# Bakhtin on Aesthetics and Political Responsibility

By

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Acronyms for texts used:

AH - Mikhail Bakhtin, Artist and Hero in Aesthetic Activity

PA - Mikhail Bakhtin, Towards a Philosophy of the Act

CMF - Mikhail Bakhtin, The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art

KU - Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment

## Abstract:

Given that politics in general has elements that can be aestheticized, speeches, rallies, posters, etc., and as an *idea* is necessarily symbolized in some way, how are we to distinguish between business as usual and pernicious applications of political aesthetics as propaganda? Is this aesthetic component always misleading? The description of authoritarian 'politics as art' may be a step in the right direction but remains too abstract and difficult to apply in practice. Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *outsideness* and authorship can be used to answer these questions in a clear way. Politics contains an essentially creative element, which is free and subjective, while propaganda and harmful ideologies obscure the role of subjectivity. I will first outline Bakhtin's general aesthetics - outlining what I take to be his three main contributions: the hero, consummation (that is, finishing, making whole), and the so-called answerable act. I will then consider the significance of symbols, 'heroes', and political communities in making politics intelligible. Next, having defined the significance of these ideas in the Bakhtinian worldview, I willconsider what it means for politics to become 'aestheticized'. Finally, having highlighted the incompatibility of 'politics as art' with both the qualities that make artworks unique and basic democratic principles, I will sketch an outline of how we should approach aesthetics in a democratic state to prevent a decline into demagoguery.

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# Introduction

"I still think we should've spent the money to fix Main Street."
*Marge Simpson*

"Well, you should've written a song like that guy."
*Homer Simpson*

Our aesthetic sensibilities wield tremendous political potential. At the most basic level, the state and democratic political proceedings are made tangible in forms which are necessarily rendered to citizens as something aesthetically tangible: a courthouse or parliament building have some architectural style, governments often invest in public art and monuments, and a state's flags and symbols can all be subject to aesthetic appraisal. Within the scope of human value systems, aesthetic sentiments are powerful but often difficult to articulate and ground- when applied to the political sphere, this can lead to misguided reasoning for promoting particular policies and platforms and a loss of common standards for their evaluation. The power of political symbolism to motivate political action, while at the same time bypassing conventional democratic processes, has not been lost on political philosophers, and even some liberal theorists believe this form of manipulation may be a desirable means of safeguarding democratic institutions. While the so-called aestheticization of politics has been addressed in a number of critical and philosophical projects throughout the 20th century, Walter Benjamin's famous coining of the term is based on a historical observation, that fascists spoke openly of their aspirations to dissolve the boundaries between politics and art altogether. If this fascist view of aesthetics *did* play a concrete role in the erosion of democratic norms and political discourse, we should find a way of identifying and systematically explaining how that came to be the case. Moreover, we want to find a way of refuting the notion of turning the state into a work of art that

is more substantive than pointing out the badness of people who have argued this position - a genuine contradiction, not mere genetic fallacy.

Given that politics has elements that can be aestheticized, like speeches, rallies, and posters, how are we to distinguish between business as usual and pernicious, propagandized applications of political aesthetics? If politics has already been aestheticized, how can aestheticizing it any *more* be dangerous? Is this aesthetic component always misleading or a distraction? Theorists reflecting on the aestheticization of politics have warned against the 'transforming the state into an artwork', but this is far too abstract to be of much help, especially in light of the features already discussed. I will draw on the aesthetic theories and vocabularies of Immanuel Kant and Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly through defending Bakhtin's general aesthetics on the basis that it provides us a meaningful way to disambiguate between politics as having aesthetic parts and politics as *art*. It is not only that politics requires symbols and government buildings require architecture. Bakhtin's aesthetics, particularly his language of outsideness and responsibility, can be used to answer these questions in a clear way. Politics contains an essentially aesthetic element, which is creative and subjective. I will first outline Bakhtin's theory of aesthetics - outlining three distinctive features of Bakhtin's aesthetic philosophy: outsideness, consummation (that is, finishing, making whole), and responsibility. Having defined the significance of these ideas in Bakhtin's worldview, I will consider what it means for politics to become 'aestheticized'. I will then consider the significance symbols, 'heroes', and political communities in making politics intelligible. While these features represent part of the irreducible complexity of politics, it is possible to discern when these aestheticized components are no longer serving the interests of individual freedom. Finally, having highlighted both the incompatibility of 'politics as art' with the qualities that make artworks unique and its

incompatibility with democratic principles, I will sketch an outline of what the political significance of aesthetics is for a democratic state.

### 1.1 Introduction to Bakhtin's General Aesthetics

Aesthetics, for Bakhtin, doesn't only involve judgments about whether certain artworks or objects are beautiful or pleasing. Bakhtin's view of the aesthetic's role is neatly summarized by Holmquist as conforming to the general Kantian framework, and further examining "how parts are shaped into wholes" (AH x). Wholeness, here, is the difference between the idea of a hundred dollars, and having a hundred dollars in one's hand, subjective judgments play a significant role in drawing this distinction. This is significant for our investigation; politics must reckon both with the value of a hundred dollars as it applies to economic principles at the same time as a voter's real hundred dollars which is destined to pay for rent or groceries. In a 1924 essay *The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art,* Bakhtin takes note of a failure of what he terms 'materialist' aesthetic theory[1], an approach which centers on artistic technique and common structural forms of art styles, including the highly influential Russian Formalist movement of his time. To Bakhtin, simply evaluating brush strokes or plot structures is an insufficient starting point for explaining what an artwork *means,* nor can it be a starting point for the broader implications of aesthetics in human life. He asserts the existence of an "aestheticism, that is, the illegitimate transfer of aesthetic forms into the domain of ethical action (personal-experiential, political, and social) and into the domain of cognition" (CMF 271). As will be explained in greater detail later, we are always experiencing the world aesthetically in Bakhtin's view, it is the *intuitive unification* of rational deliberation and the messy particulars of real life,

[1] Despite the post-revolution context in which he was writing, materialism here should not be taken as having any relation to a Marxist materialism, it is not an overarching ontological commitment but a hypothesis about the interrelation of art's form and material.

our moods, memories, past experiences and so on. It is possible, however, to lose the plot, and to allow our subjective judgments to supersede objective facts in thinking and in action. The materialist aesthetician lacks a theoretical basis for explaining, for instance, the political commitments of the Romantics like Schiller, or how anyone could talk about beautiful myths, ideas, or events. One can apply formalist ideas about literary plot structure or composition to real-life political activities only in a metaphorical sense. Bakhtin asserts that aesthetic activity is only truly realized in the creation and evaluation of art, as the work of art has a determinate material and authorial technique. As a result aesthetics in other spheres of life can only be "hybrid", whereas the process of interpreting a work of art has its own clearly delineated methodology. Bakhtin notes, however, that any successful aesthetic theory should be able to explain circumstances in which people evaluate non-artistic objects aesthetically. While Bakhtin did not write any particular chapter or section on the role of aesthetics in politics[2], his assertion that the broad role of aesthetics outside art is of 'extreme' philosophical and practical significance (CMF 272) suggests he felt his theory was up to the task.

It is not entirely obvious at first what political points, if any, Bakhtin is trying to make in his early texts[3]. To him, politics is a subset of ethics, a sphere of culture in which different normative values are applied and put in opposition. In order to demonstrate the applicability of Bakhtin's general aesthetics to politics, I will begin by drawing on two of his early works. The first, *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, is dedicated at its most basic level to explaining the relationship between a literary protagonist and the author of a text. However, heroes for Bakhtin,



[2] *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* was also planned to contain a dedicated chapter on the 'ethics of politics', but this chapter is not among the surviving parts of the text, most likely never written.

