

Benedetta Milani

Politics of *aisthesis* and the aestheticisation of politics in the digital world.

On technology, aesthetic and the faschosphere

Abstract

Today's political conditions – dominated by the global spread of far-right ideologies and governments – make it necessary to reflect on the political dimension not only of art but of aesthetics itself. Using the theories of Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser, this article analyses the relationship between aesthetics, technology, and politics, questioning why the digital world has proven to be a fertile ground for the aestheticisation of politics in a late-fascist key. While Flusser shows how technical images program subjects, Benjamin helps us understand how the recursiveness of the digital world favours the spectacularisation and aestheticisation of political discourse. Finally, I will also examine how the aesthetic-artistic gesture becomes a political act capable of activating practices of resistance and outsmarting the pervasive algorithmic infrastructure of the digital world.

Keywords

Political aesthetics, Faschosphere, Digital aesthetics

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dettamilani@gmail.com (Universität Lüneburg)

1. Introduction

Today's political conditions – dominated by the global spread of far-right ideologies and governments – make it necessary to reflect on the political dimension not only of art but of aesthetics itself. Such reflection is motivated by the highly iconic nature of the contemporary environment permeated and dominated by images, but above all by the fact that we are always interconnected by and with technologies that – as will be argued – are *fundamentally aesthetic*, i.e. technologies of sensation that interact intrusively with the relationship between subject and reality.

It is therefore central to ask not so much *whether* it exists, but *what* the political dimension of aesthetics, or rather of the particular aesthetic that pertains to the digital world, is and how it is declined. The question from which it then seems necessary to start is whether there is a correlation between the spread of far-right ideologies and the digital world; that is, whether there is a structural reason why ideologies and political strategies that can be defined as late Fascist¹ have spread so easily and effectively within the techno-aesthetic conditions of the digital world. This question, which also corresponds to a political urgency, is what the following article seeks to answer, drawing on the aesthetic-political theories of Walter Benjamin and Vilém Flusser. Both authors clearly demonstrated the fundamental political dimension of aesthetics and art, as well as the crucial connection between technology and aesthetics in the production of political subjects.

Through the philosophies of Benjamin and Flusser, it is also possible to coherently integrate different levels of aesthetic-political analysis:

i. With Flusser I will demonstrate the theoretical and strategic importance of rethinking aesthetics from its etymological meaning, that is, as 'sensation', thus bringing to the surface the political dimension of *aisthesis* in a context in which — as today — subjects are increasingly users connected to technologies that programme their experience even from the intimate level of sensation. Questioning the technical conditions

¹ I refer here to the expression introduced by Alberto Toscano in *Late fascism: race, capitalism and the politics of crisis*. The term *late fascism* is meant to highlight the need to analyse the discourse of the global right beyond mere analogies with historical fascism. At the same time, it differs from the term *post-fascism*, which, since the 1990s, has been used to describe right-wing parties with fascist roots that have undergone ideological revision. This process aimed to purge their totalitarian elements, enabling them to engage in dialogue and form alliances with conservative but more moderate right-wing forces.

of digital *aisthesis*, however, remains insufficient without analysing the power relations and forms of subjectivation that these conditions entail;

ii. On the other hand, if one cannot ignore the political dimension of aesthetics, one cannot forget the aesthetic dimension of political discourse either. Thus with Benjamin, I will look for the reasons why the algorithmic infrastructure of the digital world seems to have created such a favourable environment for the process of aestheticising politics that Benjamin considered central to the success of the fascist counter-revolution. Then as now, both the analysis of and resistance to the new forms of fascist ideology must also pass through the revival of the debate that began in Germany in the first half of the 20th century around the crucial conjunction of technology, aesthetics and political myth².

iii. Finally, I will also look at the way in which the aesthetic-artistic gesture becomes a political gesture. For both Benjamin and Flusser, art and the artist play a fundamental and political role insofar as they are capable of proposing strategies of resistance and indiscipline with respect to the violence (*Gewalt*) of the technological and ideological apparatus.

2. *Technologies and politics of aisthesis*

In *Towards a philosophy of photography* Flusser defines one of the key terms of his media philosophy, the technical image, as “a technological or mechanical image created by an apparatus” (Flusser 2000: 85). This concise definition brings out a fundamental point of Flusser’s reflection, namely that technical images are a new type of image precisely because they are the product of programming, i.e. of a scientific text producing an apparatus that produces images: they are “computation of concept” and not “visualisation of objects” (Flusser 1999: 14)³. Understanding and criticising technical images therefore means understanding and criticising the apparatus, defined by Flusser as “A plaything or game that simulates thought (trans. An overarching term for a non-human agency, e.g. the camera, the computer and the ‘apparatus’ of the State or of the Market); organisation or system that enables something to function” (Flusser 2000:

² The authors central to this debate include Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Ernst Cassirer and, of course, Walter Benjamin himself.

