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**AESTHETICS, POLITICS AND MUSIC
IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY**

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Politics, political, politization

The history of the usage of the term “politics” has developed heterogeneously and widely from the Greek term *πολιτικός*, to the medieval term *vita activa* as a translation of Aristotle’s term *βίος πολιτικός*¹, to modern notions of politics in polysemic, often contradictory potential definitions. For example, what can be called politics is conducting the affairs of the city/state; the fulfilment of public life or public dialogue; the management, supervision and regulation of state and/or social relations; the implementation of the social/communality; the wielding of concrete or abstract power; the organizing of the bureaucracy in everyday life; the establishing of relations between individual and collective identities leading to individual and collective subjectivization; an emancipatory event; the aspiration to preserve tradition; etc.

In the foregoing and many other possible identifications of ‘politics’, two distinctive aspects stand out: community and relationship. The French philosopher Alain Badiou interpreted an event as political, emphasizing this: “Događaj je politički ako je tvar toga događaja zajednička, ili ako događaj nije prouzrokovalo ništa drugo do mnoštvo zajednice. ‘Zajednica’ ovdje nije brojni koncept. Mi kažemo da je događaj ontološki zajednički, utoliko što taj događaj prenosi virtualni zahtev svih.” [“An event is political if its material is collective, or if the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity. ‘Collective’ is not a

¹ Cf. Hannah Arendt, “Izraz *vita activa*” [“The term *vita activa*”], in: *Vita Activa*, trans. Višnja Flego, August Cesarec, Zagreb, 1991, 15–19.

numerical concept here. We say that the event is ontologically collective to the extent that it provides the vehicle for a virtual summoning of all.”]²

From the vaguely outlined multitude of notions, one can single out two general structural moments that are expressed in the difference between the notions of “politics” and “the political”, according to the constructions of Chantal Mouffe³:

- i) *the political* – dimension of antagonism which is constitutive of human societies;
- ii) *politics* – the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of the conflictuality by the political.

This means that the term/notion *politics* denotes the ways in which a community and a relationship are materialized. Contrary to that, the term/notion *political* suggests the nature or character of a human community and relationship, which is antagonism. Antagonism, in that case, is the ontological prerequisite of a human relationship and the community emanating from that relationship.

The role of antagonism in the constitution of relationships, i.e. a human community, lies in the way in which personalized or abstract power turns out to be the prerequisite for overcoming an antagonism or decomposition due to an antagonism. The notion of power is flexible, as well as variable both historically and geographically. One can speak of the power of people, citizens or participants in the community, of the power of the leader, of legal and illegal power, of the power of institution(s), of the power of the bureaucracy, of the power of a political party, of the power of a parliament, of the power of faith, of the power of the economy, but also of liberation from a superior power, of a change of the power wielder, or of a change in the nature of power. The relationship between power, the community and antagonism is complex and fluctuating. For example, power in medieval societies was the personal power of the ruler legitimized by religion, or more precisely, by the structures and institutions of the religious system. Power in bourgeois societies is depersonalized in the name of representative institutions and documents (rulebooks) of political life. Power in totalitarian societies was personalized in the leader or in the party. The ideal of modern democracy is the power of the people expressed through parliamentary – representative – administration and the execution of this power in a bureaucratic way. Global neoliberalism causes a rift between politics and power, when politics as an institutional structure loses the power of decision-making, surrendering it consequently to economic interest groups.

² Cf. Alen Badiju, “Politika kao procedura istine” [Alain Badiou, “La politique comme procédure de vérité”], in: *Pregled metapolitike [Abrégé de métapolitique]*, trans. Radoman Kordić, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, IP Filip Višnjić, Belgrade, 2008, 101.

³ Chantal Mouffe, “Politics and Political”, in: *On the Political*, Routledge, London, 2005, 9.

