind of German “*imitation*”, Nietzsche and Holderlin (80; 84).

In an attempt to further clarify the dead end which Germany reached in its intent struggle for a pure self-formation, Lacoue-Labarthe traces it to the paradoxical law of mimesis according to which “appropriation”, “identity”, “being proper” (or if you will, “self-formation”) is basically a matter of “appropriation” (81), or as he paraphrases it: “imitate me in order to be what you are” (81). This implies that the other “presupposes” the “identical”, which leads us according to Lacoue-Labarthe to a long-standing tradition of mimesis based on Platonic “*eidos*” conceived as “speculative dialectic” according to which the “*eidos*”/“figural” (82) would be a sort of “model” that impresses its “type” or “image” on a presupposedly existing subject (81-82). Lacoue-Labarthe firmly rejects this eidetic notion of mimesis which he coins “*ontotypology*” (82)⁴ and which threaded through philosophical and aesthetic thought from Plato to Nietzsche and Wagner and through to Jünger and even Heidegger (82); he forcefully declares: “The speculative idetics is an eschatology of the identical: and so long as this logic, more or less explicitly, underpins the interpretation of mimesis, one can only ever move endlessly from the same to the other- under the authority of the same” (81). Thus, the “*dialectilization*” of mimesis, whose extreme illustration is Nazism, irrevocably leads to a perpetual, whirling cycle of “*fictioning*” (Labarthe’s italics, 81) subjects and whole communities.

The alternative logic to rethink mimesis which Lacoue-Labarthe proposes is based first on the necessity to discard the persistent philosophical tradition which subsumes mimesis into a sort of “*virtus dormitiva*” (Lacoue-Labarthe’s italics, 82) of social anthropology. The counterpoint to such an approach which falls short of the truth of “*imitatio*” is to probe the “conditions” under which this “*imitatio*” takes place (82). The first condition he highlights and which is constitutive of the subject of imitation is paradoxically his/her “impropriety”, an inherent “aptitude for all roles”⁵ (82). The second condition is a kind of corollary of the first: given the intrinsic “impropriety” of the subject⁶, he/she is regarded as a “being” in the sense of the “essent”, that is “originally outside itself”, or in Heideggerian terms an “ek-static” being according to his notion of “*Da-sein*” (82). This constitutive “infirmity” of the subject being originally “outside itself” relegates it to a state of “dehiscence” or, in Derrida’s terms, as Lacoue-Labarthe recalls, a state of “*différance*” (82) which perpetually prevents the subject from reaching a static “essence” (83). As to Lacoue-Labarthe himself, he refers to this state of inconsistency which underlies the subject formation by the term “*desistance*”. According to him: “The subject desists. This is why it is fictionable at its very origin and only accedes to selfhood, if it ever does, through being supplemented by a model or models which precede it.” (83). Thus? It is paradoxically this “moment” which marks the suspension of subjectivity which allows the subject to accede to his unity.

To rethink mimesis according to a more substantial model than the persistent Platonic eidetic model, or what Lacoue-Labarthe identifies as “onto-typology”, he chooses to probe more deeply into the relation between “*techne*” and “*physis*”. In this sense, he quotes Philostratus’ *Imagines*: “[...] but, seriously to return to the origin of art, imitation is one of the earliest inventions, as old as nature itself.” (83). What Lacoue-Labarthe infers from Philostratus’ claim is this relation of “congeniality” (83) between “*techne*” and “*physis*”; the best further evidence he marshals is to be found in Heidegger’s thought and notion of “*techne*” as “constitutive of *aletheia*” (83)⁷. Accordingly, Lacoue-Labarthe stresses the necessity to discard the long-standing, reductive, Platonic notion of mimesis as “specular”, reproductive” or “duplicative” representation (83). Keeping to Heidegger’s conception of the “*presencing*” (“making present” (84)) potential of *technē*, He highlights the trickiness, the complexity of such a theoretical intimation which brings to bear the problematic of origin by dissolving its formerly hollowed originarity and re-defines it in the light of the mimetic or *technē* itself. The truth of origin, selfhood, lies, thus, as Lacoue-Labarthe sustains, in this unfathomable “originary secondarity” (84) which he refers to by the term “hyperbology” (84). The latter is defined by Labarthe as “[...] a logic of infinite alternation and harmonic tension- in spite of all appearances thwarts dialectical logic [...]” (84). What Labarthe means by his last claim is that the intrinsic “paradoxality of mimesis” (84), referred to above, is not traceable to a mere dialectal aesthetics but to the fact that at the basis, the subject already desists, to use Lacoue-Labarthe’s terminology, in the process of self-formation or self-representation.

In a further stage, Lacoue-Labarthe moves on to broach the nature of *technē*, having just been identified as the other facet of *aletheia* and not a mere duplicative mode as has been long sustained. Starting from the inference that *technē* is another mode of revealing *aletheia*, he reminds us that *technē* is endemically “language”, “(Dichtung, Sprache)” (84) and thus confirms the “apophantic essence” of *technē* (84). For this reason, we may regard “mythos” with its “naming” and unconcealing power in the Heideggerian sense, Labarthe goes on, as the root, the “archaic” version of “*technai*”, as well as the basis of mimesis in so far as it is also a mode of revealing the world and peoples (84). Keeping to this “apophantic essence” of *technē* (84), Lacoue-Labarthe argues that languages “(de)constitute” subjects (85), inscribing, “prescribing” them in terms of their most fundamental, originary essence, their “genius” which perpetually remains out of reach: “[...] pure gift of *physis* in infinite excess over its infinite failure to appear or to unconceal itself. Which clearly establishes that *technē* is (in)human and unheimlich.” (85)