[3] Bakhtin's indifference towards politics seems to be as much personal as it is theoretical. In a 1973 interview, he recounts a decades-long reluctance to even file official paperwork. Notably, he refused to seek rehabilitation from the Soviet government after his arrest and internal exile for illegally lecturing on Kant in the years following the October Revolution.

are "the bearers of a destiny" (AH 66), whose actions are given a sense of purposiveness by an external observer. This determinate author-hero relationship can apply, however, to any instance of aesthetic creation *or* contemplation, making the scope of Bakhtin's project more phenomenological than strictly literary. How this is possible outside of a literary context will be the main focus of the next section. Since "a human being *qua* hero" (AH 226), a point on which an outside observer can project their values, is necessary for any aesthetic activity to take place, I will introduce Jane Doe, whose fictitious experiences, political and otherwise, will illustrate Bakhtin's points where necessary.[4]

The second text I will focus on, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*[5] is a fragment of a larger, incomplete work of moral philosophy which sought to overcome the abstractness of influential idealist philosophies of his time[6] and instead begin to explain human actions within the subjective fullness of lived experience. Bakhtin wants to lay the groundwork for a new 'first philosophy' which is capable of explaining the origin of values in what he calls the 'once-occurrent Being-as-event'[7]. Bakhtin's more specific language for describing, and standards for identifying how aesthetic activity makes up an important part of lived experience make him worthy of attention in his own right, and his broader goal of uniting the aesthetic and ethical goals in our lives seems appropriate for considering the peculiarities of political aestheticization.



[4] As will hopefully become clear later, Jane Doe is now the *potential hero* of this text.
[5] The parts of *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* which have survived act as an introduction to a future project on moral philosophy- it considers the insufficiencies of Kantianism, Marxism and modern philosophy in general in fully explaining facets of subjective experience. Nonetheless, it contains some clearer explanations of how Bakhtin uses some terms than *Author and Hero*.
[6] In particular, the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School, especially Hermann Cohen, who Bakhtin frequently cites and is considered a major influence (Steinby 2011).
[7] *'edinstvennovo bytiya-sobytiya'*

## 1.2 The Aesthetic Consciousness, Author and Hero

Bakhtin describes aesthetics as an activity, something we *do*, not as a series of passive encounters in the world. This can be described as a specific way in which we *see* the world around us. While "aesthetic seeing" (or vision, *videniye*) does bring to mind a strictly visual activity, Bakhtin takes literature as his starting point, and also applies aesthetic vision to music. Seeing is best understood here as adopting a particular point of view. Bakhtin draws a distinction between four types of event which together make up our lived experience. These 'moments' of our experience are cognitive, ethical, aesthetic and religious, which can be differentiated on the basis of how the person engaging in the activity relates to other 'consciousnesses'. The most relevant to politics is the ethical event. Ethical activity, which includes activities like giving speeches or writing a manifesto, involves cases either in which these two consciousnesses coincide in the same person, "stand next to" or "against one another as antagonists" in relation to some ethical value. That is to say, an ethical event could be one in which a person pauses and reflects on their actions as a moral agent *or* when an act is dependent on an attitude about a norm. Jane and John Doe can either be with or against one another on an issue such as abortion. Whether or not abortion is permissible is the most politically poignant point[8]. When there is only one consciousness present, then Bakhtin would say we are engaged in *cognitive* activity. One reads a scientific article or attends a lecture in the hope of learning something about the objective world. While it's possible to think about the mental states of a journal article's author or a lecturer, this is something distinct from the factual or interpretive content of what is said. Jane Doe from before must know that there is such a thing as pregnancy and such a thing as abortion in the world before she is able to make a non-arbitrary political decision on the matter. What

[8] As we will see, however, all of these 'moments' are pertinent in taking a political action.

distinguishes the strictly aesthetic things we do from others is that, "an aesthetic event can take place only when there are two participants present; it presupposes two noncoinciding consciousnesses" (22). Here we might consider the words Jane Doe uses to describe relevant facts to her political choice. Does she talk about pregnant people, or mothers? A fetus, or an unborn child? This is a subjective choice, but it reflects an ordering of information, differences of personal feeling, and a different locus of attention and care. The fourth and final activity is perhaps the easiest to understand, a religious event such as prayer is directed towards the ultimate consciousness of God. If Jane Doe is religious, she may view the entire situation through the lens of a personal relationship with God[9]. A very obvious question arises, however - how does Bakhtin justify this idea of a second consciousness in aesthetic activity? It's quite common to look at a painting or listen to music in solitude, which doesn't immediately suggest any other consciousnesses are present, and paintings and music are obviously not alive. It is in this moment, however, that Bakhtin sets up his structure for positing the distinct, but interdependent quality of ethical and aesthetic life.

When we read a work of literature, one could say we operate under the belief that the characters we read about are the sorts of things which have thoughts and feelings within their literary world. Hamlet may not be a real person, but there is still some sense in which we can speak about Hamlet grieving for his father, or being motivated to avenge him. Bakhtin is not claiming that writing a book or a play is the same as giving birth to a person, but the author's work does create a limited context in which the reader can empathize with a character *as if* they possessed a consciousness of their own. One could just as easily say, to avoid any confusion with mind-like properties, that aesthetic experience for Bakhtin rests on the *subjective belief* in the

[9] This religious perspective is worth mentioning, it falls within Bakhtin's division of values and is a reflection of his own religious views, although it otherwise falls largely outside the scope of this paper.

hero's inner experience, rather than any panpsychist or ontological claim more broadly. A result of this is that Bakhtin claims that all aesthetic contemplation involves some degree of anthropomorphization. If I see a picture of a cat that I believe looks upset, my belief comes from an idea of what being upset looks like that comes from my own (human) feeling of being upset and the feelings of other people I know who have been upset. I do not have any direct access to what a cat being upset is like that doesn't come from this original human sensation in some sense. When an artist creates a poem or painting of something they encounter in nature, Bakhtin uses the example of a cliff, the artist must give their artistic object a "determinate emotional-volitional attitude, make them human" (AH 66). The artist gives Bakhtin's cliff a determinate form, colors, and tones which express for the viewer "its possible inner states: stubbornness, pride, steadfastness, self-sufficiency, yearning, loneliness" (ibid). Bakhtin is clear to assert that his aesthetic system is not impressionist, the emotions conveyed in a painting do not provide any meaningful access to what the artist is feeling (nor, in fact, does it help provide the artist with special access to their own mental world), nor is it expressionist, there is not a truly objective emotional state contained within the artwork. Either of these two interpretive methods lose the necessary relationship between the artist or viewer's perspective and the significance of the artwork's form and material.

While his methodology has achieved some prominence in the sphere of literary analysis, few have argued in favor of its use as a general aesthetic rule, especially when applied to nonrepresentational art. One *could* make a hero, for instance, out of one of Rothko's paintings. Seeing and talking about one of Rothko's squares as a bearer of meaning and values in its own right seems to be a more plausible account of its aesthetic value than it being a particularly good representation of what a rectangle should look like. Pollock's famous splatter painting *No. 5,*

however, does not depict any sort of objects, let alone any form that could be described as a *hero*. Bahktin is insistent, however, that even non-representational art is endowed with some sense of internal life, otherwise music, for instance, would be "nothing else but a physical stimulus for the psychophysiological state of pleasure" (CMF 266). There is *some* quality of an artwork that is compelling beyond the passive emotional states it can arouse in its viewer, but a unique whole is formed when the viewer's cognitive and emotional values interact with the form of the piece- the 'consciousness' of a work is the object of interpretation and the bearer of the work's purposiveness.

The arrival of Husserl's phenomenology in Russia[10] played a fairly significant role in the development of Bakhtin's early aesthetics and helped to differentiate his work and ideas from the body of Kantian literature he drew upon. Bakhtin's general aesthetics serve not only to explain the relationship between spectators and works of art, but to explain more broadly how aesthetic sensibilities transform the world from sensory representations into the dynamic, ethically and emotionally rich world of lived experience. We are not passive participants in this process, either, with Bakhtin writing, "the aesthetic whole is not something coexperienced, but something actively produced, both by the author and by the contemplator" (AH 67). Viewing something aesthetically involves a unique perceptual, embodied vantage point which Bakhtin calls 'outsideness' (sometimes also translated as 'exteriority')[11]. Both the creator and the viewer of an aesthetic object approach it from the position of their outsideness, and their unique point of view allows them to observe elements of the real life environment as well as observing (or in the author's case, creating) facts about the art-world that lie outside the experience of the hero.



[10] At least in part due to Gustav Shpet's 1914 book *Appearance and Sense,* although Bakhtin was reading many German idealist texts in their original language at this time, as well.
[11] *Vnyenahodimost'* in the original.