Table 1 – Politics, political, politization

politics 1	the political 1	politics 2	the political 2	politization 1 theoretical	politization 2 activist
politics is a set of practices and institutions that effectuate a certain social system or relationship	the political is a multiplicity of antagonisms which are constitutional for a human society	politics is a set of techniques for creating a relation between power and society	the political is a set of traits that something (anything) acquires by being put in a social relation or in a relation between power and society	politization of art, in the theoretical sense, leads to the epistemological discovery or to the use of the political in any human activity	The politization of any human activity, in the activist sense, leads to a phenomenological confrontation with an event of human activity as a social antagonism

Politization singles out a certain activity that uncovers, utilizes and/or demonstrates the political character of every human relation. Seeing every form of human life – a relation or a set of relations – as political suggests that antagonism has active role in every situation which appears to be independent from politics.

Thus, in the first step, politization reveals that culture, religion or art are vague fields of politics, i.e. of the social with characteristic antagonisms. In the second step, it is shown that politics can be means of influence on antagonisms appearing in ostensibly autonomous fields of culture, religion or art. In the third step, the inverse potential appears. This means that, for example, at the moment when social antagonisms are shown to exist in art too, art can be offered as a sensibly affective sample of the fictitious or actual settling or aggravation of antagonisms.

Aesthetics and politics

To develop the thesis on aesthetics as the intermediary between politics and music, I must remind that there is no unique notion of “aesthetics” which would be irrevocably delimited by the concepts of “the science of the beautiful”, of “the philosophy of specialized sensibility”, of “the philosophy of art”, of “the politics of human sensibility”, of “the revolutionary or emancipatory potential of sensibility” and of “the metacritique of the aesthetics and philosophy of art”. All of these outlined identifications of aesthetics have their specific synchrony and diachrony, which means *the logic of narrative* which was developed in a particular way and set against other narratives about what aesthetics was, what it is and what it will be. Due to certain revisions of aesthetics, forgotten or completed aesthetical stories were reactualized and revised in the new conditions of human life and the political, i.e. in the antagonisms of ‘new’ time. The aesthetic

now becomes a sort of contradictory cause and effect of the phenomena of politics and the political. In other words, I shall demonstrate that the elements of politics and the political are sensible phenomena connected in a complex way with the discourses of society. But at the same time, the manifestations of the articulation of the total individual and collective sensibility of humankind are always in a political environment – within *a form of life* (state, institution, social or cultural group, modalities of subjectivization). In the process, individual and collective sensibilities remain within a multitude of affects created by antagonisms which are overcome, provoked, evaded, surpassed or created by ‘that life’, while dealing with its collective and individual human sociability.

Table 2

aesthetics 1 <i>autonomous aesthetics</i>	aesthetics 2 <i>aesthetics of art autonomy</i>	aesthetics 3 <i>politization of aesthetics</i>	aesthetics 4 <i>aesthetization</i>	aesthetics 5 <i>metaaesthetics</i>
judging/knowledge about a specialized sensory experience of an external (visible, audible) stimulus	philosophy and/or theory of art, including music. Ernst Bloch, <i>Princip nada 3 [Das Prinzip Hoffnung 3]</i> , trans. H. Šarinić, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1981	knowledge about political regimes of the potential or real totality of human sensibility with respect to nature, culture, and even art	knowledge and ability to perform a sensible transformation or, more often, to identify the human world (aesthetization)	critique of the discourses of specialized sensibility, of political regimes of human sensibility, and of art, including music

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière⁴, for example, foresaw the turning point in aesthetics which proceeded from the aesthetic as a specialized sensory experience judged impartially, or with a philosophical bias in the domain of the autonomy of art, to the *politics of sensibility*. In other words, this is “the politics of the distribution of sensibility” within political life. This is perceived as the transformation of politics and the political from a “non-sensible domain”⁵ into building sensible life forms and pursuing the desire for new visible and/or audible life forms. The politization of sensibility and the sensibilization of politics are the outlined subjects of this aesthetical narrative.