³ In the original text: “Demnach wäre dies der Unterschied zwischen traditionellen und technischen Bildern: die ersten sind Anschauungen von Gegenständen, die zweiten Komputationen von Begriffen”.

83). By drawing attention to the centrality of the apparatus in the cybernetic society, Flusser grasps a key element for contemporary discourse as well, namely not only the importance of the technical apparatus in the production of images that are increasingly bulimically consumed by subjects, but also and above all the work of production, or rather the 'programming' of the subjects themselves through these images. They are in fact programmed images that end up programming the subjects⁴. It is thus with great lucidity that Flusser shows how the philosophical analysis of the apparatus and of technical images must necessarily pass through an understanding and critique of the apparatus itself, that is, of the technical conditions underlying the programming of the relationship between subject and reality and between subject and images:

As apparatuses function automatically and do not obey any human decision, they cannot be owned by anybody. All human decisions are made on the basis of the decisions of apparatuses; they have degenerated into purely "functional" decisions, i.e. human intention has evaporated. If apparatuses were originally produced and programmed to follow human intention, then today, in the "second and third generation" of apparatuses, this intention has disappeared over the horizon of functionality. Apparatuses now function as an end in themselves, "automatically" as it were, with the single aim of maintaining and improving themselves. This rigid, unintentional, functional automaticity is what needs to be made the object of criticism. (Flusser 2000: 73-4)

We can certainly convey this critique in relation to the algorithmic infrastructure and network of computational technologies that are nothing other than today's evolution of the apparatuses described in the 1980s by Flusser as "subhuman - bloodless and simplistic simulations of human thought processes which, precisely because they are so rigid, render human decisions superfluous and non-functional" (Flusser 2000: 74). Indeed, the actualisation of this critique is made even more urgent by the increased sophistication of the cybernetic network and the necessary awareness that the technical conditions of the digital world have also become the conditions of aesthetic possibilities of the digital subject.

The computational technologies – machine learning, artificial intelligence, biometric measurements, data gathering and data mining, etc. – that inform the digital world are able to modulate the subject with particular effectiveness precisely because they are able to adapt and

⁴ "In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do" (Flusser 2000: 35).

personalise themselves to it. The sub-human level of their functioning, outside and indifferent to the human dimension, is what at the same time allows the insertion of the human into the apparatus, it is in fact the human who is one of the targets of the cybernetic network. This is why it is crucial to recognise these technologies as *aesthetic technologies*, because at the concrete, functional and processual level, computational technologies aim at capturing the sensible (e.g. datafication) and translating and inserting it into the cybernetic feedback loop.

As Mark B.N. Hansen proposes in *Feed forward*, such technologies are able for the first time to access a layer of the real that is pre-cognitive, micro-temporal and micro-sensory and therefore outside the human possibility and capacity to be grasped directly, but only through the feed-forward process that computational technologies perform. That is, they open access to a micro-temporal and extra-human dimension of the sensible but always *ex post facto* and always obviously mediated by machinic processuality itself.

In the present conditions, it is evident that the aesthetic potential of computational technologies allows for an unprecedented and intrusive form of domination of the subject's *aisthesis*: precisely because of the fineness of capturing the grain of the sensible, these technologies manage to modulate the subjects at the intimate level of sensation and of their capacity to affect and be affected. Computational technologies are therefore intrusive techno-aesthetics that are connected to the fundamental capacity of life to be and to enter into relations, and in this way have become an instrument of control and subjectivation based – as Reinhardt Mühlhoff writes in *Immersive Macht* – on a form of power and control that invests the ways in which subjects are modulated, disciplined and produced in the digital world. The immersivity of computational technologies (datafication, personalisation, profiling, nudging, etc.) configures an environment – whether physical, virtual or hybrid – that is able to enclose the subject in subtle ways: the immersed subject remains in an environment that constantly modulates and defines its potential. Immersive power is thus an intrusive form of control that operates by stimulating some potentialities of the digital subject while repressing others, and results in a subject that is thus embedded in a feedback loop with its environment, which constantly modulates, stimulates and represses its potentialities and possibilities.