Bakhtin calls these features “transgredient”, in contrast with features of the world which are *transcendental*. Whereas no one could ever have an empirical experience of something like a Kantian category, these transgredient characteristics are ones which are only epistemically inaccessible from a particular vantage point. The simplest example might be the rest of the room behind me - someone looking in my direction has visual access to a part of space that I do not, that nonetheless comprises a part of my environment and the world of which I am a part. If there’s a ball flying at my head, this difference in awareness is what lets a friend yell ‘look out!’ The protagonist of an allegorical novel, even if we were to grant her (purely for the sake of argument) a sense of consciousness, would have no way of knowing about the events in *our* world that explain how her life makes sense or is interesting to the reader. One cannot explain Freud to Oedipus. This idea of outsideness is of twofold usefulness: first, it provides a concrete way of distinguishing between what is aesthetic and what is not, it is crucial for understanding Bakhtin’s larger social philosophy. There are crucial and identifiable parts of a person’s value system and knowledge about the world that are dependent on their interactions with others.

## 1.3 Aesthetic Activity in Social Life

While “the aesthetic realizes itself fully only in art”, the author-hero relationship in literature is meant to be indicative of a broader sense of authorship in which a person is constantly engaged in a process of endowing the objects in the ‘plastic-pictoral’ world of their perception with meaning. When thinking about people we are familiar with, for instance, Bakhtin notes that their “true and integral countenance” exists alongside all of our attitudes about them and unique personal history (AH 6). There is an authorship of a unique story, which incorporates but is not reducible to just the facts we know about them. This process is aesthetic in character,

but undifferentiated, since we take a personal interest in the other person's existence (so this is not a *pure* judgment of beauty in the Kantian sense). We have created this subjective picture of a person. This process is not something we are actively aware of, as Bakhtin notes "Insofar as this process conforms with psychological laws, it cannot be studied by us directly. We meet with it only to the extent to which it precipitates itself in a work of art" (AH 6). Art sets aside a space specifically for the aesthetic activity. The artist has control over the formal elements they use to bring a character to life, whereas in everyday life, we construct our aesthetic images more haphazardly out of events and situations that have already happened and out of objects that may have been created to fulfill a specific purpose. Art allows us to identify the uniquely aesthetic moment- the artwork captures something specific for us to contemplate and interpret.[12]

The lives of human subjects, like our literary heroic counterparts, can be broken up into cognitive and ethical moments. *I-for-myself* cannot, however, truly engage with myself in an aesthetic sense. This is already clear if we take Kant's account of judgments of beauty to be correct; since we can never truly be disinterested in our own existence, any judgment about whether or not we're beautiful is necessarily confused and impure. Bakhtin's model takes this a step further by noting that our inability to gain *outsideness* relative to ourselves precludes the possibility of true aesthetic self-judgment. Bakhtin provides an extended account of why mirrors and photographs don't count, since in these instances we are both dealing with images, not ourselves, and our interpretation of these images still does not contain the elusive emotional-volitional values of *myself-for-other*. We can assert, and believe, that we are beautiful, but the fundamentally confused nature of this assertion means it lacks the same validity as if someone else had told us the same thing. It is entirely possible to fabricate a sort of mental person to judge

[12] Also, Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* p. 61

our appearance or the meaning behind our actions[13], but in the grand scheme of things, this is just an essentially non-productive cognitive exercise. Although Bakhtin never uses the term, the subject is ultimately left in a state of alienation. While we find ourselves in a world of experience which we take to be a complete whole, we are unlike everything else in our experience insofar as we cannot be fully self-sufficient with respect to values.

Bakhtin provides his schema of aesthetic activity in social circumstances with the example of a suffering man[14]. Experiencing overwhelming pain distorts their experience of the surrounding world, he becomes incapable of experiencing his part of Being to its fullest extent. If someone else walks by, however, they become aware of transgredient features of this suffering that are necessary to finish 'the full picture'. The man in pain can't see his facial expressions, he may not be aware of what his muscles are doing. Bakhtin here assumes that our reading of this situation is not reducible to gleaning a piece of data off the man's face, that it is true that this man is suffering, but it includes a moment of genuine empathy with him as well. For this moment to considered aesthetic, however, one cannot simply co-experience the emotional content of a person or event, but Bakhtin here asserts that a person must then return to themselves, and consummate what they have encountered either aesthetically, by completing the picture, as it were, with things outside the other's experience, or ethically, by helping this other person. Bakhtin doesn't consider this possibility, but it does not seem to be the case that a lack of empathy would disrupt this schema, since the moment of suffering could be taken in purely for its pictorial value without any regard for 'feeling for' the other. This is relevant not only for stone-cold sadism, but various forms of comedic artworks as well.



[13] Bakhtin uses the funny term 'soul-slave', '*dusha-raba*' to describe this fantasy character.

[14] It at first may seem callous to consider the suffering of another human being as something that can be aestheticized, but Bakhtin is once again drawing on the German aesthetic philosophy of his time, particularly Theodor Lipps's 'purity of empathy' (64)

The other-for-me is a constant presence in experienced life. The acts of others not only console us in moments of grief or engage in idle chat, but play an important role in the development of self-identity and self-understanding. Were it not for the other people in our lives, the idea of possessing *value* or a justification for one's actions would be an impossible task, there would be no external point of reference by which to compare ourselves and articulate a *personality.* It is early caregivers, teachers, and friends who give people the language, for instance, to not only express their beliefs, but identify particular internal states as well. It is only through this outside linguistic intervention that people have *names,* even if they eventually come to choose a different name later. Bakhtin has interest in neither poetic sentimentalism about love nor in love as an empty cultural abstraction - love has both tremendous significance in our emotional-volitional perspective and a crucial *epistemic* function, as "Words of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct, satisfy, and connect it with the outside world" (50). Naming not only structures my experience *qua* being, but provides a framework for the recognition, contemplation and discussion of mental and emotional states. Loving acts are *sui generis,* irreversible moments between human beings that each leave a permanent mark on their participants and on Being.

This interpersonal dynamic can also manifest in the form of shared ethical and political responsibilities. notably his conception of rights, as he writes, "my legal personality is nothing else but my guaranteed certainty in being granted recognition by other people" (49). Whether or not we possess rights 'naturally' is not the question here, although Bakhtin would contend that we do not. It would not even be the case, then, that belonging to a commonwealth could serve as an adequate protector of a person's rights, as Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (302). One cannot *experience* having rights until it is realized in others fulfilling

their legal obligations to them. Until one exercises a right, for instance, their right not to perjure themselves in an American court, their whole concept of being a bearer of rights remains entirely a possibility yet to be actualized. The acknowledgement of the court, in this instance, that this person does possess that right affirms it for them, and they possess a fully realized experience of the what-it-is-likeness of having rights, instead of an empty, inductively-reasoned possibility.

### 1.4 The Act

In his fragmentary text *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin attempts to draw Kantian moral philosophy away from mere abstract principle back to the world of lived experience, with all its emotional richness and complications. At the heart of this project was a realization that the Kantian tradition, in producing its moral philosophy, had become preoccupied with *merely thinkable acts*, interested in deriving universal scientific and moral laws from human experience by means of abstraction and derivation (ex, Spir[15]). Strictly rational or strictly ethical approaches to human behavior, like game theory or the categorical imperative respectively, write off the complexities of real-world decision-making as idiosyncratic or irrelevant, arguably to their own detriment. Bakhtin's skepticism towards these projects can be most neatly summarized by his treatment of two different words the Russian language has for *truth* - pravda[16] and istina. Istina truth can be equated with logical or mathematical truths and those that correspond with objective reality, whereas pravda truth implies a correspondence with one's individual experience and is appropriate for discussing moral and existential findings[17] and beliefs (Zhukovsky and Pivovarov 338). While the assertion that everyone has 'their own truth' may sound relativistic, or overly

[15] Spir, Afrikan *Right and Wrong* trans. Alexander Falconer 1954
[16] The better known of the two in English as a result of the Soviet newspaper of the same name - *Pravda*.
[17] *Pravda* can also be translated as 'justice'.

permissive towards unjustifiable beliefs (i.e. 'everyone's entitled to their own opinion'), Bakhtin's formulation of the idea contradicts this, seeing the pravda-istina distinction as something which enriches scientific and empirical observation of the world, not diminishing it[18]. A strictly abstract method of thinking about ethics, which strips away the unique content of actions performed in the world (and here we must acknowledge that for Bakhtin every political and social act is also ethical) is resigned to be a merely descriptive project of cultural philosophy. For this reason, he develops a distinctive approach towards responsibility[19]. One is not merely causally responsible for their actions, but is also ultimately *answerable* for them. Rationality and accordance with universal law are only a part of this responsibility (29). What a posited universal law necessarily fails to take into account is the full scope and gravity of mental effects that weigh on a person when they act in the world. In choosing to act, however, we draw together relevant facts intuitively. The acts for which we are responsible are the "actualizations of a decision" (28), and our *true*[20] actions are those which align with an abstract system of moral philosophy, but all at once acknowledge the context, emotions, history and irreversibility behind them.