Over the history of aesthetics, such related strategies of aesthetization and politization can be most certainly identified in the works of Friedrich von

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics – The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London, 2004.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, “Aesthetics as Politics”, in: *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity, Cambridge, 2009, 38.

Schiller, in his ideas about the aesthetic education of man⁶; Ernst Bloch, in his quest for “the intensity-richest human world in music” [“intensitätsreichste Menschwelt in der Musik”]⁷; Herbert Marcuse, in his projection of the idea of “new sensibility”⁸ yearning for unlimited freedom; Wolfgang Welsch, in a revisionist theory of contemporary aesthetization which develops from the traditional notion of the aesthetic in arts towards the aesthetic in the sensuously altered world of the new media⁹; Thomas Docherty, who created the liberal notion of ‘aesthetic democracy’,¹⁰ etc... These and many other examples show the importance of understanding the aesthetic as a ‘political agent’ which plays an important role not only in the judgment or interpretation of art, but also in the complex multiplicities of the social life of humankind, which are often external with respect to art. This proves that aesthetization places a work of art, i.e. a work of music, into an external relationship to politics (a set of social relations, practices, institutions) and the political (constitutional social antagonisms). The aesthetic, in that case, is not seen as an essential feature of the artistic/musical, or as a distinctive intersubjective effect of a musical work. It is seen as a set of sensory events which make, for example, a single individual work of music or a work’s microstructure establish a relationship with politics and the political in a specific way. This way of establishing the relationship depends on the contextual, meaning historical and geographical circumstances of the work’s phenomenon in its artistic, cultural or social aspects.¹¹

⁶ Cf. Fridrih Šiler, “Pisma o estetskom vaspitanju čoveka” [Friedrich Schiller, “Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man”], in: *O lepom [On the Beautiful]*, trans. Strahinja Kostić, Book & Marso, Belgrade, 2007, 111–202.

⁷ Cf. Ernst Bloch, “Prekoračivanje i čovjekov najintenzivniji svijet u muzici” [“Überschreitung und intensitätsreichste Menschwelt in der Musik”], in: *Princip nada 3 [Das Prinzip Hoffnung 3]*, trans. H. Šarinić, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1981, 1248–1303.

⁸ Cf. Herbert Marcuse, “Nova osjetljivost” [“Die neue Sensibilität”], in: *Kraj utopije / Ezej o oslobođenju [Das Ende der Utopie / Versuch über die Befreiung]*, trans. Branka Brujić, Stvarnost, Zagreb, 1978, 151–170.

⁹ Wolfgang Welsch, “Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics; For a New Form to the Discipline”, in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, SAGE Publications, London, 1997, 79.

¹⁰ Thomas Docherty, “Aesthetic Democracy”, in: *Aesthetic Democracy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2006, 149–160.

¹¹ For instance, Courtney Brown politicizes the practice of performing Beethoven’s works depending on the historical context related to the fluent geopolitical space of Germany. He points to utterly different statuses of “Beethoven practice” in Beethoven’s own time; after the re-invention of his work in the Second Reich; during the Weimar Republic; in the Third Reich; and in the divided Cold-War Germany after 1945. Courtney Brown, “Beethoven”, in: *Politics in Music. Music and Political Transformation from Beethoven to Hip-Hop*, Farsight Press, Atlanta, 2008, 11–27.

Music, aesthetics and politics

The relationship between music and politics as mediated by aesthetics can be deliberated in various ways. Here, I choose the binary structural model with the categories of (1) politization of the aesthetic, i.e. the formal formations of a musical work, and (2) the aesthetization of political relationships between music and its cultural-social environment. The offered binary structure (1–2) is based on the distinction between the internal (micro) and external (macro) approach to music. The internal (micro) approach is effectuated through the recognisability of the sensible in politics in the phenomenal or functional modalities of music in culture and society. I identify the former approach as the immanent (i.e. inherent, intrinsic, internal) politics of music. I identify the latter approach as the transcendent (i.e. non-inherent, non-intrinsic, external) politics of music.

