The Total Work of Art in European Modernism

Roberts, David

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Ancients and Moderns: Rousseau’s Civil Religion

Rousseau stands at the beginning of what we might call the passage of modernity. In *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique* (The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right) (1762) he constructs the imaginary history of the foundation of society through an act of association that effects “the passage from the state of nature to the civil state” (1.8). This founding act, through which the “Republic or body politic” gains its unity, common identity, life, and will, points to a second act of self-institution: the recovery of the republic, of the sovereign body politic, through the refoundation of society. Rousseau’s appeal to the eighteenth-century imagination springs from what Jean Starobinski calls this mythic figure of the rebirth and regeneration of society.¹ This second passage—the passage of modernity, from slavery to freedom, from despotism to democracy, which announces the death of the old divinity, the Christian God, and the birth of a new divinity, humanity²—draws its inspiration from the archetypal image of the republics of antiquity, Sparta and Rome.

For Rousseau a Christian republic is a contradiction in terms, since the kingdom of God is not of this world. He declares: “True Christians are made to be slaves” (4.8). Rousseau condemns the Christian separation of the theological and political systems as a perpetual source of social dissension inimical to social unity; he acknowledges at the same time, however, that there can be no state without a religious basis. Rousseau therefore seeks a new unifying principle of social cohesion. The social contract must be completed by a civil religion, by a purely civil profession of faith, designed to preserve the unity of the body politic. The civil religion of the republic demands the moral adherence of each citizen just as each citizen participates in the moral universality of the General Will. Rousseau’s political religion accordingly replaces impiety with antisocial behavior, to be punished by banishment, and apostasy with its civil equivalent, perjury—the repudiation of the profession of faith to which each citizen has sworn—to be punished by death (4.8). In Robespierre’s republic of virtue, all opponents of the General Will are by definition guilty of atheism.

But what form is the civil religion to take? In its general form as the religion of man, based on natural divine right or law, it possesses neither temples nor altars nor rites. In its particular form as civil or positive divine right or law, the religion of the citizen is good in that it equates the divine cult with the state, and bad in that it encourages superstition, “drowns the true cult of the Divinity in empty ceremonial,” supports tyranny, and unleashes murderous intolerance (4.8). Rousseau does not provide an answer in the Social Contract. We note, however, that as with the General Will the religion of man precludes representation in the double sense of political and/or theatrical representation. The religion of man consecrates the General Will as the invisible spirit, the indwelling divinity of the republic, that can never be represented but comes to presence (is instituted and constituted) in the general assembly of the citizens, whether in the political forum or in the public festival.

We find the same sentiments in the contrast that Rousseau draws in his Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre (1758) between the public spirit of the festival and the private vices indulged by idle theatrical amusements. Rousseau’s ire was aroused by d’Alembert’s suggestion, at the prompting of Voltaire, in his article on Geneva in the Encyclopédie that a dramatic theatre be established in the city republic so that “Geneva would join to the prudence of Lacedaemon the urbanity of Athens.” Like Plato, Rousseau, the citizen of Geneva, refuses dramatic art a place in the republic. Not only would it ruin our “antique simplicity”; it threatens public liberty. But when Rousseau turns from his review and moral condemnation of French classical theatre to the entertainments fitting for a republic, an unacknowledged tension between two conceptions of the festival appears. In the Letter to M. D’Alembert and the Social Contract Rousseau’s interest is the same: “to transform each individual who, in isolation, is a complete but solitary whole, into a part of something greater than himself, from which, in a sense, he derives his life and his being; to substitute a communal and moral existence for the purely physical and independent life with
which we are all of us endowed by nature.”

But is this communal existence the task of the legislator or the spontaneous act of the people? The latter, declares Rousseau in the *Letter to M. D’Alembert*: the festivals of the citizen are not those that enclose a few spectators in the gloomy confines of the theatre. “No, happy peoples, these are not your festivals. It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness.” A happy people, united by bonds of joy and pleasure, will be drawn naturally to the free and generous atmosphere of festivity. Unlike the theatre, the entertainment of the people needs neither spectacle nor spectators.

