

Sovereign Spectacles: From Monarchy to Liberal Democracy

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Modern liberal democracy defines itself in opposition to art – in fact, liberal democracy since its inception has been thoroughly anti-aesthetic. This situation results from the aesthetic political arguments during the Enlightenment and its assault on its principle adversary – monarchy, and its thoroughly theatrical politics of the spectacle. Louis Marin's *Portrait of the King*, for instance, describes seventeenth-century France as a world in which “spectacle is necessary and intrinsically tied to the exercise of power, since the king must dazzle the people.”

The same insistence on aesthetics and politics pervades eighteenth-century counterrevolutionary work, perhaps most notably Edmund Burke's 1790 *The Reflections on the Revolution in France*. When Thomas Paine criticizes Burke's conflation of aesthetic and politics his *Rights of Man* – such as when it decries that “Burke's hero or heroine must be a tragedy-victim expiring in show” or a political treatise that “degenerates into a composition of art” – Paine misses the point entirely. Rather than a “degeneration,” Burke, the prototypical-conservative, wants to *conserve* the aesthetic dimension of politics, and champions a politic order that addresses the bodies, senses, and affect, rather than a simply rational political order underwritten by Enlightenment rationality and enshrined by the bodiless abstractions of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* that have given rise to the supposedly apolitical abstractions of the marketplace that operate according to the logic outlined in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.

In this presentation, I will argue for the reappropriation of aesthetics for the domain of politics. My argument contends that the aesthetic mode of modern liberal democracy functions like literary realism, *cinéma vérité*, or the rhetorical trope of hyperbaton, which Longinus defines as the artificial rearrangement of words that strike the auditor as if they were natural. Like these modes of artistic realism, which *artistically* covers over its aesthetic scaffolding to appear *as if it were reality*, liberal democracy, takes shape around what might be called a political iconoclasm, or political anti-theatricality – against what I define as the *politics of the spectacle* – that functioned *as if* it were not art, but instead natural, immediate, invoking a kind of political transparency unobstructed by the potentially stilted, obfuscating mediations of art. What, then, I ask, is the future for a politics of the spectacle taken back from the logic of monarchy and the its modern inheritor, the marketplace?