The former approach is governed by the requirements of close/careful reading and listening to music, in order to reach and penetrate it. The latter approach is governed by the conditions of distant reading and listening to music, in order to show that it exists by everything else that is not music, which in this case means by politics. However, it transpires that this ‘highly dramatic division’ is not, in fact, a split, but a manifestation of one and the same under the different conditions of interpretative movement between a concrete and abstract knowledge about music and its political manifestations with respect to human sensuality.

Table 3

in a musical work	outside of a musical work
internal	external
microplatform	macroplatform
immanent formalized aesthetics of music	transcendent politicized aesthetics of music
close or careful reading/listening	distant reading/listening
sociological formalism	political interpretations
politization of a musical form	interpretations of a musical work, musical practice or music by cultural or social potentialities
immanent politics of music	transcendent politics of music

Sociological formalisms – such as those that can be found, directly or indirectly, in the works by Theodor W. Adorno¹², Fredric Jameson¹³, Tony Ben-

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Filozofija nove muzike [Philosophie der Neuen Musik]*, trans. Ivan Focht, Nolit, Belgrade, 1968.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1971.

Table 4, 5

immanent politics of music	transcendent politics of music
music and subjectivization: presentation of <i>self</i>	music and the public sphere
music and ideology: construction of everyday life	music and the emancipation of humankind
politization of musical form	music and nation as an imaginary community
politization of musical technique	music and representation of power
signifier musical practices	music and revolution
musical creation as productive work	music and totalitarianism
institutional critique of music	music and anarchism
political economy of music	music and terrorism
ecstasy or participation: from style to strategy in music	music and war
	music and violence
	music and transition

nett¹⁴, Franco Moretti¹⁵ and others – are based on a general hypothesis that an undisputable correspondence exists between the social processes and constitutional potentialities of a work of art, literature or music. In *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno quite indisputably grounded his debate about Schönberg’s modernity on the thesis of ‘social formalism’: “Umjetničke forme zapisuju historiju čovječanstva istinitije od dokumenata. Nema ukrućene forme u koju se ne bi mogla očitati negacija krutog života. ... Schönberg je naišao na društveni karakter usamljenosti tako što je usamljenost utvrdio do ekstrema” [“The forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents. There is no hardening of form that is not to be read as the negation of the hardness of life. ... Schoenberg hit upon the social character of loneliness by cleaving to it unconditionally”]¹⁶ or “Dok umjetnička djela gotovo nikad ne podražavaju društvo i k tome njihovi autori ne treba uopće da znaju o njemu, gestovi umjetničkih djela su objektivni odgovori na objektivne društvene konstelacije...” [“Though artworks have scarcely ever imitated society, and their authors need know nothing whatever about it, the gestures of artworks are

¹⁴ Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, Routledge, London, 2003.

¹⁵ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, Verso, London, 2013.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, op. cit., 70.

objective answers to objective social constellations...”¹⁷ For instance, Moretti uses the following words to present a similar hypothesis on the social potential of the form: “Forms are the abstract of social relationships: so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power. ... [S]tudying how forms vary, you discover how symbolic *power* varies from place to place.”¹⁸

The *immanent politics of music* can be another, more general and vaguer name for ‘sociological formalism’. It appears as a risky attempt at reading, or sometimes ascribing – i.e. inscribing – political meanings, values or references from/into the musical work itself, or more precisely, from/into formal effects and affects of the musical material. If one accepts this, then the unity and integrity of the opacity of musical creativity and/or musical reception is broken up into potential segments. These segments, potentially open to politization, which can be found in any work of music, are many – I will give some of them: music is the means of subjectivization; music is the referential space of the performers’ and the listeners’ bodies; music is the agent of ideology in the processes of constructing everyday life; i.e. musical form is an abstract sample of the social, but so is the musical technique of performance; musical creativity (composing, performing, media design) is productive work in the domain which can be denoted by the political economy of the production of value and, more importantly, of surplus value; but music is also a signifier practice which, upon re-orientation from a delusion of ecstasy to the domain of productive, communicational and consumer participation, becomes the transformation of a musical style into a political strategy.

