

The art of politics, or the politics of art? Conceptualizing aesthetic commitment from within a Ricoeurian framework

Candess Kostopoulos*

University of Johannesburg

It is certainly possible, and usually uncontroversial, to claim that art has values that transcend or reach beyond the so-called “autonomously” aesthetic. Making philosophical sense of what we may call, for brevity’s sake, “aesthetic heteronomy” however entails grappling with both the nature of aesthetic autonomy itself and with the exact relationship between autonomy and heteronomy. In this paper I explore the conditions of aesthetic commitment¹, in particular, by asking what aesthetic autonomy and its relation(s) to the socio-political sphere would have to be like for authentic political art to be possible at all. I submit that Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical bequest has made “new adventures in thinking” (Ricoeur as quoted by Jervolino, 1990, p.134) on aesthetic commitment possible, and my exploration is placed within the framework of his philosophy of the imagination.

My paper has three main parts: (1) first, I stipulate the theoretical *impasse* in which the debate on aesthetic commitment finds itself, after which I argue that the nature of, and role played, by the imagination is pivotal to conceptualizing aesthetic autonomy; (2) secondly, I explicate the main features of Ricoeur’s philosophy of imagination; (3) and, finally, I elaborate those selected aspects of his account which can be used to flesh out a viable theory of aesthetic commitment.

* candess.kostopoulos@gmail.com

¹ Committed art can be defined as the selection, arrangement and foregrounding of certain elements from (largely socio-political) “reality” as perceived by the artist which can either illustrate how corrupt, unjust or immoral a specific political, social or economic system or community is, or portray an idealized version of an alternative system or community either by implication or by expressed opinion.

1. Imagination and the debate on aesthetic commitment

When it comes to aesthetic commitment, one question is particularly salient: does committed art signify the transformative potency of the aesthetic, or does it signal art's sacrifice on the altar of politics?² Due to the constraints of this paper, I will not elaborate on this question beyond stating that the debates ensuing from it seem characterized by an *impasse*. Accounts of aesthetic commitment are most often weighted towards either autonomy or heteronomy in such a way as to reduce the one to the other; or, at the extreme ends of the theoretical spectrum, to expunge art from the socio-political realm and vice versa³. Two options of escape from this dead end are left: we can view the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic values as fundamentally aporetic; or, we can try to situate the relationship itself in a broader, more fundamental context. I want to argue that the latter option provides us the theoretical elasticity needed to bear the tension between autonomy and heteronomy in a productive manner. I want to place both the idea that art has a special type of value *and* that it has a type of political value in a more constitutive category, namely that of the imagination. This shift allows us to see that autonomy and heteronomy, as we've come to understand these concepts, rest on the same foundation⁴.

Due to the constraints of this paper, I will not able to give a detailed exposition of the idea-historical development of the concept of imagination. I will therefore only highlight the elements that are most crucial to my own argument. Firstly, we need a skeletal definition of imagination. Defining imagination is notoriously difficult, and we will see that Ricoeur takes seriously Kant's claim that the imagination cannot be comprehended directly, and that it is an "art concealed in the depths of the human soul"⁵. If we forget about conceptual mastery for a moment and concentrate on the actual usage of the concept, we can, however, construe a *minimal* or working definition with which to guide our discussion: imagination is something between pure thought and pure sensory experience.

My contention is that the "filling-in" or fleshing out of this minimal definition is linked, in a constitutive way, to conceptions of the aesthetic. Various options

² A "twin" question, usually set in a more normative context, is also possible from the vantage point of the political itself, namely whether politics should strive towards rational neutrality and impartiality or incorporate the sensuously particular and/or the mythical-symbolic.

³ I am thinking here of the extreme formalism of Clive Bell and the extreme political aesthetics of Soviet socialist realism.

⁴ Jacques Rancière also speaks of this "same foundation" in *The politics of aesthetics* (2006). He describes it as "... bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the visible" (2006: 19), in short, as the "distribution of the sensible". I think that the distribution of the sensible can be fruitfully connected to, and even explained by the more fundamental concept of imagination.

⁵ This is with regards to the "schematism", see the *Critique of pure reason*, B: 138.

present themselves. We can flesh out the minimal definition by postulating a negative relationship between imagination, as a “third thing”, and either thought or sensory experience (or both, in a really comprehensive account). If we view imagination as a weak form of thought, we are liable to construe art as a cheap version of profound ideas; and if we view it as a weak form of sensory experience, we are liable to construe art as a merely superficial and, essentially superfluous, cultural pastime⁶.

