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Peter Fenves (Northwestern University), Eduardo Sabrovsky (Instituto de Filosofía, Universidad Diego Portales), and Rodrigo Farías (PhD student, Diego Portales)
“Aesthetics and the Critique of Political Theology”
Syllabus Outlines (graduate-student version): DRAFT

Goal and Procedures

The goal of this seminar is to consider the manner in which aesthetics can function as a critique of political theology. The meaning of each term in the title of the seminar—“aesthetic,” “critique,” and “political economy”—is a persistent matter of debate. The seminar achieves its goal, above all, by helping students come to understand the intricate network of their meanings. All of the terms circuitously derive from ancient Greek thought, but a premise of the seminar is that an understanding of how they relate to each other requires a broad horizon of research and reflection. Here, too, the seminar will achieve its goal only if a full range of aesthetic, critical, and political-theological formulations come under examination; but since nothing approximating a “full range” can be expected within the three or four months of an academic term, the seminar is constructed so that 1) one particular line of argument is used to frame the opening weeks of discussion, and 2) students are enjoined to help to select the theme and texts around which the final weeks will revolve.

In order to establish an initial framework for discussion, the seminar thus begins with a particular—and particularly problematic—line of argument concerning the relation between aesthetics and political theology. The argument owes its origin to a set of polemical writings Carl Schmitt published in the 1920s and ‘30s, stretching from the essays he presented under the title *Political Theology*, through his *Concept of the Political*, to his tendentious inquiry into the peculiar emblem Hobbes chose for the frontispiece of *Leviathan* (a gigantic head composed of smaller men). At issue in the argument that frames the seminar is an incontrovertible historical fact: the word “aesthetics” does not derive from classical antiquity but is, rather, an invention of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. “Aesthetics” was first conceived as a “science” of sensation that would complement a revised version of logic (understood as the “science” of thought). Since the highest form of sensation lies in the experience of the beautiful, the appreciation of beautiful arts (“beaux arts,” “schöne Kunst”) forms an integral element of the discipline. According to Schmitt’s argument, however, the emergence of aesthetics within the context of Enlightenment thought is a precise index of what this discipline implicitly promotes, namely the process of “de-politicization.” The argument runs briefly as follows: aesthetic distinctions, by virtue of their endless subjective variability, replace and occlude the decisive, unifying, and totalizing distinction that, for Schmitt, characterizes the essence of the political: the distinction, that is, between friend and enemy. Insofar as political theology—so the argument continues—is grounded in the sovereign, who represents divinity and (as Schmitt famously proposes) “decides on the state of exception,” aesthetic and political-theological regimes are mutually exclusive: where there is a sovereign decision, aesthetic judgments are

meaningless; where aesthetic judgments have probative value, there is no sovereign decision—and thus no sovereign, indeed nothing “political” in the eminent sense. In light of this argument the emergence of aesthetics appears as a crucial element in the process of de-politicization that expands the domain of apparent “neutral” technologies, beginning with the invention of a mechanical state (captured in Hobbes’ image of the Leviathan), moving through bureaucratic professionalization, and culminating to the idea of a “pure law” that would dissolve friend-enemy groupings into schemata of legal-bureaucratic-technical classifications.

The relation between aesthetics and political theology sketched above leaves open the matter of critique. Here, too, the seminar takes its point of orientation from European thought in the eighteenth-century, specifically from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which is the source of both the use of the term *aesthetics* in its current sense (in German, English, Spanish, and many other languages, including non-Indo-European ones). In the second paragraph of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant obliquely address the relation between critique, aesthetics, and politics. Under discussion is the question of whether a certain building, specifically a palace, is beautiful. Below is the implicitly political-theological analysis through which Kant makes aesthetics into the culmination of what he calls “the critical business”:

If someone ask me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I don’t like that sort of thing, which is made merely to be gaped at, or, like the Iroquois sachem, that nothing in Paris pleased him better than the cook-shops; in true Rousseauesque style I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things; finally I could even easily convince myself that if I were to find myself on an uninhabited island, without any hope of ever coming upon human beings again, and could conjure up such a magnificent structure through my mere wish, I would not even take the trouble of doing so if I already had a hut that was comfortable enough for me. All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here. One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation. It is readily seen that to say that it is **beautiful** and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object. (§ 2)

The seminar begins with a reflection on this inceptive moment of aesthetic theory for several reasons, beginning with the incontrovertible fact that the question Kant poses is altogether imaginary, or perhaps more precisely, a consequence of his vast consumption of travel literature: he never saw a palace, since there are none in Königsberg, from which he never once departed. Beyond this fact, however, the passage also suggests other modes of critique, beginning with the remark of “Iroquois sachem,” to which Kant does not even bother to reply, perhaps because he does not understand its form of indirection. If the seminar could be said to revolve around a single question, it would be this: does Kant inadvertently imagine in the voice of the “Iroquois sachem,” who represents an indigenous mode of thought transported into the center of European civilization, an alternative “critique of the power of judgment”?