The political act is understood in this system to be a specialized form of an ethical act. Bakhtin is largely content to use ethical, social, and political acts interchangeably; for him the distinction is contextual in usage. Political speeches and manifestos, while methodologically distinct from articles on normative ethics, function along the principle of some sort of *ought*. Of the few things he says on politics explicitly in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, he does note that politics has a tendency to overgeneralize, seeing people and acts as representative of some



[18] Although some Russian thinkers and state actors assert the complexity of Russian logic as a basis for factually incorrect statements still being 'true'.
[19] Holquist translates *otvyetstvennost'* as 'answerability'. I will use 'responsibility' for the sake of clarity (see Steinby 2011)
[20] *Pravy*

universal that is present in them while obscuring that it is universally true that they are distinct historical moments which are incapable of being repeated. While Bakhtin is not the only author to note this phenomenon, which traces its roots back through German idealism, he is special in framing it as a problem of *responsibility.* When a person begins to attribute their actions to some source outside themselves, their sense of meaning, their unique value-position, and their relationship with the other is blurred and made indistinct. Searching for a universal value position to end all value positions makes the acts we do seem incapable of significance, for there is no way to ground such a self-concept. Examples of this include being "a moment of infinite matter, toward which we are indifferent, or as an exemplar of *Homo sapiens*, or as a representative of his own ethics, or as an embodiment of the abstract principle of the Eternal Feminine" (51). Outside of an ideal vision of the other, because none of these universal perspectives are capable of being grounded in actual experience (they remain strictly possibilities), everything becomes an empty performance of culture. The act itself is oriented away from actual, realizable universality (of reason, of moral development) and towards bare biological necessity and economic utility (55) as a result. Although he does not use the term, we could speak of this as Bakhtin's critique of ideology. The idea that I act as a member of the human species or as a representative of my worldview is something that can be posited, something that I can believe and a way I might even think about others, but there is nothing I can draw on from my lived experience or sensory perceptions to validate these assertions. What is capable of grounding the significance of our acts in the world is the aesthetic activity of the other, through his projection of a totally unique meaning onto the things we do, and the things he subsequently says or does to me. Since our individual social lives have this aesthetic quality, and are predicated on interactions between people with fundamentally distinct worldviews and

feelings, it stands to reason that our group and community political activities might have some aesthetic component as well.

## 2.1 The Political Community

The term ‘mass formation psychosis’ was completely unknown to psychiatric or psychological literature until its use in early 2022 by vaccine-skeptic Dr. Robert Malone used the term to describe the behavior of individuals who broadly supported and complied with pandemic-related restrictions, suggesting they were willing participants in the activities of a totalitarian state, not unlike the crowds who were complicit in mass violence under Hitler or Stalin. The comparison is spurious, and the psychological principle Malone cited had no basis in clinical or empirical literature. It became a media sensation, however, with various press outlets struggling to reach people with the proper context that highlighted the (non) meaning of the doctor’s claims. What empirical literature shows, however, is that people are likely to assess themselves as more unbiased and less conformist than everyone else (Pronin et. al 2007). In a twist of irony, nothing quite grabs a person’s attention like the affirmation that they are different from everyone else.[21] Flattery, and ‘telling people what they want to hear’ are, of course, fairly standard forms of manipulation, but this alone doesn’t tell us much about the how and why of this form of manipulation. What criteria can one use to distinguish between the construction of a genuine political community (if such a thing can exist), and a mob in service to immediate self-interest and demagoguery? Moreover, If it is not psychosis underlying the transformation of individuals into a mob or ‘the masses’ (whether this mass is understood either as compliant with or hostile to the rule of law), then what is it?

[21] Compare to Heidegger’s concept of ‘being-with-one-another’ - “we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back” (164)

In order to act as a historical subject, or a representative member of one's class, or any other manner in which one sees their activity as fitting into a larger whole, one must first possess the actual ability as an individual to act and make decisions. He is similarly dubious of the assertion that human beings are best understood as a product of their culture. The universality of culture is not a given, but is rather 'set out as a task' yet to be achieved. Any supposed laws of culture are not written in stone, silently determining the course of people's lives and waiting to be discovered and conformed to, but rather "any universally valid value becomes actually valid only in an individual context" (36). It is not that our attitudes and emotions exist only to affirm the fact that we have been acculturated in some sense, but must be understood as carrying just as much weight as a part of our experience, and these supposed laws should always be called into question when they fail to be realizable.

An almost comically on-the-nose demonstration of this principle can be found in modern Russian political culture. Vladislav Surkov is credited as a highly influential Kremlin advisor whose educational background is in directing avant-garde theater. While, perhaps, odd at face value, there is nothing immediately concerning about Surkov's tenure in the administration, while many western commentators attributed to him a profound mastery of social engineering, made possible by his knowledge of stagecraft and spectacle (Hosaka 751). In a 2007 lecture, Surkov notes that one of the features of Russian culture is "synthesis prevail[ing] over analysis in our thinking and culture, idealism over pragmatism, imagery over logic, intuition over reason, the general over the particular" (27). These vague notions are then taken as an "axiomatic" basis on which Russian political culture could be defined, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, first involves a "desire for political cohesion through the centralization of authority". Surkov himself may

prefer images over logic, as the special rules of inference he applies here seem to suggest, but actual content that would make these assertions plausible is simply lacking.

Two moments in Surkov's lecture here that are worth considering. The first is that this sort of rhetoric, while not a *loving* act, may still very well be taken by the listener as a form of affirmation of their internal states. It is not altogether dissimilar in that sense from a psychic cold read - who *doesn't* want to think of themselves as an intuitive, holistic sort of thinker? Surkov is careful to sprinkle his lecture with weasel words, so that the self-styled logical thinkers need not be too alarmed at his generalizations, they get to be exceptional in this view. Surkov's speech acts here are not, however, guided by a genuine commitment to advance any sort of sincere contribution to Russian sociology, he is acting on the part of a Kremlin advisor. The second moment of this propaganda speech is the burying of responsibility. Authoritarianism is posited as a natural end result of culture, while the acts and actors which are responsible for bringing about this state of affairs are never addressed, or taken to be other cultural determinants themselves. With that said, this carries the danger of creating a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy - the *is* and *ought* become confused. If the people sitting in this lecture hall at the Russian Academy of Sciences agree that a quality of Russianness is preferring images over logic, whether because it aligns with their own self-image or on strictly instrumental grounds (ie, we should cultivate a national mythology), the existence of Russians who don't agree with this conception presents a bit of a problem.

Bakhtin not only observed this rhetorical phenomenon, but also provided a way for us to critique it. To say (or believe) that I act in a certain way *because* of a *universal* cultural tendency is to deny my sense of individual responsibility for each act I perform. Being an American is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for barbequing on the 4th of July. It may conform

with an image, perhaps even an image shared by the majority of people who know about Americans, barbecuing, or the 4th of July, but conforming to an image is not the basis for an *authentic* community. The image we conform to is not our own, it is not a reflection of our one-of-a-kind perspective and the things we do in the once-occurrent event of Being.

A community is not something that comes ready-made whose norms and behaviors are *discovered* as one spends more time among them. Communities are formed from disparate parts as an aesthetic whole, intrinsically subjective in their original constitution, and sustained by means of social and ethical acts. I say here the community is an aesthetic product insofar as it is drawn together from disparate parts that do not have a mechanical interrelation, the arrangement of which could very well be otherwise, and which is presumed to have some significance beyond the sum of its parts. If we take the population of a neighborhood to be a community, neighbors Jane and John may have two very different ideas of what it means to be community member - to what extent a person needs to live in a certain range, participate in neighborhood events, or be seen or known to others plays a role in whether one individual will see them as part of their immediate community. This act of bringing the community together, of formulating and positing of this concept, is a concrete action that a person can ultimately be asked to take responsibility for.