But what then will be the objects of these entertainments? What will be shown in them? Nothing, if you please. With liberty, wherever abundance reigns, well-being also reigns. Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.

Rousseau gives color and body to these sentiments through his description (in a footnote) of a spontaneous gathering that he had experienced as a child, set in motion by the officers and soldiers of the local regiment dancing together in the square after their exercises.

A dance of men, cheered by a long meal, would seem to present nothing very interesting to see; however, the harmony of five or six hundred men in uniform, holding one another by the hand and forming a long ribbon which wound around, serpent-like, in cadence and without confusion, with countless turns and returns, countless sorts of figured evolutions, the excellence of the tunes which animated them, the sound of the drums, the glare of the torches, a certain military pomp in the midst of pleasure, all this created a very lively sensation which could not be experienced coldly.

Soon they are joined by their women folk, wine is brought, and the dance is suspended.

There resulted from all this a general emotion that I could not describe but which, in universal gaiety, is quite naturally felt in the midst of all that is dear to us. My father, embracing me, was seized with trembling which I think I still feel and share. “Jean-Jacques,” he said to me, “love your country. Do you see all these good

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Genevans? They are all friends, they are all brothers; joy and concord reign in their midst.\textsuperscript{5}

These often-quoted passages breathe Rousseau’s nostalgia for the lost community of childhood: “Ah, where are the games and festivals of my youth? Where is the concord of the citizens?” There, in the suspension of social distances, in the one body of the dance, in the sense of universal gaiety, Rousseau found his dream of communal transparency, in which the abolition of the distance between desire and pleasure excluded representation. The spontaneous festival “actualizes what is perpetually denied to social man but what is intended everywhere and always in a gathering of persons: the affective community, the integration of the members who love and recognize each other, the joy felt in rediscovering a hidden common belonging.”\textsuperscript{6} Nevertheless, Rousseau finds it necessary to bring back the legislator to direct and supervise popular festivals precisely in relation to the young people of Geneva, for whom he proposes periodic balls, open to all the marriageable young, to be presided over by a magistrate appointed by the council. Suitably conducted, such balls would serve many useful purposes, from training the young to the enhancement of social concord. The aim of training citizens for the republic allows Rousseau to slide imperceptibly from spontaneous to regulated activities, taking the “modest festivals and games without pomp” of the Spartans as his model. In Sparta, the citizens, “constantly assembled, consecrated the whole of life to amusements which were the great business of the state and to games from which they relaxed only for war.”\textsuperscript{7} The rapid passage to the great business of state appears to indicate that Rousseau is scarcely conscious that his contrast between republican entertainments and those of the theatre brings into play two very different types of festival. The patriotic games and festivals of the Spartan model seem scarcely compatible with the utopian moment of community of childhood memory, where the reciprocal opening of hearts realizes a sense of presence of each to all and “a collective soul is formed amidst the raptures of joy.”\textsuperscript{8} Doubtless in Rousseau’s mind it is this aesthetic and ethical model of community that is intended in the public festivals that will make up the civic religion of the \textit{Social Contract}. But where the utopian moment of community suspends and transcends the social hierarchies and distances of the social order, the public festival serves to cement and reinforce the social order. The one dispenses with representation, the other in its instrumentality restores spectacle and theatricality.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 133.
Rousseau’s dream of a world without differences and divisions, of the transparent community beyond all social contradictions, defines the spontaneous popular festival as a *liminal* experience in a double sense. It creates an interregnum that suspends and transcends the social order. The interregnum belongs to times of transition and renewal: festivals that celebrate the death of the old and the birth of the new year, times of “disorder” between the old and the new king, times of the carnivalistic inversion of the social order, which recall the perennial image of a lost golden age of equality and bring back the originary space of the social to which societies can return to renew themselves. The revolutionary festivals of federation in 1790 came closest to this liminal experience of the suspension of the social-symbolic order, the consciousness of the dissolution of old social identities in the utopia of liberty, equality, and fraternity. And here too in the Revolution a gulf opened up between the festivals of 1790 and the public festivals of the Republic. 