Those who flesh out the minimal definition of imagination in a positive manner, on the other hand, are likely to view art as important, and even as fundamentally important. Imagination, positively correlated to thought, presents us with a view of the artwork as something that possesses a special type of truthfulness, not attainable via logical thinking alone. The positive correlation of imagination to sensory experience then presents us with the view that art is a special way of perceiving reality⁷.

It is important to note here that this conceptual charting has not solved the problem of the *impasse* in the debate on aesthetic commitment. In fact, it has exacerbated it to a certain extent due to the fact that the concept of imagination may be equally, or even more, troublesome⁸. Yet, I maintain that addressing the problematic status of political art is something that one can do with much fruit *via* this detour through imagination. An account that can give a positive but balanced portrayal of the power of imagination will allow us to make philosophical sense of aesthetic commitment. I would now like to explicate one such an account, in the hope that it may illuminate our way forwards toward a theory of aesthetic commitment: the account of imagination presented by Paul Ricoeur.

2. Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of imagination

Paul Ricoeur never wrote a systematic treatise on the imagination, making it necessary for his readers to construe this theory for themselves. It is, off course, problematic that a first encounter with Ricoeur’s vast and divergent body of work leaves the reader with the impression of a “forest” one could readily get lost in. Yet, on closer inspection his work follows coherent lines of development, which can be picked out by readers. The “destiny of the idea of subjectivity” is, by his own admission (1990, pp. xi), the recurring *problematic* addressed by his work;

⁶ One may think here of the strict rationalist’s and the strict empiricist’s views on art. Both Plato and Hume, for instance, essentially view artists as “liars”.

⁷ Although these accounts make a constructive aesthetic possible, there are also extremities that may pertain to them: the limits of the aesthetic may be grossly overextended, leaving the world exposed to types of freedoms which are dangerous. One may think here of the Romantic and Idealist conceptions of art, and also of certain phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophies that overestimate the creative abilities of human beings.

⁸ Cf. Kearney’s *The wake of imagination* (2001); and also Anderson’s “Imagination and ideology: ethical tensions in twentieth-century French writing” (2001).

Ricoeur also, however, stipulates two other important features which combine to produce the coherence of his work, namely: an emphasis on *method* and a particular *vision* (Ricoeur in Jervolino, 1990, pp. xi-xiii).

When reflecting on the role played by “imagination” in his philosophy, one must therefore keep in mind that imagination is tied up with all three themes: it is an integral part of what makes us human; central to Ricoeur’s dialectic method of “phenomenological hermeneutics”; and, most importantly, a fundamental condition of his vision, described as “the elaboration of a hermeneutics of human praxis within the horizon of a poetics of freedom” (1990, pp. xi). One cannot, however, reflect on all three themes at once; and therefore I will start from *method*, since the various shifts he affects throughout his work are easily readable instances of deeper-lying conceptual developments.

Ricoeur started his life-long project of writing a “philosophy of the will” with an “eidetics”, by which he meant a “pure description” (in the Husserlian sense⁹ of the word) of the voluntary and the involuntary. Although eidetics has the advantage of presenting us with the fundamental possibilities of humankind’s existence as incarnate being (by presenting us with the pure structures of willing), a pure description must exclude or “bracket” both transcendence and fault. In order to deal with the “actual, immediate ethic” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 22) implied by fault and transcendence, Ricoeur proposes a methodological shift from eidetics to “empirics” and, finally, to “poetics”. “Empirics” is meant to deal with radical evil and the rupture of the will to which the “fault” is correlated; and Ricoeur applies it in two parts, namely to deal with the *possibility* of fallibility first and, secondly, to deal with the *actual* manifestation of evil. The second “volume”¹⁰ of his “philosophy of the will” thus includes both *Fallible man* (1965) and *The symbolism of evil* (1967). Ricoeur’s “empirics” therefore includes both the existential description of that fallibility which is possible in actuality and the hermeneutics of the symbol needed to deal with the concrete human being who has committed an evil act. Although there are important references to the imagination in his study of the voluntary and the involuntary, his philosophy of the imagination gets its first real airing in these two works of empirics. In *Fallible man* Ricoeur establishes a correlation between the imagination and the intentionality of language. He is especially influenced by Kant’s notion of the “productive imagination”, which functions as a “synthesizing act” or, as Ricoeur puts it, as “... a fragile and hidden mediation [of disproportion] in a third term ...” (as quoted by Evans, 1995, p. 67).

⁹ Ricoeur is influenced and inspired by Husserl’s notion of intentionality, but his interpretation of intentionality is distinctive in a subtle manner. Ricoeur expresses “it differently by saying that consciousness constitutes itself by the type of object to which it projects itself” (Ricoeur, 1966:6). Husserl associated the notion of intentionality with the reflective acts of pure consciousness instead of the dynamism of the will pointed to by the centrality of the notion of the “project” in Ricoeur (see Rasmussen, 1971: 31).