Recall that the distinction between a strictly aesthetic and an ethical activity in Bakhtin's system involved the subject's position in relation to some other 'consciousness'. The ethical, and by extension political act, could be either a form of confession, or the bringing together of different consciousnesses around some shared ethical value. The transformation from a subjective sense of community to a political or ethical one is the adoption of values and norms. These shouldn't be accepted as a given, since communities are impermanent and because

universal values fail to be universal without subjective validity. There is another component to living in community which Bakhtin introduces, a situation in which a person becomes abstracted from their experience of self and sets forward to live life on behalf of the other. Whenever we participate "in a communal mode of existence, in an established social order, in a nation, in a state, in mankind, in God's world" (120) we subjugate ourselves to something imposed from beyond, a something which Bakhtin refers to as *rhythm.* Submitting to this rhythm is inconsistent with our free will and self-activity, but it is these moments of self-alienation in which we become most acutely aware of meaning being granted to us from the outside. We join our community members in a *chorus*, a collective of our peers, and each of us shares in a moment of externally-imposed purposiveness. To use less joyous, metaphorical language, when we take on particular civic or community responsibilities, let's take compulsory jury duty, or volunteering, we accept new rules or structure which limit our range of activities but that let us take part in civic or communal life, a moment in which we are part of something bigger than ourselves (which is yet again a new aesthetic whole).

## 2.2 Political Symbols

So far, we have outlined the points of Bakhtin's aesthetics as they relate to social and political organization. Politics cannot, however, be reduced to how different individuals think about themselves and their communities. There are objects in the environment which are incorporated into the political whole as well. You can think about Obama's *Hope* poster as being a purely aesthetic or decorative object. It is an artwork, and it is possible to consider whether or not it is in accordance with one's taste, disinterestedly. I suspect, however, that most people who own an Obama *Hope* poster and display it in their homes do so not out of aesthetic disinterestedness and an appreciation of art's general accordance with nature. Similarly, the

MAGA hat is not just a fashion statement. These objects are *symbols* of political programs, and without them political order would otherwise be impossible to make tangible. we would have no way of making our concepts align with worldly experience.

Some transcendental concepts, like the Kantian category, are absolutely incapable of being perceived empirically. These concepts require illustrations or symbols in order to be made perceptible. Kant distinguishes between two forms of *exhibition* in his Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, the schematic and the symbolic (226). The schematic is something in which the understanding of the thing in question is given *a priori*, like a map of New York or a diagram depicting the various parts of a government. The symbol, on the other hand, is indirect, it operates by means of a metaphor, an 'I Heart NY' t-shirt is a *symbol* of New York, and a civic monument can be a symbol of a government. The similarity between the symbolized and the symbol has to do with the sense in which they can be both said to follow the same rule. Kant provides a political example of how symbolism can function in practice,

> Thus a monarchy ruled according to its own constitutional laws would be presented as an animate body, but a monarchy ruled by an individual absolute will would be presented as a mere machine (such as a hand mill); but in either case the presentation is only symbolic. For though there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill, there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and on how they operate [Kausalitat]. (KU 227)

There is not an exact science to the interpretation of symbols. The mental connections between the purely symbolic and the symbolized are not something grounded directly in the idea of a thing, but rather an understanding of how that thing works in context. A symbol can be independently beautiful, a statue of a political leader can be exceptionally well-designed and we can judge it to be a good thing on those grounds. Kant, however, also affords a moment of subjective aesthetic appreciation to symbols in the *Critique of Teleological Judgment,* noting that the way in which a symbol demonstrates a particular concept, and 'invigorates the imagination'

can be appropriately called beautiful (244). Donald Trump's curious 2020 executive order 'Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again' included a number of claims about America's public architecture 'physically symbolizing' the nation's 'self-governing ideals' in contrast to more recent construction which 'subverts traditional values', although it does not seem this order was in effect long enough to impact public construction significantly. The goodness and appropriateness of symbols can be judged, however, on whether or not they are illustrative of a particular rule.

It is not only that politics is something made possible through its symbolic manifestations. From Kant's perspective, the beautiful is the *symbol* of the morally good, and in our thinking and discussing beautiful things in the world, we are better prepared to think in terms of moral principles. Judgments of taste are based on immediate reflection, something is rendered beautiful not for its adherence to a rule or concept (although such adherence can heighten one's appreciation of a beautiful thing), yet at the same time, presupposes a common sense of value by which *everyone* might think the object is beautiful. Even if this is obviously not the case in practice, as Kant notes (for there is no objective law of taste), the transformation of subjective valuation to regard for a common good leads Kant to note, "Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap" (KU 230). Taste alone, and the extent to which we find particular images or soundscapes beautiful or concordant with an idea of the good is not enough to resolve disputes or ground principles of moral philosophy. While not all political iconography or political events will direct a person's mind towards the function of government, in an ideal world, it could at least orient a person's thinking towards the good of a community as a whole. There may be more dynamics at play in the subjective appraisal of these aesthetic elements, however, than taste alone.

## 2.3 Political Heroes

Recall from section 1.2 that each aesthetic event requires some potential hero, a fixed point outside ourselves that we empathize with and interpret through our value system. We are awash in a world full of these heroes. While our life is full of everyday heroes, Grandpa, Mom, our dear friends and mentors, whose meaning *to us* is very clear, there are also heroes of a much more historic sort. Alexander the Great, Lenin, Gandhi, Ronald Reagan - these figures are transformed into heroes not because we find their actions or belief systems agreeable or not, but by the fact that just invoking their name is capable of calling to mind a certain instinctual response. Images and biographical facts we may have been exposed to from a textbook or documentary are coalesced together into a whole which is taken to mean something 'in the grand scheme of things'. A person's name alone can invoke a movement, ideology, or historical period to which we have an emotional-volitional response- admiration or antipathy. These are the most obvious examples of people Bakhtin considers as having 'accomplished' their lives as something capable of being consummated as an artful whole - the people about whom books are written and monuments constructed, as he says. Heroes are distinct from symbols insofar as they do not represent an abstract *concept*. To say that Alexander the Great is a *metaphor* for Hellenic Greece would require some kind of additional context or explanation, since Alexander the Great does not invoke the rule adherence of a good symbol. A hero is capable of being *symbolized*, reduced to a moment of standing in for something, but this imposes an instrumental purpose on the hero, it takes away from his strictly artistic quality. Bakhtin claims that even if a literary hero is *intended* to serve as a mere symbol for a certain ethical belief, an author may *intend* for his character to just be a mouthpiece for his own views, a caring reader can nonetheless find a life, in

which those moments of propagandizing are only a part, a testament to his belief in the power of artistic vision (10). Failing this, the mixed nature of the hero can still be explained through the relationship between the art and the artist. Even if it is not a strictly symbolic relationship that draws these concepts to the historical heroes in our mental activity, it is worth noting that this imaginative, aesthetic exercise actually happens.

Heroes do not necessarily need to do anything heroic, they simply need to be brought to mind as and considered as the sort of thing a person might identify with or attribute an experience to. *Potential* heroes are everywhere. Recall Jane Doe and the issue of abortion. In talking about abortion with her friends, Jane will have to use some kind of language and imagery to get her point across. How she does so reflects both her whole view of the facts related to the issue as well as her personal feelings and will. Jane can choose to draw her listener's attention to a 'pregnant woman', or an 'unborn child', this character becomes the center of attention. Depending on the knowledge and values of both Jane and the listener, they may experience different degrees of empathy and identification, and fill out the gaps in the story differently, *consummating* it. In this case, the consummation may take the form of additional hypotheticals; what if someone *I* knew had a difficult pregnancy or what if the baby grows up to cure cancer? There is nothing factually incorrect or inherently misleading about either of these two illustrations, they reflect relevant possibilities about the issue at hand. It is impossible to progress, however, unless Jane returns to the ethical component of her position - the responsibilities of the state or of the pregnant person. With the issue of abortion, this is relatively clear. Complications can arise, however, when these norms become based on subjective judgments, say, a law banning subversive literature (subversive to whom?)

If there is any doubt remaining at this point of whether the political experience is something containing aesthetic elements, consider the act of voting. It is election day, and let's suppose I am not a very well informed voter - I am broadly familiar with the political parties and what they stand for, but I have managed to avoid all the obviously performative, artful components of the election cycle. I have not seen any television advertisements, attended any rallies, or listened to any candidate perform the art of rhetoric. I am in the voting booth and see a number of options on the ballot. Each one of these names invokes not just the concept of the person in question, per the power of imagination, but other concepts as well, which cannot be analytically derived from the first. An election is not generally believed to be a beauty contest[22], but thankfully it is not the conjured up image of the candidate competing for my attention, but a full picture I have created, the candidate as a *hero*. This hero is all at once the person, a representative of their political movement or party affiliation, and someone I feel a gut instinct towards, as just their name gets imbued with a certain emotional tone on my part. The hero is greater than the sum of her parts, and comes together in subjective acts of contemplation.