The paragraph serves as a point of orientation for the seminar for one further reason: written within a year of the French Revolution, it identifies aesthetic reflection with a certain de-politicization—not the process of de-politicization described by Schmitt but the establishment of a certain distance from a “Rousseauesque style” of political theory that only ambiguously belongs within the framework of political theology. As a guide to what may be implied by Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* with respect to the question of politics—and the absence of political theology—this section of the seminar will close with a discussion of Hannah Arendt’s innovative and influential *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, which will serve as the counterpart to Schmitt’s work in the framing of the questions under discussion throughout the seminar.

The first half of seminar, in sum, traces the co-emergence of aesthetics and critique in the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment in conjunction with imputed images of non-European perspectives, which, for Kant at least, are to be summarily dismissed. The next unit of the class are concerned with attempts to major attempts to produce a political theory on the basis of aesthetic reflection, each of which is still guided by the fundamental thought that animates Kantian critique, namely that aesthetics is something like a “common ground” through which everyone can either see the same way (as in Schiller) or experience everyone else’s perspective (as in Arendt). This unit then leads to a corresponding consideration of two attempts to clear away all of the terms of aesthetic theory as they emerged in the eighteenth-century European enlightenment: the question that will be posed to the attempts on the part of Heidegger and Benjamin circa 1935 to re-commence the understanding of art beyond the traditional concepts of aesthetics is whether they are able to respond to the challenges under discussion in the beginning part of the lecture—including the question they, too, involve an implicit suppression of questions in “Rousseauesque style” as well as implicit refutations of the entire procedure of inquiry “like the Iroquois sachem.”

All of these units of discussion are meant to lead toward a confrontation with particular cases of artistic practice in which the relation of aesthetics to political theology can be examined in detail—beyond the conceptual abstractions that cannot fail to produce a certain tension with the opening gesture of aesthetic inquiry, which emphasizes nothing so much as perceptual uniqueness over discursive generality. The choice of cases is always, in a certain sense, arbitrary; but the work of Jorge Luis Borges is particularly appealing, for it arguably represents at once a continuation, reexamination, and even implicit refutation of the initial connection between aesthetics and political theology that set the agenda for the seminar. As we read the most widely read collection of Borges’ fictions, we make sure that the students are familiar with specificity of his literary, cultural, and political environment through a small selection of scholarly writings. The question that we then pose to the students is whether the form of Borges’ fictions—some of which resemble the imaginary question Kant poses at the beginning of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*—can be understood as a critique of political theology that is conducted through an aesthetic practice that likewise brings into implicit question the program of aesthetic inquiry that begins with the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment.

Syllabus Outline

Weeks 1-2: The Founding of Aesthetics as a Discipline and the Thesis of De-politicization:

- Alexander Baumgarten, “Reflections on Poetry”
- Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (selections)
- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” and *The Concept of the Political*.

Weeks 3-5: The Inception of Aesthetics as the Culmination of the Critique of Human Cognitive Faculties

- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Preface to the A edition), *Critique of Practical Reason* (preface) and *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Preface, §§ 1-22, 39-42)

Weeks 6-7: Two Alternative Ways of Responding to the Opening Section of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

- “In true Rousseauesque style”: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Human Beings*, *The Social Contract* (selections); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (chapter 2)
- “Like the Iroquois sachem”: Kant, *Lectures on Physical Geography* (selections); Robert Bernasconi, *Race* (Part 1); Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 4)

Weeks 8-9: Two Ways of Responding the Political Character of Aesthetic Judgment: the Aesthetic State and Political Judgment

- Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity* (selections)
- Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*

Weeks 10-11: Two Attempts to Renew the Understanding of Art outside of both Aesthetics and Political Theology

- Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”
- Walter Benjamin, “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility”

Weeks 12-14: Aesthetics as the Critique of Political Theology: the Case of Borges

- Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*
- Doris Sommer, “Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America”
- Rodian Fiddian, *Postcolonial Borges* (Introduction, chapter 3)
- Eduardo Sabrovksy, *Modernity as Miracle and Exception* (chapters 1 and 10)