What emerges is thus a techno-aesthetic politics that programmes subjects that are increasingly adapted and suited to the cybernetic

environment ⁵. Computational technologies and the underlying algorithmic infrastructure programme us as functional elements for the cybernetic purposes of capture and control; at the same time the digital environment increasingly tunes itself around subjects and their behaviour in a process of mutual approximation but unequal power.

If in fact today's discourse is dominated by transhumanist messianic philosophies that are both dystopian and techno-enthusiastic, which envisage the complete assimilation of the human into the cybernetic machine and the humanisation of the machine, as evidenced by the interest in the figure of the robot, what is overlooked is the fact that in today's conditions the human embedded in the cybernetic network is *already* a robot itself. And, as Daniel Nemenyi writes in *Robot makes free*, this means: "that you don't need to be born in a factory – or of a certain race – to be a robot, you just need to turn in your soul and rotate like a wheel. The natural humans who represent the interests of capital and state are no less 'robots' than the robots themselves. This is to say that in its origin the robot is not the fiction of a fascist imagination, but the fiction of fascists imagined" (Nemenyi 2023: 4).

3. *Aestheticisation of politics, or of the Faschosphere*

The automation of the human and the technical intrusion into the *aisthesis* bring to critical attention what the father of cybernetics himself, Norbert Wiener, had clearly theorised in his main writings (Wiener 1961; 1963; 1989), namely that "a 'new Fascism' [is] rendered possible, inevitable even, by cybernetic machines" (Nemenyi 2023: 5).

The fact, then, that for at least the past ten years, Internet spaces and languages have increasingly become sites of radicalisation of certain categories (e.g. young, mostly white males who identify with the trope of the nerd) and of infection and contagion of the 'mass' in Europe as well

⁵ "The four basic concepts *image, apparatus, program* and *information*, support our cosmological thinking quite spontaneously, and in so doing, quite spontaneously prompt us to reach out for functional explanations. The same applies to other areas such as psychology, biology, linguistics, cybernetics and information technology (to mention only a few). We think, quite spontaneously, across the board in an imaginary, functionally programmatic and information-technological fashion. The hypothesis proposed here thus argues that we think like this because we think in photographic categories: because the photographic universe has programmed us to think in a post-historical fashion" (Flusser 2000: 77-8).

as in the US, shows the need to critically return to the study of the alliance between (cybernetic) technology, aesthetics and the spread of reactionary, late-fascist political myths. What we face today is precisely the engineering of mythical-political thought to create an ideological apparatus capable of becoming hegemonic⁶: a true technology of government implemented through digital techno-aesthetics.

Thinkers like Benjamin or Ernst Cassirer can be of great help in re-actualising the critique of the conjunction of technique and myth. In *The myth of the state*, Cassirer writes:

The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not the wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skilful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our own great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth. Henceforth myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon — as machine guns or airplanes. And they were used for the same purpose, for internal and external warfare. (Cassirer 1974: 282)

The technised myth of our times needs new prophets and *vates publici*, so the modern politician *à la* Trump can only be accompanied by a Technoking *à la* Musk⁷. On this point too, Cassirer's words remain relevant: the new politician "had to be a *homo magus* and a *homo faber* at the same time. He was the spokesman for and the priest of a new and entirely irrational and mysterious religion. But if he and his collaborators had to defend and propagate this irrational religion, they were by no means irrational" (Cassirer 1979: 253).

In this political context, social media and other communities (e.g. 4chan) are proving to be extremely effective social technologies in pursuit of what Benjamin famously called "the logical outcome of fascism" — that is, "an aestheticising of political life" (Benjamin 2008: 41). Indeed, since at least 2016, the term 'faschosphere' has been used to name the galaxy of websites, blogs and portals through which European and US-American

⁶ The use of the word hegemony is also chosen to refer to the interest of the extreme right in Europe in the concept of cultural hegemony theorised by Antonio Gramsci. On this point one obviously remembers the philosopher Alain De Benoist, founder of the French *Nouvelle Droite*, but also the book *Gramsci è vivo. Sillabario per un'egemonia contemporanea* written by the current Italian Minister of Culture Alessandro Giuli, an example of the right-wing reinterpretation and re-signification of Gramsci, an author who is biographically and theoretically deeply connected to anti-fascism.