Rousseau’s mythical figure in the *Social Contract* of life recovered through death, of the abolition of the past and of the recovering of the original transparency of the body politic present to itself, this dream of origin and of refoundation was played out in the French Revolution. It would reveal the double face of instituting/instituted power: the never forgotten dream of Saturn’s golden age of equality, and the drama of the Revolution consuming its own children, like Saturn. To this double mythical image corresponds Michelet’s distinction between the spontaneous festival of the people, charged with the religious creativity so important for Durkheim, and the Jacobin usurpation of the General Will in the festivals of the state religion. The tension between these two ideas of festival brings to the fore the contradictions of representation, in theatrical and political form. The fatal passage from the universal religion of humanity and nature, from the pure festival of freedom and the pure social bond of unity—which as such *instiutes nothing*—to the phantasm of the Republic *one and indivisible*, in which virtue has become one with terror, defines the crisis of refoundation. It marks the parting of the ways between the true and the false sublime of the new religion of society.

**The Festivals of the French Revolution**

Michelet, the great historian of the French Revolution, singles out the final chapter of the *Social Contract* on civil religion and the praise of the Jesus of the Gospels in “the Creed of a Savoyard Priest” in book 4 of *Émile* as forming together the last will and testament of the eighteenth century. They announced the new life, the new religion, of the French people that emerged spontaneously from the revolutionary events of 1789. In the winter of 1789, Michelet writes, France crossed the passage from one world to another, toward national unity as Frenchmen. The

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people, not the leaders, were the actors in this holy epoch of the nation: “No one saw this wondrous unity without thanking God. These are the sacred days of the world.” Michelet is the historian of the Revolution as festival, the festival that belonged to the people not their leaders: “Profoundly human Genius! I love to follow, to observe it in its glorious festivals in which a whole people, simultaneously actor and witness, gave and received the impulse of moral enthusiasm, where every heart swelled with the greatness of France, of a fatherland, which proclaimed as its law the rights of Humanity.” 11 In his famous preface of 1847 to his History of the French Revolution Michelet addresses the spirit of the Revolution, which fulfilled the legacy of the eighteenth century by abolishing the double theological and political incarnation of tyranny: “That century, that of the spirit, abolished the gods of the flesh in the state and in religion, so that there was no longer any idol, and there was no god but God.” 12 But what in Michelet’s eyes was this God other than the people itself, the God revealed in the sublime passage from the brotherhood of death to that of life, the God present in the spontaneous unity of the nascent nation that canceled all distinctions of class, fortune, and parties? Michelet’s eloquence swells to a climax in his conjuration of the “sacred days” of the Revolution. In the festivals of federation he perceives the miracle of a new religion, the miracle of a return to nature, manifested in what we could term with Rousseau the natural divine law of sociability, the benevolence that sweeps aside all artificial barriers to fraternity. Michelet echoes Rousseau in his admiration of the festival of the people for the people: “There is in these immense assemblies, in which the people of all classes and communions form one heart, something more sacred than an altar. No special cult can lend holiness to the one holy thing: man fraternizing before God. The beauty, grandeur, eternal charm of these festivals: the symbol in them is living. The symbol of man is man.” 13

The importance of the revolutionary festivals is clear: they manifest the social bond as such, brought to consciousness by the tabula rasa of the Revolution. In returning men to a state of nature, the Revolution discovered society, 14 or more exactly the sacred nature of the social bond. The revolutionary festival springs from the dream of an original equality, the return of the golden age. The people present to itself in the political forum and in the festival embodies the original instituting power of foundation and refoundation. The festival thus inaugurates a new political space, that of the French people, of the nation, no longer divided and separated