The problem of the political hero, mythogenesis and the evaluation thereof is that this aesthetic whole is not truth-functional.[23] Certainly, one can construct an image of a hero off of false premises, or may be unaware of all the relevant historical facts, but assuming two people knew all relevant facts about a historical figure, neither one of their mental images is *false*, even if the two may diverge significantly based on *which* historical facts seem relevant to the experiences or values of one party or the other. If we were to take the existence of these disagreements as a given fact of culture or history (e.g. a person from India and a person from

[22] Although everyone is free to cast their ballot as they see fit.
[23] Even if this were rendered in a valuation of 'istina-pravda-false', all we would be conveying is the banal realization that people have different values.

South Africa *necessarily* having different attitudes towards Gandhi and his beliefs about race), then this would imply a sort of unsurmountable cultural relativism. For Bakhtin, however, the only absolutely meaningful, actually insurmountable value difference lies between the poles of *myself-for-the-other* and the *other-for-me.* The hero, that whole idea which means something to us, is something constructed through our emotions, ethical commitments, and *a priori* powers. Bakhtin calls this process of construction *architectonics*. Culture is not an *a priori* faculty, and although it plays a role in shaping our value commitments, we should only believe that it is *destiny*, a *reason* for the things that we do insofar as it can be subjectively affirmed. Each person is themselves fundamentally responsible for their *own* acts, including those of aesthetic contemplation and creation. We are not always conscious of the emotional and valuative constituents of the created whole, but speaking frankly about our value commitments and emotive states can serve as a basis for overcoming these disagreements.

## 2.4 What Isn't Art

We want to arrive at a definition of art Bakhtin's relatively loose definition of what an aesthetic event is allows for a wide number of styles and sorts of objects to be considered a work of art. The soup can, for instance, can be transformed from the thing we might find in the supermarket or kitchen, where our judgments of what makes it good are related directly to our expectations of how a soup should function, and transformed into an object of aesthetic contemplation by someone like Warhol. An artist may also very well be able to put a regular, mass produced soup can into a gallery space. All that is required is the ability to take the art object as an individual bearer of meaning, *granted*, on the part of the observer, non-purposive purposiveness in the Kantian sense.

Bakhtin's system does not allow, however, for a small number of key events into objects of aesthetic contemplation. In order for the relationship between the artist and their individual work to be productive, a distance between the two is necessary, and the artist needs to approach their subject with the right kind of outside perspective. In this sense, Bakhtin can provide a compelling answer to the question posed by Foucault in a 1983 interview, "But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?" Yes, but someone else must make that work of art for them. Besides looking odd in the mirror, hearing the sound of our own voices strangely and not always noticing when we smell funny, we're incapable of clearly articulating what our life *means* in the way we can say that about a work of art. This is something that comes from us, not from the object itself. This would not even be desirable to Bakhtin, for the aesthetic consummation of our life is impossible, since our lives are not over. While we're still alive, we can still think and act, and could very well choose to live our lives in such a completely different way starting tomorrow that a biographer will be stunned, call it a 'turn', and alter the emotional impact our lives will have on other people once we've died.

One cannot appraise the aesthetic content of an act one is performing during the duration of that event. Any event, in principle, can *become* aestheticized, with Bakhtin using the example of children at play. From their perspective, playing cops and robbers, the product of their activity is not an image but imagination, but the possibility exists of a "spectator who contemplates this life event in an aesthetically active manner and, in part, creates it (as an aesthetically valid whole, by transposing it to a new plane—the aesthetic plane)" (75). The spectator can imbue the activity with meaning and think about it as a kind of drama, but this stops as soon as they choose to join in themselves. This principle holds as well for professional theatrical productions. As a

play is rehearsed, the director is said to stand in as the 'eyes and ears of the audience'[24], a beholder of the act of artistic creation, capable of refining the theatrical art in both its verbal and visual forms. The actor receives feedback on their motions on the stage and delivery of lines, and the stage crew gets new directions for the lighting and sound cues to maintain the play's imagerial quality. An actor, in a moment of self-consciousness, may try and imagine what the audience is seeing at any given point, but in their particular situated position on the stage they are both relatively unreliable at imagining the entire pictorial scene, and furthermore, are more likely to mess up a line. Being self-absorbed in the moment of action leaves one at risk of failing in their obligations to others, and this action lacks the outside perspective necessary to render it actually aesthetic.

In a democratic state, the general presupposition from political philosophy is that most, if not everyone is subject to the law as well as a participant in its legislation[25], usually through the election of some kind of representative. In contrast, since one is not an active participant in their political activities, reliant on them for the protection of rights etc., it is entirely possible for people to develop an aesthetic fixation on various foreign states and historical cultures. This can manifest anywhere between a sort of idle curiosity (like coin collecting or reading Livy) to a complete fixation (like Nazi paraphilia, in Sonntag 1974). While this certainly could be, in some cases, a manifestation of a person's genuine political beliefs, this engagement retains the possibility of being purely aesthetic.[26] Similarly, if we were to visit another country, our experience of it can lean more towards an aesthetic experience. Jane Doe may visit a country, be



[24] A common saying from directors and directing classes.
[25] There are some people with diminished capacity in some circumstances and jurisdictions, like children.
[26] One may argue even further that this aesthetic fixation could play a role in *informing* a person's adoption of particular political outlook, but this is speculation on my part, and outside the scope of this paper. While internet politics has observed the phenomenon of 'LARPing' (live-action role-playing), a kind of highly stylized, self-indulgent political performance, absent additional empirical evidence, we're left with a chicken-or-egg problem.

curious about its customs, be respectful of local norms, and gain some kind of insight through dialogue. This may not always turn out ideally. Jane could also just impose a certain picturesque unity onto the new place, ignoring any facts or norms or potential insights along the way.

How we bring all the distinct parts of national politics is always going to require some imagination on our part. In order to establish a political identity of our own, however, we rely on other people's perspective, their outsideness, for validation. Our *act* of voting is not something that we can experience aesthetically, although it is entirely possible to reduce it to a mere performance. When one performs, they may be *staging* an art event, but it is not until this created vision interacts with the outside world of values that it becomes aesthetic, since we, ourselves have nothing new to add. These acts of performance can have completely different results than we anticipate when we imagine the response of the other - what one anticipates to be a provocative act can fail to capture anyone's attention, a carefully-crafted speech on patriotic values can be recognized as mere humbug (Frankfurt 17) or as over-the-top parody. In these cases, the performer's self-conscious image stands in *contrast* to the aesthetic event, the *actualized* imposition of transgredient value.

"In aesthetic seeing you love a human being not because he is good, but, rather, a human being is good because you love him." (49)[27]. Artistic appreciation invokes a different value, taste, than what otherwise makes a thing good. Buying the sleekest car on the lot is no guarantee that it will be the best at getting you to work in the morning or provide an otherwise pleasant use experience. This is something intolerable for a democratic state. Centuries of political philosophy have outlined obligations and expectations for how state actors ought to

[27] Bakhtin's view of aesthetics as deeply connected to loving is derived from the neo-Kantian aesthetics of Hermann Cohen. Cohen's position was that aesthetic creation was motivated by love, not in a passive sense or as an affect, but a feeling of goodwill towards humanity as a whole. Works of art are directed towards an idealized vision of mankind (Steinby 238).

behave, and current developments in rights and theories of justice give us potential directions to improve things even further. The state isn't a free beauty, or a flower, but something that must be subject to critical analysis on how well it achieves its goals, and if it fails to do so, it is intolerable.

This is where Schiller's idea of the artist-statesman reappears in a perverse new form, the mass politics of the 20th century. In his novel *Michael*, Joseph Goebbels writes, "The statesman is also an artist… Politics is the plastic art of the state, as painting is to the plastic art of color." (Stollman 47). Such a statement could only be possible in the context of a complete rejection of popular sovereignty. Aside from being a clear articulation of the *Fuhrerprinzip*, several propositions of the fascist political method must be taken as true for this to make sense. Gone are the careful warnings about the violent methods of the state, as this is no object to a political project that makes no presuppositions either about intrinsic human rights or the desire for peace. Gone too is the distinction between the methods of the statesman and the artist, the respect towards the unique personality of individuals and of inner moral convictions of citizens. The mass of people is presupposed as a canvas to be manipulated, all responsibility is presumed to lie in the hands of the leader. We can now say, however, that this premise is not only disagreeable, and not only inconsistent with democratic values (that was the plan, after all), but a patent absurdity from the perspective of aesthetics as well.