⁷ This is how Musk himself wanted to define his role within his own company, Tesla. See: Sweney, M., "Elon Musk changes his Tesla job title to 'technoking'", *The Guardian* (15.03.2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/15/elon-musk-changes-his-tesla-job-title-to-technoking> (last access: 1 February 2025).

far-right movements have produced endless amounts of ideological content – memes, posts, trolls, videos, etc. – that have increasingly spread, in sometimes diluted and sometimes pure forms, even into the mainstream (Albertini, Doucet 2016). These contents have burst the ‘nerd’ bubble to become common heritage of contemporary language and imagery⁸.

Here, then, to the political dimension of the control and automation of *aisthesis*, we need to add the analysis of the aestheticising strategy that aesthetic-computational environments effectively pursue by “granting expression to the masses – but on no account granting them rights” (Benjamin 2008: 41). With the spectacularisation and aestheticisation of violence, war, pain (one’s own and others’), one’s political ideas, etc., the space of political discourse has increasingly shifted to social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X, and the global far-right has been able to exploit these techno-aesthetic environments to give expression to the frustration of some, and to inject it into political and social discourse as well as the collective imagination (Jäger 2024). As Benjamin notes, however, the expression of the mass means at the same time the anaesthetisation of its revolutionary and progressive potential in order to preserve and strengthen power relations unfavourable if not antagonistic to the mass itself. The shift in US-American politics towards a technocracy led by the oldest president in US history and the richest man in the world shows how, under current conditions, it is possible to become the messianic symbols of the people at war with the élite, while at the same time being the purest expression of that élite.

But the aestheticisation of politics with a late-fascist imprint also – and above all – takes place through the obsessive production of images, memes, videos, etc., with which far-right groups and their leaders continuously represent themselves and their enemies – migrants and racialised people, feminists, trans people, the left, etc. This exponential production of content, typical of the techno-aesthetic digital environment, has driven political discourse over the past decade into a recursive spiral. A morbid interest in increasingly radical and deliberately provocative content – baited by the far right – has been accompanied by the impossibility of genuinely countering or contesting these ideologies

⁸ Think for example of the spread of the term “woke” or in Italy of the expression “teoria del gender”, a misleading translation from the English “Gender theories”. But also of terms like “remigration” and “ethno-nationalism” that have been accepted as part of the 2025 pre-election debate in Germany.

and images. By continuously reproducing themselves, they absorb every form of reaction and resistance.

An example of this is the response to the Roman salute performed twice by Musk during the inauguration of Trump's second presidency: a sterile yet noisy and entertaining back-and-forth between those proving that it *clearly wasn't* a Roman salute and those proving that it *clearly was*. In this case, the most accurate analysis on the daily controversy is the one posted by Musk himself on X: "Frankly, they need better dirty tricks. The 'everyone is Hitler' attack is soo tired" (Connolly 2025). Indeed, new strategies are needed to counter the late-fascist ideology, because after years of spreading such ideas, no one is any longer frightened by the spectre of the return of Nazi-Fascism. What actually happens, however, is the continuous and effective re-signification of gestures, rituals, symbols and words performed by right-wingers one meme at a time, one trolling at a time, one podcast at a time⁹.

But the recursive and self-quoting circularity typical of Internet phenomena such as memes, gifs, etc. can also create violent short-circuits. An example of this is the recent suicide of Matthew Alan Livelsberger in Las Vegas on 1 January 2025. Livelsberger was an active-duty US Army Green Beret who set fire to the car he was in when he killed himself. Notes were found on his phone clarifying the matrix of the gesture: "This was not a terrorist attack, it was a wake-up call. Americans only pay attention to spectacles and violence. What better way to get my point across than a stunt with fireworks and explosives". The wake-up call is for fellow patriots called to rally around Trump and Musk in the fight against the "weak and feckless leadership who only serve to enrich themselves" (Copp 2025).

The Las Vegas attack, as it has been called by the US media, is an example of the aestheticisation of politics in the sense that the 'political' gesture must become a violent spectacle in order to pierce the dense web of news and images, and reach the target audience of the message, while at the same time showing the recursiveness into which political discourse has entered: Livelsberger has been identified as a patriot and staunch supporter of Trump and Musk, yet as the venue for his 'patriotic

⁹ An extremely significant example of this phenomenon is the repeated attempt by the leader of the German far-right party AfD, Alice Weidel, to argue that Hitler was not a right-wing politician, but a left-wing one, even a communist: "He was a communist! And he considered himself as a socialist". "Elon Musk-Alice Weidel Full Conversation: Tesla CEO speaks to German far-right party AfD chief" (o.V. 9.01.2025). These forms of historical revisionism are obviously not new, indeed they have a long history within the thinking of the far-right. See: Schergaut 2025.

martyrdom', he chose the Trump International Hotel and rented the cyber truck which, upon catching fire, gave rise to images that seem to come from the dystopian future of which the cyber truck itself is a preconceived



symbol.