11. Ibid., 6.
12. Ibid., 3.
Refounding Society

by historical borders and barriers, and the new time of a new political era, ordered and manifested through a new calendar. The declaration of the Republic on the day of the autumn equinox “consecrated the social regeneration of the French people.”15 The most important function of the revolutionary festival lies for Mona Ozouf in the “transfer of sacrality” from the old to the new values, which could be expressed and celebrated only through the invention of a civil religion, for which of course the model was the city republics of antiquity. The spirit of the Revolution was betrayed, however, once the new religion of humanity split apart into contending sects, and fratricidal leaders usurped the place of the people. In Michelet’s judgment, the failure of the Revolution was prefigured in the passing of the moment of religious creativity in 1790, the upsurge of popular inspiration that had made of the Revolution a kind of dream. And with this moment the possibility of giving the Revolution a solid social foundation was lost.16

Jacques-Louis David emerged as the master planner of the Republic’s ceremonies.17 With the series of paintings The Oath of the Horatii (1785), The Death of Socrates (1787), and The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons (1789) David established himself as the preeminent painter of his generation and ensured the hegemony of neoclassicism in France from 1790 to 1815. David’s exaltation of civic virtue and heroism expressed in ideal form the morality and philosophy of the bourgeoisie. His choice of noble and sublime subjects broke with the rococo style of the court and the Christian iconography of the church, with the twin goals of regenerating painting and morally instructing society. Sponsored by Marat and Danton, David was proposed for a seat in the National Convention and elected in September 1792, later becoming secretary and then president of the Convention. He voted for the execution of the king (for which his wife divorced him), supported the Jacobins in their struggle against the Girondins, and remained a close friend and ally of Robespierre to the end. In September 1793 he was appointed a member of the Committee of General Security, which has been described as “a kind of terroristic ministry of homeland security.”18 This committee was subordinated to the Committee of Public Safety, of which David became one of the twelve, and later fourteen, members. In this capacity he signed 406 of the 4,700 decrees of the committee.19 He was also the dominant member

19. Warren Roberts, Jacques-Louis David: Revolutionary Artist (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 74–75. Among the decrees signed by David was one for the arrest of Quatremère de Quincy, his traveling companion in Italy in 1779 (see chapter 2).
of the Committee for Public Instruction from October 1793. This accumulation of offices, including membership of the Commission for Monuments and its successor, the Temporary Commission of the Arts, which took control of the Royal Academies and the National Museum of the Louvre, meant that by the end of 1793 “David stood supreme and unchallenged as a kind of ‘dictator of the arts.’ He had suppressed the Academy [of Painting and Sculpture], captured the art commissions, organized the artistic contests, and brought the artists’ societies to heel.”

His varied activities as official propagandist of the Jacobin regime during the Terror covered “national fêtes, comprising public funerals of Jacobin heroes, triumphal celebrations in honor of republican achievements, and religious festivals such as the Fête of the Supreme Being; public works, involving monuments, statues and city planning; and graphic representations such as paintings, engravings, and caricatures.”

David was arrested and imprisoned after the fall of Robespierre, but by 1797 he had attracted the attention of Napoleon, embarking on a new career as official court painter of the emperor in 1804. Faithful to the cause of the Revolution, he went into exile to Brussels in 1815.

David’s activities as propagandist of the Revolution are epitomized by his most famous painting, *Marat Assassinated*, presented to the Convention 14 November 1793. In his speech to the Convention the following day he summed up his conception of the public, moral function of art: “It is thus that the traits of heroism, of civic virtue offered to the regard of the people will electrify the soul, and will cause to germinate in it, all the passions of glory, of devotion to the welfare of the fatherland.”