For example, subjectivization by music takes place as a material social practice both from the composer’s/performer’s and the listener’s point of view. Adorno fully centralized the subjectivization of the composer in Schönberg’s music in these words: “Subjekt nove muzike, o kom ona vodi protokol, to je onaj emancipirani, osamljeni, realni subjekt kasnograđanske faze. Ovaj realni subjektivitet i materijal što ga je on radikalno preoblikovao predstavlja za Schönberga kanon estetske objektivacije” [“The subject of new music, what its deposition transcribes, is the real, emancipated, isolated subject of the late bourgeois period. This real subjectivity, and the radical material that it has integrally structured, provides Schoenberg with a canon of aesthetic objectivation”].¹⁹

On the other hand, Roland Barthes, in the case of a listener to Robert Schumann’s music, promotes subjectivization to a bodily event which is the basis for the potentiality of music as social subjectivization: “But, in music, a field of *sig-*

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, op. cit., 154.

¹⁸ Franco Moretti, op. cit., 59

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, op. cit., 83.

nifying and not a system of signs, the referent is unforgettable, for here the referent is the body. The Body passes into music without any relay but the signifier.”²⁰ By relating music to the body it enters, Barthes necessarily promises musical space as the social space of bodily action. But this is not a literary space representing/denoting or describing a social motive, subject or narrative. This is a space directly linked to the performer’s and listener’s bodies, bodies that through music become subjects confronted with what can anticipate any meaning, although it is not conveying a particular or specified meaning at that moment. This is certainly a ‘signifier’ which is a part of the *signifier practice* in music.

Adorno understood art/music as the subject’s last refuge: “The work of art ‘reflects’ society and is historical to the degree that it refuses the social, and represents the last refuge of individual subjectivity from the historical forces that threaten to crush it... Thus the socio-economic is inscribed in the work, but as concave to convex, as negative to positive. *Ohne Angst leben*: such is for Adorno the deepest and most fundamental promise of music itself, which it holds even at the heart of its most regressive manifestations.”²¹ If we dramatically overemphasize this Adornian idea of refusing the social, we obtain the Althusserian-Lacanian image of relationship between the immanence of music and transcendence of politics, i.e. the censorship of the political in the artistic. From the Althusserian-Lacanian standpoint, it transpires that that which eliminates the social from the artistic/musical, and the social is constituted by that elimination, is not some pre-human chaos, an unfathomable abyss of the nature, the place of the source of truth; instead, a *predetermined practice*, a *signifier practice*, is the real foundation or the *truth* of what Sigmund Freud called the ‘unconscious’ in the relationship with sexuality, and Karl Marx ‘class conflict’ in the relationship with society.²²

The *transcendent politics of music* can be attempts at going beyond “the artistic or musical text” and to perceive the *text* in quite different referential situations with respect to the social. Discussing Western music, the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe underlined: “Il y a d’abord la question de la musique, laquelle, étonnement, n’est jamais la question de la seule musique” [“Firstly, there is the question of music which, strangely enough, is never only about music”].²³

²⁰ Roland Barthes, “Rasch”, in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, 308.

²¹ Fredric Jameson, op. cit., 34–35.

²² “Umetnost, društvo / tekst” [“Art, Society / Text”], *Polja*, No. 230, Novi Sad, 1978, 2.

²³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Avant-propos”, in: *Musica Ficta* (Figures de Wagner), Christian Bourgois Éditeur, Paris, 1991, 12

To put it crudely: the sense and meaning of music do not emanate from the musical work itself but from the work's place in the field of social relationships. One could say that musical work or music as an event is something that is structured into specific sense and meanings by an external relationship with social institutions (politics) and social antagonisms (the political). However, a musical work also causes potential affects in a listener, which are subjectivized by music in a specific context.