Fig.1 Image from: Copp, T., *Soldier who blew up Tesla at Trump hotel left note saying blast was to be a "wake up call" for US*, "AP" (4.01.2025).

Why so? Why destroy the symbols of the power one wishes to assert? Perhaps because in the feedback loop of images and symbols in which the subject is placed by digital aesthetic technologies, the circularity of consumed content and images makes these images and symbols absolute: omnipresent and omnipotent. Thus, even in the intention of endorsing Trump and Musk, Livelsberger can only make an iconoclastic gesture by destroying the effigies of power of the two leaders because in his imagination *there are no other symbols outside of them*. The iconoclastic act thus becomes the ultimate gesture of spectacularisation and aestheticisation of politics: by expressing itself through destruction, it produces images that only reaffirm and reinforce the symbolic and mystical power of the new leaders.

4. Conclusion

But bringing the political dimension back to the center of the aesthetic debate also means asking whether it, but also art, can play a role in the possible forms and strategies of resistance and opposition that inevitably emerge in the face of power. Benjamin famously calls for the politicisation of art, while Flusser looks at the practices of experimental photography as a frontier space that shows possible forms of freedom in the face of the automation of the apparatus, precisely because experimental photographers constantly work against the will of the apparatus (Flusser 2000: 76-82). Both positions are still valid for outlining, or rather understanding and naming, practices of reaction, struggle and resistance that are already constantly enacted in the digital world.

Ordinary users, gig-economy workers, and activists, are in fact constant protagonists of thousands of acts of resistance and indiscipline with respect to the power of the algorithmic infrastructure and somehow try to disturb and evade the alleged absolutism of the cybernetic network and its forms of control (Bonini, Treré 2024). Just as experimental photographers worked against the photographic apparatus to achieve a complex image not foreseen by the technical programming of the camera, somehow freeing vision from the automation of the apparatus to produce something new and unexpected; so the digital subjects – embedded in the techno-aesthetics of the cybernetic network – strive creatively and cunningly to evade and escape the forms of control and modulation of the immersive algorithmic power and thus try, even if only temporarily, to jam the apparatus in order to construct temporary spaces of freedom for themselves.

There are also new forms of activism that try to use the digital techno-aesthetic environment to their own advantage and to puncture the narrative of the far-right and confront them on the same terrain of struggle, in a way responding to the Benjamin's call for the politicisation of art. An example of this is the action of *artivism* claimed by the British political group Led By Donkeys and the German Centre for Political Beauty, which projected images onto the Tesla gigafactory in Grünheide, outside Berlin, precisely in response to the controversy that arose around Musk's gesture. In fact, the video projected on the facade of the factory shows Musk making the Roman salute and the inscription "Heil", which,

in montage with the factory's illuminated sign, creates the inscription "Heil Tesla", and then calls for a boycott of the company.



Fig. 2 Image from: o.V., *Police investigate Musk salute projected on Tesla factory*, "DW" (24.01.2025).

Again, what is created is a short-circuit, but in this case, it is researched and intended to undermine and, indeed, jam the apologetic narrative that has tried, and to some extent succeeded, in re-signifying Musk's gesture: from a Roman salute to a gesture of love and generosity towards the crowd and the American people that made Trump's election possible¹⁰. After the projection of the images, "the German security services have launched an investigation into the suspected use of symbols of anti-constitutional organisations, including the depicted salute itself, the use or display of which is illegal in Germany", thus, in a certain sense, proving the unequivocal nature of Musk's gesture (see o.V. 24.01.2025).

The extent to which these practices can permeate the imaginative fabric of society without being immediately absorbed and reprocessed by the recursiveness of digital techno-aesthetics is the strategic, as well as theoretical, question facing anyone who seeks to engage with the contemporary aesthetic-political issue.

¹⁰ Musk's Italian spokesperson Andrea Stroppa, commenting on the video, wrote on X: "The Roman Empire is back, starting with the Roman salute", except that he later deleted the post to adapt to the rewriting of the event and the gesture: "That gesture, which some have mistaken for a Nazi salute, is simply Elon, who is autistic, expressing his feelings by saying 'I want to give you my heart', and that is exactly what he communicated on the microphone" (See: o.V. 20.01.2025).

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