The transformation of the state into an art object first requires that its citizens and other consecutive parts be organized into a material, something capable of being worked upon by a leader. Even if this were possible, however, for it to be truly a work of artistic creation, two features impossible to attain would be required on the part of the statesman-artist. The first is outsideness. Certainly, a demagogue could easily be understood as being above the law and

unaccountable to the internal mechanisms of politics and jurisprudence, but when one *acts politically* one is making changes to a system of *which one is necessarily a party to*. The byproduct of this is that the dictator cannot act disinterestedly in their supposed act of creation[28]. Even if the dictator's actions demonstrate a complete antipathy towards their fellow man, killing at their leisure and stripping people of their rights at will, any judgments made about the success or failure of this artistic project is completely arbitrary. There is not even a theoretical possibility of aesthetic vision being 'bestowed' upon the people, this vision of the artist-statesman is a desperate attempt to cling for an alibi, and we must always affirm our "participative (nonindifferent) non-alibi in Being" (Bakhtin 50). Ironically, the last thing preventing the transformation of the state into an art object is the basis on which it has already been aestheticized - it doesn't have a determinate form. The disparate, disorganized parts of civic life invite some kind of organization, but this takes place in our reflecting on the world much more easily than it does for the statesman.

## 3.1 A Counterargument

So far, we have seen how Bakhtin's philosophy regards our political and social lives as having a necessarily aesthetic quality. We rely on the vision and insight of the other in order to validate and make sense of the world, and our own vision fills out the world with unique meaning. This subjective interpretation of events is not the end-all and be-all, but rather one constitutive moment among many. The aestheticization of politics in this system still has a meaning - namely, when the cognitive and ethical moments parts of politics become overshadowed by pure

[28] Whether this would be theoretically possible in a colonial relationship is unclear, but the necessity of economic exploitation and the lack of historical precedent make it seem doubtful. Aesthetic purpose is given freely, as a gift.

feeling and belief. The conspiracy theorist is not swayed by empirical facts about a shared reality, they become invested in a narrative in which they have been told they play a decisive role. The supporter of authoritarianism, whether in its fascist or Stalinist variety, believes in good guys and bad guys, but is perfectly content with *ex post facto* justifications for moral failings and is largely disinterested in establishing ethical norms to govern their community. Harmful ideologies proliferate when people lose sight of their outsideness, their unique creative potential, and subordinate themselves to the aesthetic view of someone else.

We will now consider two potential objections to this approach of understanding political aesthetics. While I argue that Bakhtin's criticism of internally consistent but totally abstract ways of thinking about history and political activity itself is a form of ideological critique, a Marxist might say the project is hopelessly flawed from the outset on the basis of Bakhtin's overtly Kantian foundation. One could then argue against using Bakhtin as the basis for critiquing political aestheticization as his project was an inescapably deceptive ideological one on its own. German idealism is, after all, *the* German ideology of *The German Ideology* fame. While the target of Marx's criticism in that text is primarily Hegelian absolute idealism and its continuing influence on his Young Hegelian contemporaries like Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner, the point remains clear throughout - any truly critical philosophical project must be undertaken from a *materialist* viewpoint. Many 20th century scholars with an interest in political aesthetics subscribed to a Marxist position, including Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Terry Eagleton[29], so it is important to understand where Bakhtin stands in relation to this Marxist position. A similar example of this sort of criticism can be found in the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin. Adorno criticizes Benjamin's work on Charles Baudelaire for what he

[29] Eagleton has also written a novel featuring Bakhtin's brother, Nikolai, who in real life was a lecturer of classics in Britain who became a close associate of Ludwig Wittgenstein while at Cambridge.

understands to be an un-dialectical, idealist reinterpretation of Marx's commodity form, chiding him that it is the commodity that produces consciousness, not the other way around (Adorno 111). Idealist philosophy, which takes consciousness as its starting point, in Marx's view bears no relationship to the social circumstances in which people's ways of life come about. Just as the bourgeoisie own the means to produce goods, so too do they control the means of producing ideas, and laws, morality and history. These develop in such a way as to reflect their interests, maintaining the political and economic status quo. Even other materialist philosophers, like Feuerbach, could be methodologically inconsistent. In developing his critique of religion, Feuerbach failed to consider how the objects of sense perception were products of historical and productive circumstances, and thus, could produce only a skin-deep criticism of culture. Whatever the consciousness does on its own is 'immaterial' and 'trash' (Marx 51).

Bakhtin hesitates to make any definitive claims on the ontological status of the material world, but he does champion Kantianism as a form of scientific achievement[30]. Bakhtin's approach towards individual subjectivity, rather than a strictly ideal rationality, as the driver behind human actions places him somewhat closer to a Marxist position than his Kantian predecessors or Hegel. Both would agree that people creates their own history, as Marx notes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire,* but they are constrained in their choices and ways of thinking by historical circumstance. Bakhtin's point of contention[31] however, is that Marx's own critique of givenness (that philosophers have been too preoccupied with the essences and ontology of tables and chairs to pay any attention to labor that made them) lapses into its own oversimplified vision



[30] When an interviewer asked about his lectures on Kantian aesthetics in post-revolutionary Leningrad and his subsequent arrest, Bakhtin responded, "it seemed like there was nothing to worry about at the time." (Duvakin 1973)
[31] Some have claimed that Bakhtin was a Marxist himself (particularly those who believe he was the true author of his colleague V.N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language),* but his early texts include scattered, explicitly anti-Marxist arguments.

of the world. He was clearly familiar with developments in Marxist thought and was impressed by the potential of historical materialism as a worldview, the first achievement of a comprehensive worldview which moved away from theorizing into a world of its own creation and instead grounded itself in what people did and felt. Bakhtin accepts that an economic materialist worldview is 'in the right' (PA 55) with a major caveat. He claims that historical materialism commits the same error of which its opponents are confused, a fundamental indistinction between the is and the ought. Bakhtin does not explain what he means by this, although there are clues elsewhere in the text. Working on the assembly line, one is certainly alienated from the products of their labor, but Marx is convinced that once freed from the coercion of wage labor, the products of human labor would reflect man's objective essence, as clearly stated in *Comments on James Mill*, "Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature" (Marx 1844). Bakhtin's counterpoint to this is our creations only appear to be objective reflections of ourselves, but it does not contain any *information* about the unique I, only additional layers of interpretation. Alienation is not something that can be overcome simply by changing the way we interact with objects in the world, even if those objects are our creations.

Anyone committed to a materialist position who opposes idealism *qua* idealism would no doubt find Bakhtin's hesitancy to take a clear position on the matter dissatisfying. Marx's criticism of German idealism, however, is predominantly based on pragmatic concerns - people who had developed and promoted idealist conceptions of history and perception had done so in order to justify a particular state of affairs. Bakhtin voices almost the same concerns. Bakhtin was no revolutionary by any stretch of the imagination[32], but he nonetheless developed a

[32] In his 1973 interviews, Bakhtin recalled his concern at the outbreak of the October Revolution: "We were very pessimistic. We thought it was the end. [...] It was inevitable that the victory would go to the masses of soldiers and

methodology for criticizing dogma and understanding human agency. He, too, considered the social and historical moment in which he lived as being in crisis, but this crisis could only be resolved with open dialogue. Along the way, he raised an important concern of his own towards orthodox Marxism.

Bakhtin does not have the only theory of general aesthetics, of course, but his abiding concern with linking aesthetics and ethics in his search for first philosophy make his work suitable for the task. The French author Jacques Ranciere has written a substantial number of works on the interrelationship of politics and aesthetics, and would disagree with Bakhtin's assertion that art, contrary to politics, is the proper object of aesthetic contemplation. While the scope of Ranciere's analysis is admirable, his vision of the aesthetic revolution muddles the boundaries between art and politics substantially, going on to say that art takes on a strict political function, and that any attempt to reach 'pure' art or politics, contrarily, renders them 'indistinct' (22). In some sense, any work of art lends itself to a political interpretation, and it would be difficult to understand the history of art without taking into consideration the historical and political contexts in which works emerged (the sculptor's marble has to come from somewhere, after all), but I would disagree with Ranciere's interpretation here that modernist aesthetics and the breaking down of hierarchical structures in the world of art dialectically abolishes the possibility of 'pure aesthetics', or art for art's sake.