In his attempt to plumb the Greek genius and its relation to mimesis, art, and by consequence politics⁸, Lacoue-Labarthe sketches three major inferences, the last of which we shall dwell on: first the notion of the political, that is the City, is basically “a form of plastic art” in the fictionable sense (66)⁹; second, the consideration of the Greeks as the “political people par excellence” (67) due to their uncontested engagement with art¹⁰; third, the organicity of the political. Such “organicity”, Lacoue-Labarthe relates to the “organic essence” of the political in that the “State” operates as a “living totality” a cohesive “artwork” (68). The interrelated entity akin to characteristic organicity of the political is, he contends, fundamentally “infra-political” and even “infra-social”, foregrounding as such the organicity of the community, the “*Volkstum*” (69). In this sense, Lacoue-Labarthe traces racism, and we may add by extrapolation, any other form of xenophobia, to a “misinterpretation” (69) of this political, apophantic essence of *physis* which supplants it by a “logic” grounded in “biologism” (69). he points out how this “interpretation of *physis* as *bios*” leads to the substitution of a “nation” or a “language community” by a race one (69). Such organic interpretation of the political, leading either to anti-Semitism or any other xenophobic form of extreme racial segregation, is at bottom a form of “aestheticism” based on a sort of over-representation of *technē*, so much so that it comes to blur its (artwork’s/community’s) own contours and causes its “excrescence”, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, by means of caricature or else (69).

Lacoue-Labarthe draws our attention to the reverse side of the formerly hailed notion by Heidegger, among others, of the immeasurable scope and potential of *technē*/technology, as well as its *presencing* power, when it (this notion) is pushed to the extreme, for it may prove “lethal” and lead to race extermination or genetic manipulations (69). The organic conception of the political translates a given community’s desire to “[...] produce their own essence as their work (oeuvre), and moreover to produce precisely this essence as *community*.” (Lacoue-Labarthe’s italics, 70). Lacoue-Labarthe quotes Nancy’s term “immanence” (70) to refer to such “totalitarian” (69) aesthetics. The latter is a sort of extreme version of “Romanticism” which is conventionally based on the notion of the “subject as work and work as subject”, Labarthe recalls (70).

What happens with “immanentism” is that the community is its own artistic oeuvre, its own “work” of art (70), which leads it to infinitely indulge in a perpetual process of self-formation. This continuously renewed, ever-whirling process of asserting the community’s essence inexorably leads to “the infintization or the absolutization of the subject”(70), a sort of an endless inception of an ever-deferred formation which Lacoue-Labarthe defines above as “hyperbology”. Finally, he highlights two further aspects endemic to the aestheticization of politics/totalitarianism: the merging experience of war or festivals (as is the case with Wagner Bayreuth Festival”, or the rallying, “ecstatic identification” with a given figure (70). Rather than translating a transcendental type of experience, both aspects of “fusion” denote the inescapable grip of the community’s “immanent fashion” or aesthetic codes, which brings Lacoue-Labarthe to relate the sense of urgency that accompanies such fusional experience of National aestheticism, or what he calls “will to immediate effectuation or self-effectuation” (70) to the inescapable organic bond of the community.

By plumbing the roots and nature of politics and extreme nationalist trends and by noting the inextricable bond between art (fiction) and the political (fictioning), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe enables us to better understand and be aware of the highly insidious mechanism behind extreme forms of racism, xenophobia and rejection of the other and ultimately extermination. Such attitudes are in fact toxic manifestations of a community’s failed attempts to accede to a pure historic emergence or self-formation. Lacoue-Labarthe’s study not only spells out the macabre mystery behind racist extermination (of Jews or others), but also dispels the comfortable, erroneous belief in the subject stability, for, according to him, the subject proves to be in an ever-spiraling cycle of alternating desistance and (self)formation.

Works Cited

- Heidegger, M. (1977), *Basic Writings* Edited by David Farrell Krell. London: Harper&Row Publishers.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, P. (1999) *Heidegger, Art and Politics –The Fiction of the Political-*. Translated by Chris Turner. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- (1989), *Typography–Mimesis, Philosophy and Politics*. California: Stanford University Press.

¹Syberberg quoted in Labarthe *Hitler: a film from Germany*, p. 234.

² Syberberg quoted in Labarthe *Hitler: a film from Germany*, p. 234

³Lacoue-Labarthe refers here to Kant’s notion of the historic necessity of the transmission of any heritage, or a people’s genius (79).

⁴*Typography* (67).

⁵Lacoue-Labarthe further expands on this “aptitude” in his essay “*The Caesura of the Speculative*” published in his book *Typography* (152).

⁶“The subject is originally the infirmity of the subject... in a state of dehiscence.” (82).

⁷Lacoue-Labarthe obviously is referring to Heidegger’s conception of *technē* expounded in, among other works, his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” in which he defines *technē* as an alethic manifestation, “a bringing forth” (295).

⁸ As has been clarified above the political is in its essence an art, the art of (in)formation (Lacoue-Labarthe, 66).

⁹“The accomplishment of physis itself” (66).

¹⁰ Such commitment of the Greeks to art, and by that token to political/politics ultimately crystallizes, as Labarthe notes, into what Hegel calls “the political work of art” (67): “the formation of man himself” (Hegel quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe, 67). An instance of this commitment is the Greek consecration of “beautiful corporeality” which transmutes the body into an “organ of the spirit” (Hegel quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe, 67), a doctrine endorsed by the Third Reich with the 1936 Olympics policy. (67).