If what has been previously said stands, one could say that music effectuates the potentiality of the political with respect to numerous forms of human life. These potentialities are manifold and possibly infinite, as are the situations of politics and the political in the reality of individual and collective forms of human life. There are many examples of the external or distant politization of music, which means bringing music into a specific relationship with the social. For example: the relationship between music and the public sphere²⁴; the function of music in the emancipation of humankind²⁵; music in the creation of the *imaginary community* that we call nation²⁶; music and the representation of power²⁷; music and revolution²⁸; music and totalitarianism²⁹; music and anarchism³⁰; music and terrorism³¹; music and war³²; music and violence³³; music and transition³⁴, etc.

All these examples, and many more, show that the “external politics of

²⁴ Christian Wolff, *Bread and Roses – Piano Works 1976–1983*, Sally Pinkas (piano), Mode, 1995.

²⁵ Philip Glass, *Satyagraha*, DVD, Arthaus Musik, 2001.

²⁶ Krzysztof Penderecki, *A Polish Requiem*, Klosinska, Rappe, Minkiewicz, Nowacki, Warsaw National Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra, Antoni Wit, Naxos, 2004.

²⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte Op. 41* (1942), Glenn Gould (piano), The Glenn Gould Collection, Sony, 2012.

²⁸ Luigi Nono, *Al gran sole carico d'amore*, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Lothar Zagrosek, SWR, 1999.

²⁹ Larry Weinstein, *Shostakovich against Stalin – The War Symphonies*, Nederland Radio Philharmonic, Kirov Orchestra, Valery Gergiev, DVD, Decca, 2005.

³⁰ John Cage, *Anarchy – New York City – January 1988*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Con., 1988. Cf. John Cage, *Roaratorio. An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (1982), Wergo, 1994.

³¹ John Adams, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by John Adams, directed by Penny Woolcock, DVD, Decca, 2003.

³² Stefan Wolpe, *Lieder; Battle Piece* (1943–1947), Neos, 2007.

³³ Cf. Susan Fast, Kip Pegley (eds.), *Music, Politics, and Violence*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown CT, 2012 – a collection of papers on the relationship between popular music and violence.

³⁴ Laibach, *Rekapitulacija 1980–1984*, NSK Records & Nika d.o.o., 2002

music” is carried out by the aesthetic which is vague and variable, i.e. by sensory techniques of placing music in discursive and affective political contexts as a possible acoustic *embodiment* of politics and the political. This does not mean that music ‘transcends’ from the immanently musical (music as music itself) to the musical as politics and the political, but that music is understood as a political situation. For example, while theorizing music and politics, John Street puts forward the following opinion: “I would like to persuade readers that music *embodies* political values and experiences, and *organizes* our response to society as political thought and action. Music does not just provide a vehicle of political expression, it is that expression. And, furthermore, states organize us through their management of music and sound more generally. The boundaries between the two realms of music and politics, I will try to suggest, are largely illusory.”³⁵

The placement of the relationship between music and politics is carried out by the contextuality of music (culture, state, nation, race, gender, class); by programme actions (verbal denoting of a musical work as a political notion meaning); by functional institutional employments of music (assigning political, social and cultural functions to the musical work); by compositional politizations, identifications, but also obsessing over political *ideas*, myths and ideals; by performance actions (adding various social roles while presenting the musical work); or by motivational guidance of the performers’ and listeners’ attention (generating complex networks within discursive and affective apparatuses related to usual or exceptional forms of everyday life).

The relationship between discourse and affect enables music to become the means of the articulation and subjectivization of the human intelligible and sensible presence in the social world of antagonisms and institutions which provide or disturb various functions of society. In other words, music is not only the representative of politics and the political, but also an aesthetic – meaning sensible at the individual and collective level – potential of generating society and the social. Therefore, the external politics of music are aimed at showing that no music exists which is not politics within the political, i.e. antagonistic situations in society.

³⁵ John Street, “Introduction: making Connections”, in: *Music and Politics*, Polity, Cambridge UK, 2012, 1.