His most valuable contribution to the Revolution, however, was not as painter but as pageant master, involved in the planning and staging of festivals from 1791 to 1794. It was he who established the pattern of the republican festival, contributing to the creation of the new symbols of the moral unity of the people after the break with the monarchy and the church, which had still occupied the presiding role in the 1790 Fête de la Fédération. The new type of public festival appeared with the interment of Voltaire in the Pantheon in 1791 and the “simple but sublime” (Robespierre) Festival of Liberty in 1792, with music by François-Joseph Gossec and songs by Marie-Joseph Chénier. D. L. Dowd lists the chief components of the republican festivals: the procession, with its floats, carriages, costumes, and banners, consisting of civil functionaries, the Convention, the Paris commune, sections, and popular societies, was framed by temporary monuments (triumphal arches, statues of liberty, temples, altars, pyramids, and obelisks), which provided the setting for the symbolic rites and ceremonies, such as civil oaths, official oations, solemn hymns, marches, and triumphal choruses. The Festival of Unity and Indivisibility on 10 August 1793, to celebrate the anniversary of the overthrow of

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21. Ibid., 97.
22. Ibid., 79.
the monarchy, gives a good idea of how David deployed the participating masses in order to achieve the intended mass effects. The festival commenced at the site of the Bastille with speeches, cannon fire, and songs. The procession was led by the popular societies under the banner of the all-seeing eye of surveillance, the emblem of the Jacobin clubs, followed by members of the Convention with the ark containing the text of the new constitution, an allegory of the sovereign people, a chariot of liberty, and floats honoring the aged, the blind, foundlings, workers, and the fallen soldier. The constitution was proclaimed at the fifth station, the Altar of the Fatherland on the Champs de Mars, where the ark and the fasces of unity were deposited. The whole event, which lasted some sixteen hours, concluded with singing and dancing, banquets, and a military pantomime and attracted some 200,000 enthusiastic spectators.²³

The culminating point of David’s propaganda and of Robespierre’s power was the Festival of the Supreme Being on 20 Prairial, Year II (8 June 1794). How was the refoundation of society to be anchored in the hearts and minds of the people? This was the question that preoccupied Robespierre, Rousseau’s most faithful disciple. Robespierre presented his decision to found a new national religion through the establishment of the cult of the Supreme Being as the logical consequence and culmination of the Jacobins’ struggle against the enemies of the Republic, who by espousing atheism, materialism, and nihilism had placed reason in the hands of crime. In his speech to the National Convention of 18 Floréal, Year II (7 May 1794), “On the Relation of Religion and Morality to Republican Principles, and on National Festivals,” Robespierre set out to establish Rousseau’s natural divine law and to embody it in appropriate festive form. Ozouf considers the Festival of the Supreme Being the exemplary revolutionary festival. In joining with Rousseau to reject atheism and embrace deism, Robespierre expressed the intellectual consensus of the century, summed up in Kant’s religion within the bounds of reason. The festival signified above all the supersession of historical religion by natural religion, that is, the replacement of the hierarchical festivals of the ancien régime by the “universal religion of nature.”²⁴ In Robespierre’s words, “The true priest of the Supreme Being is nature; its temple, the universe; its festivals, the joy of a great people assembled under his gaze.” Even if the idea of the Supreme Being and that of the immortality of the soul are nothing but fictions, they are, Robespierre declared, humanity’s most beautiful dreams.²⁵ They alone form the pure foundation of virtue and justice; they alone bar the way to chaos, emptiness, and violence. And they must be inculcated through an institution that comprises an essential part of public education: “A system of festivals… would provide both the softest bonds

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of fraternity and the most powerful means of regeneration.”

National festivals will give expression to the very principle of the people’s moral instinct, its sublime enthusiasm. Echoing Rousseau, Robespierre hails the festival of humanity: “Man is the greatest object there is in nature, and the most magnificent of all spectacles is that of a great people assembled. One never speaks without enthusiasm of the national festivals of Greece;...One beheld a spectacle greater than the games; it was the spectators themselves, it was the people which had conquered Asia, whose republican virtues had elevated it at times above humanity.”

