

## Preface

This book starts from the premise that there is an intimate link between aesthetics and democracy. That, in itself, is not new: indeed, much of the history of twentieth-century criticism and theory consists in an argument about the extent to which art has been politically determined. Some thinkers have seen the link as being so intimate that they will claim that art is political through and through, whereas for others the relation is more attenuated, although still there. The debate is given its most urgent point and clearest articulation in the work of Walter Benjamin, especially in his response to the great question of what we should do when confronted with a state of affairs in which the political has become aestheticised: we should politicise the aesthetic. Yet the title of this book is *Aesthetic Democracy*, and the suggestion here, in my qualifying of the concept of democracy with the adjective 'aesthetic', is meant to indicate that the link between aesthetics and democracy is indeed so intimate as to suggest that democracy is entirely *conditioned* by aesthetics as such.

In the present book, I argue what might seem at first to be a counterintuitive proposition. Instead of accepting that a political state of affairs determines the shape and nature of our art, I propose that the relation is effectively reversed, and that it is the aesthetic determinants of a given social formation that enable us to be political beings at all, to be members of, participants in, or even citizens in a polity. In short, we might see that there is a certain inflection in our living of 'democracy' that is dependent on aesthetics. It is important to see this not as some homage to Oscar Wilde, however thought-provoking his habitual counterintuitive pronouncements might have been; rather, my argument is that we do not fully understand democracy unless and until we have an understanding of how much it depends on what is at stake in any given moment of the aesthetic.

What is at stake is that there be established a social relation among

subjects of perception. How might we think of this? First, subjects of perception here are those entities who will constitute themselves as 'I' or as 'we'—and thus become identities—precisely by virtue of the act of perception in which they can propose themselves as a community that shares, at least for the purposes of their mutual engagement, an object. They do not yet 'own' the object except as a conceptual other against which they can identify themselves precisely as subjects of perception, locations of a point of view. Second, that establishment of a relation that constitutes an opening to the social is also a *moment* of perception. It is important for this argument that such a moment be seen precisely as a matter *of moment*, an 'event' that carries with it the physically kinetic energy of a momentum. Third, the nature of that event may or may not establish a relation among the subjects of perception that could truly be said to be democratic; and, for this, we might have recourse to a specific understanding of the stakes of democracy itself.

In all of this, I have to face up to the fact that for many, democracy is consonant with, indeed identified with, a certain freedom; and, further, that what I propose here might seem to be at odds with such ideas. There is a reason for this. Freedom has been reduced in most common discussions of democracy to a matter of choice: where there is choice (between political parties, between consumables) there is also thereby freedom, and such freedom is identified with a political system that calls itself democratic. My argument here goes completely against this view. I try to deepen the idea and the fact of freedom by seeing it not as a matter of choice but as a matter of the event, and most significantly, of the event that I call cultural. The cultural event is that moment in our relations, in our perceptions or in the aesthetic, in which we see the possibility or potential for freedom; and the location for that, most often, is in what we call art: literature, poetry, painting, music, dance, sculpture. A democracy that is intent on establishing and furthering the freedom of subjects—subjects who know themselves always to be conditioned by the alterity to which art opens them—is the most fundamental form of democracy that we might have. A polity that degrades or ignores the aesthetic, or sees it as an arithmetical add-on to a social formation rather than a fundamental geometry that shapes the very possibility of our being sociable and free at all, entirely misses the point; and the consequence of that is not only a degradation of the concept of freedom, but also a reduction in actual freedom.



I have had the pleasure of trying out many of the ideas in the pages that follow before many audiences who provided most welcome feedback. I thank my audiences in Bergen, Canterbury (University of Kent), Cairo, Edinburgh, Ghent, Grahamstown (Rhodes University), Harvard, Leeds, London, Reims, Rosario, and Utrecht. Parts of some of the chapters have appeared in different form in the following journals or volumes: chapter 2 in Martin McQuillan, ed., *Emergencies: Deconstruction, Politics, Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2006); chapter 4 in John Joughin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); chapter 6 in *Paragraph* 25, no. 2 (2002), special number on Agamben, ed. Brian Dillon; and chapter 8 in the journal *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, vol. 13 (2001). I thank the editors and publishers for permission to reuse some materials here.

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