¹⁰ The two parts of the second volume appeared simultaneously in France, but separately in English translation. *Philosophie de la volonté*, vol. I: *Le Volontaire et l’involontaire* appeared in 1950 and *Philosophie de la volonté*, vol. II: *Finitude et culpabilité: 1. L’homme faillible, 2. La symbolique du mal* appeared in 1960.

To this notion of imagination as mediation he adds the Husserlian notion of intentionality, thereby replacing the Kantian terms “understanding” and “sensibility” with “meaning” and “appearance”; or with the dialogue between “seeing” and “saying”. What we see points to our “finitude”, for we are “riveted to appearance and perspective” by the sense data delivered to us through perception. Our ability to use language, to say something about what we see, however points to our “infinity” since the words we use for things transcend our particular perception of things. Imagination thus holds together that which is seen and that which can be said (1965, pp. 37-44).

For Ricoeur this implies that the self is expressed through “things which are human works”; and this, in turn, implies that knowledge of the self is only available to us in an indirect manner. Knowledge of radical evil is therefore also only available to us through our reflection on the “human works” which stand as the objectified mediations of what can be seen and said of actual evil. These “human works” are then the symbols and myths of evil which are the topic of *The symbolism of evil*. Here Ricoeur utilizes Kant’s notion of the creative imagination as it is set out in the third Critique (of Judgement-power) and starts developing and applying his hermeneutic theory.

Ricoeur is, as he phrases it, “enchanted” by Kant’s aphorism, “the symbol gives rise to thought”¹¹; and he argues that when it comes to limit conditions, such as radical evil, we are driven into the opaque and obscure but rich realm of symbolic and mythical (or, “religious”) discourse. Philosophical reflection does not start from itself but from what is given to it by the world of the concretely human; mythic-symbolic language is therefore not an impediment to, but a necessary condition for the elaboration of a full philosophical anthropology¹².

From this basic “wager”, Ricoeur sets out to develop his *phenomenological hermeneutics*. His emphasis on imagination as mediation allows him to develop a way of reflecting on concrete human works by “grafting” phenomenology onto hermeneutics. This results in a unique method: the “dialectic of distanciation and belonging”, or “the dialectic of phenomenological distance and hermeneutical understanding”¹³. By employing a critical and creative combination of Husserl’s “imaginative variations” and Kant’s distinction between “reproductive” and “productive” imagination, Ricoeur is able to formulate a theory in which imagination is understood as a *meaning-receiving meaning-creating* collection of activities that we come to understand by means of a properly hermeneutic account of the works of imagination.

Of these “works” the semantic innovation central to metaphoric utterance becomes paramount for Ricoeur. Because metaphors – on Ricoeur’s account –

¹¹ See *The symbolism of evil* (1967: 347).

¹² Cf. Rasmussen’s *Mythic-symbolic language and philosophical anthropology: a constructive interpretation of the thought of Paul Ricoeur* (1971).

¹³ This is H.I. Venema’s apt re-naming of Ricoeur’s methodology. See his *Identifying selfhood: imagination, narrative and hermeneutics in the thought of Paul Ricoeur* (2000: 37).

involve, not a deviating use of nouns, but a deviating use of predicates, it is ruled by “predicative impertinence”, as Ricoeur (1991, p. 124) calls the clash produced between different semantic fields by the use of “bizarre predicates”. In order to respond to this challenge, we produce a new “predicative pertinence”, which is the metaphor. “It is”, Ricoeur writes, “in the moment of the emergence of a new meaning from the ruins of literal predication that imagination offers its specific mediation”. The imagination is thus the apperception of pertinence within impertinence, or a “predicative assimilation” which enables a specific “seeing as ...” – an imaging “competence” generated in and through *language*. The works of imagination are works in the strong sense implied by the labour connotations of the word; and imagination itself is not a weakened form of perception, but the unique activity of “seeing” something “as” something else.

In order to “see as ...” the imagination must do two seemingly opposed things: it must suspend the real *and* it must refer to the real. Here, Ricoeur introduces the idea of *split-reference* – an idea he also uses to describe the productive functions of fiction. According to this principle, the neutralizing function of imagination with regard to the real is the negative condition for the release of a second-order referential power (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 174). What is abolished, according to Ricoeur, is only the reference of ordinary discourse applied to objects which respond to our first-order interest in manipulation and control; this abolishment allows a second-order reference in which our belonging to the life-world and our ontological ties to other beings and to being is allowed to be said. A new “reference-effect” is thus produced by the imagination’s “double valence with respect to reference”, namely the power of works of the imagination to re-describe reality (2007, p. 175).