Despite Ranciere's analogy of the 'distribution of the sensible' to a Kantian investigation into the forms of sense experience, the question of who is responsible for this aesthetic interpretation becomes muddled. In this model, art and politics have equal claim to being



peasants in uniforms, who didn't hold anything dear, the proletariat that did not constitute a proper historical class and did not have any values, had nothing at all to speak of. . . . They had spent their lives fighting for the most basic material needs. They were the ones who would surely seize power in the end."

aesthetic activities, as they are both ways of moving around materials and human bodies, changing around the visual appearance of space. Not only does Ranciere see his project as different from Benjamin, whose concern he describes as the "commandeering of politics by a will to art" (13), he denies the possibility of an 'aestheticization' of politics at all (69). Ranciere equates the attempt to render art as distinct and autonomous from other parts of life with modernism, and claims the failure of this project is what lead, ultimately, to the various forms of critique proffered by postmodernism. Apart from generalizing about a considerable number of theoretical developments outside of art criticism, muddling art and the rest of life leaves the door open for relativism). Notably, this also returns to Bakhtin's critical point, how does one differentiate between what is a given and what is a product of our subjective experience?

One example Ranciere uses is the police[33]. By arresting a group of people, removing them from public view, the state has achieved a new distribution of the sensible. We have reverted back to the totalitarian position, statecraft and art appear not altogether dissimilar. As discussed earlier, though, we have compelling prudential reasons to reject the idea that politics can be an art. To use another example, Ranciere and Bakhtin both, curiously, draw a parallel between the chorus in art and participation in a community. Both authors see the imposition of *rhythm* onto a person's life, a series of rules and norms which create a new sense of identity and allow for a person to participate as part of a political whole. Ranciere makes the observation that this sense of community is 'inscribed' by these forms, but gives little explanation as to who, exactly, is doing this inscribing, and how (14). Bakhtin's account, which I have previously described in section 2.3, demonstrates how this is not simply something which emerges out of

[33] He uses the term in a specialized manner, to describe the combined power of society's judicial and carceral forces, citing Foucault. I will focus here on the subset of law enforcement officers specifically.

'culture' in the abstract, but something which individuals willingly participate in in order to gain the recognition and support of their community and peers.

## 4.1 Hope for the Artist-Statesman?

As the idea of aesthetics as a constituent feature of our experience goes back (at least) to Kant, there have been several authors interested in what an aesthetic transformation of statecraft might look like. Friedrich Schiller, in his fourth and fifth letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, introduces the figure of the 'artist-statesman', who approaches the art of statecraft as a *creative* art, rather than just a skill. Schiller introduces "the pedagogic and political artist, who has Man at the same time as his material and as his theme" (29), but Schiller also notes that mankind is a material unlike any other, for every person is an individual, each in some sense unlike others. The artist-statesman is *unlike* a regular artist, insofar as their artistic medium whose idiosyncrasies must always be respected, and they can never hope to fully control or suppress it.

The 'natural' state, as people come to know it, is a given feature of their world, essentially violent, and stands in opposition to people's moral sentiments. The state must be transformed from its natural, given composition into a moral state that is governed by rule of law instead of through violence and suppression. This societal transformation is an artistic project in Schiller's view, because it requires a vision of the *whole* of society, which, as a Kantian, he believed only an artist was capable of doing. It is also a worthwhile distinction that Man is taken as the object of artistic development here, not *men.* Each person is taken as completely and necessarily unique. Even if the goal is to reach a higher, more rational and moral form of idealized humanity, this idealized picture is always actualized in unique persons.

Given what has now been said about the role of outsideness and authorial responsibility, is there anything at all to be said for the idea of an artist-statesman? Treating statesmanship or the political process as a whole as an art would seem to be an error. There is still something to be said, however, for an approach to politics that is aesthetically conscious and working in service to art. Schiller's idea of aesthetic education may not be the worst place to start after all[34], but I think we must put to rest the idea of *the people* or *politics* being the object, since these things are not materials. Ajume Wingo believes that liberal politicians should be willing to use and manipulate political symbols and mythology to safeguard liberal democratic values without resorting to coercion. I do not think this should be part of a politico-aesthetic goal either, because it denies people the opportunity to stand on equal footing and participate as equals in a creative project. Good governments should promote art, but not in the sense of Stalinist socialist realism, where art only serves to convey images of an ideologically pure world. The state should rather maintain an active interest in the aesthetic education and creative exercises of its citizens. The artist-statesman in this model does not take on the role of director, but takes an active interest in ensuring there can be a stage. All art, any art is good, a *symbol* of the good, which primes people for difficult conversations about universal moral values (KU 229), and as Nussbaum and others have argued, gives people the opportunity to develop empathy as a skill (8) and relate to others.

The statesman-artist is not one who pretends to have mystical sway over the population, but rather a statesman who recognizes that their political role is a productive one, that their acts have a creative character for which they alone are ultimately responsible. If a politician is to be an equal, answerable participant in the process of creation. They should be, to use a term from Bakhtin's later literary work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 'polyphonic', which is defined as

[34] Cf. De Man, *Kant and Schiller*.

"A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6). The state cannot be the arbiter of taste, since it is impossible to develop an objective standard of taste. I may see both a parliament building and a mail carrier as constituent features of the state, but the same mail carrier likely does not think of herself as such. Does appearing in the capacity of a state official 'count' one as being a constituent part of it? We cannot rule out the possibility that these sorts of judgments, which ultimately have more to do with agreeableness than a rule-oriented rationality, might play a role in impacting people's political attitudes and behavior. What distinguishes the realm of artful contemplation from the world of ethical action in Bakthin's work is the existence of *norms*. The alternative is to be lost in a morass of 'interesting' but unsubstantial political narration, slogans, and name-calling.[35] The state's role of promoting justice should not be blind to the feelings, aspirations, or even the tastes of the electorate. An aestheticized politics, however, caters to these sensibilities at the expense of public discourse and the enforcement of fair laws. It may also be worth considering Bakhtin alongside contemporary authors like Nussbaum, who, while going about the practice of philosophy in a completely different manner, nonetheless recognizes a significance at the intersection between a person's emotional states, art, and the law.

## Conclusion

Bakhtin does not strongly distinguish between ethics and politics. Instead of considering politics from the position of competing interests between different groups or sorts of individual, politics

[35] Consider ambiguous but heavily charged language in current American political discourse. Ex. the broadening scope of 'insurrectionists' from people physically present during the Jan. 6 2021 storming of the Capitol to Trump supporters in general, or labeling of Democrats opposing Florida's Parental Rights in Education law as 'groomers'.

can instead be looked at from basic value components, cognitive, ethical and aesthetic - what are the facts, what are the relevant norms, and why does any of this matter to me? Public policy can never be truly neutral on aesthetic matters, not only because of its speeches and monuments, but also because it operates off the images, stories, and aspirations citizens make up. Trying to purify politics of this, to embrace a sort of official iconoclasm out of fear of taking advantage of people is, ironically, just another manifestation of aesthetic form. Sterile bureaucracy is a style choice, and one which still requires the imposition of some purpose onto the state. While these value areas coexist in politics, they also make up distinct moments, and they can exist in different proportions. People are deeply motivated by their aesthetic experiences, and democratic proceedings must, in some way, reckon with people's desire to experience and preserve beauty without giving into the temptation of social domination. A government which de-emphasizes creativity and people's subjective values and preferences risks allowing illiberal actors to capitalize on people's need for purpose and being heard. The state itself cannot be understood in the same way as a work of art, but a democratic state has responsibilities towards its citizens. Recognizing that aesthetic interpretation will always play a role in people's political aspirations and motivations can help the just state account for their needs, and provide opportunities for aesthetic creation and contemplation as social benefits in themselves, rather than an instrumental means of control.

Although aesthetic contemplation can encourage empathy, allow people to confront their prejudices and consider how things can be of universal benefit, this subjective freedom can also be misguided, and serve as a legitimizing basis for the worst forms of arbitrariness and relativism. In a 2006 press conference, Vladislav Surkov received a question from the French financial newspaper La Tribune. When asked why Russian television stations never broadcast

opinions from opposition figures, Surkov first responded that the journalist's question was misguided, and that opposition figures did appear on TV. When the Tribune journalist noted "It's very rare", Surkov replied, "It's a matter of taste".

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