It is this power which also comes to figure prominently in the *social imagination*, where the “imaginative practices” of *ideology* and *utopia* become the primary instances of the imagination’s *figuring* and its *re-description* of the socio-political landscape. These imaginative practices display a “double ambiguity”, one arising from the polarity between the two practices and one arising from the polarity *within* each of them, which consist of the opposition between a positive and constructive side to a negative and destructive side in each (2007, p.181). Both polarities are structural features of the imaginative core that constitutes both ideology and utopia before simply being “obstacles” to overcome. According to Ricoeur (2007, pp.182-185), ideology functions in a way similar to a *picture* of a societal/political grouping, or as an instance of the *reproductive imagination*; and its specific pathology is manifested in a reinforcement and repetition of social ties in situations that are “after-the-fact”. A utopia functions similarly to fiction (that is, as an instance of the *productive imagination*) and its specific pathology is degeneration of viable imaginative variations of society into “a mad dream” following the logic of schizophrenia. This means that the crisscrossing of utopia and ideology is the result of two fundamental directions of the social imaginary; and that you cannot have one without the other, for even the most reduplicative ideology produces a gap or distance for imaginative variation and even the most

erratic form of utopia remains a desperate effort to represent humanity as it fundamentally is.

“This is why”, writes Ricoeur (2007, p. 186), “the tension between utopia and ideology is insurmountable”. The insurmountable tension between utopian and ideological imaginings underlines the importance of *fragility* in Ricoeur’s thought. It is necessary to stress the important methodological, anthropological and visionary role that Ricoeur attributes to human fragility. Without this concept Ricoeur’s account of the imagination can very easily be read as a rather conservative, “all-ends-well” account where difference can be and is successfully subsumed by the unifying and colonializing force of Imagination. The fragility of imagination therefore forms an integral part of the “Ricoeurian” account of aesthetic commitment.

3. A Ricoeurian account of aesthetic commitment

I would now like to elaborate on what a Ricoeurian account of aesthetic commitment would look like. In the first place, such an account stresses the fundamentality of imagination. It is the imagination that acts as the foundation on which both aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic heteronomy are conceptually constructed. The imagination, on Ricoeur’s account, can be understood as *a hidden and fragile language-like mediation of differences that effects a double movement of reference*. How does this flesh out the minimal definition of imagination we started off with? The first important aspect of Ricoeur’s account of the imagination is that he emphasizes the mediating function of the imagination to such an extent that it becomes possible to speculate whether the imagination might just be the concept we use to explain/describe types of “mediations”. This would also explain why Ricoeur does not present us with only one version of imagination, but presents us with different versions: metaphoric imagination, social imagination, etc. What is salient about the different types of mediations, though, is that creative mediations are privileged “works” of imagination for Ricoeur. In fact, when one remembers the “double movement” of reference imagination is capable of effecting on Ricoeur’s account, it becomes clear that imaginative mediation *qua* mediation is itself capable of establishing new insights. Therefore, Ricoeur’s emphasis on mediation does not place his account “somewhere in-between” a negative and a positive definition of imagination. His “placement” of imagination as something “in-between” has a powerful *constitutive* effect: the mediation itself makes certain things possible, or acts as a *condition of possibility for creativity*.

One needs, however, to admit that Ricoeur’s account is slightly weighted towards the idea that imagination (as fragile, hidden mediation) is more cognitive than perceptual. Although his account gives a very nuanced portrayal of imagination as an expression-and-condition of a “merely human freedom”, it may be interpreted as equating the imagination to a special type of cognition. More research needs to be done on this aspect of his account of imagination, though.

I will therefore conclude by highlighting those aspects of Ricoeur's philosophy of the imagination that are most advantageous to a constructive construal of aesthetic commitment. In the first place, the fundamentality of imagination implies that what we understand as the autonomously aesthetic is something that is made possible by the work of the imagination. The work of the imagination also acts as the condition of possibility of what we've come to understand under "aesthetic heteronomy", meaning that the potential for the politically transformative or the liberating elements of art become recognizable because the political realm itself contains something "imaginary".

The autonomy of the artwork can be understood, in this context, as a product of the imagination's aesthetic labour and, therefore, as a condition of possibility for engagement. The political artwork is still an artwork and not an election poster or a party manifesto. What the autonomous political artwork allows us to do instead is to imagine and to re-imagine a possible socio-political "world" via the double movement of reference of which the imagination is capable. Art is a specific, fragile mediation that is expressive of and, at the same time, constitutes a "merely human freedom".

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