To prolonged applause Robespierre read out the articles of the decree establishing the new state religion, to be inaugurated and celebrated by the Festival of the Supreme Being, 20 Prairial, Year II (8 June 1794), under the direction of Jacques-Louis David. The exalted sentiments inspiring the festival found sentimental expression in David’s scenario presented to the Convention: “Dawn has scarcely announced the day when the sounds of military music echo from all sides, replacing the calm of slumber with an enchanting awakening. Beneath the benevolent star that brings life and colour to nature, friends, brothers, spouses, children, old men, and mothers embrace and hasten to decorate and celebrate the festival of the Divinity.”

The more prosaic report in the Gazette nationale two days later specified reveille at exactly five in the morning. At exactly eight cannon fire summoned the gathered sections to proceed to the National Gardens (the Tuileries), where Robespierre hailed the eternally happy day that the French people had consecrated to the Supreme Being: “Never has the world he created offered him a sight so worthy of his eyes.” After Robespierre’s speech the hymn of François Louis Désforges, “Father of the Universe, supreme Intelligence,” set to music by François-Joseph Gossec, was played. With the torch handed to him by David, Robespierre set fire to the effigies of Egotism, Atheism, and Nothingness (le Néant), revealing a somewhat singed statue of Wisdom. After Robespierre’s second speech the assembled citizens proceeded to the Champs de Mars and grouped themselves around the mountain that David had constructed, on which the Convention took up position, with Robespierre occupying the summit. There followed a hymn to the Supreme Being, words by Marie-Joseph Chénier, to a great symphony of instruments and voices (200 drummers and a choir of 2,400 drawn from the forty-eight districts of Paris), and then oaths to the Republic, the singing of “The Marseillaise,” and military salutes. Conrad L. Donakowski sums up the whole complex of expectations going back to Plato that were reinforced by the festivals of the Revolution:

The continuing artistic and popular quest for theatrical happenings which combine all the arts as symbols of a reintegrated psyche and society; the belief that social

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26. Ibid., 411.
27. Ibid., 410–11.
28. Aulard, Le culte de la raison, 308.
Revolution and Representation

Michelet’s 1847 preface to his *History of the French Revolution* opens with his contemplation of the empty space bequeathed by the Revolution, its only monument the arid plain of the Champs de Mars. An appropriate beginning, for this site bears mute witness to the instituting spirit of the Revolution, the sublime enthusiasm of the people. This space is sacred: a God lives there, an omnipotent spirit, says Michelet. Its emptiness, like the “nothing” of Rousseau’s popular festival, is the very symbol and cipher of the revolutionary sublime in its unrepresentability as the politics of the General Will and the religion of the Supreme Being. If for Ozouf the Festival of the Supreme Being is the exemplary festival, it is because it shares with all the revolutionary festivals the animating imaginary of a return to an original equality. When Michelet declares that man is the true symbol of man, he means with Rousseau the image of man as total not fragmentary being, who demanded a new form of participation, that of public assembly. Thus the festival alone could guarantee the undivided expression of the people’s sovereign, instituting power. What mattered to the revolutionaries was “being able to conceive of a society in which the instituted is still not too far removed from the institutor. Indeed, it was in this sense that the festival is itself, for the men of the Revolution, their great borrowing from antiquity, for the festival is instituting.” In opening the originary space of the social, the festival—Rousseau’s theatre without representation—opens the space of social performance, the common space of religion, politics, and theatre, the space, that is, of representation. All the contradictions of the Revolution appear and are played out in this public space. The very attempt to deny representation entangled the Jacobins in fateful illusions, ideological and theatrical in equal measure.

Contemplating the empty space of the Revolution, Michelet did not share these illusions. He admits no continuity between the holy days of the Revolution, the new religion born of the spirit of universal fraternity, and the artificial religion of Robespierre’s republic of virtue. The human and generous epoch of the Revolution belonged to the people, whereas the epoch of violence issued from the actions of an

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31. Ibid., 275.
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infinitely small number of leaders. The people’s liberation from the old, theological-political “fraternity of death,” accomplished by the “wondrous unity” of the nation, ended in the Terror’s absolute alternative: “fraternity or death.”³² For Michelet the Festival of the Supreme Being cannot be exemplary, and yet it expresses the ultimate logic of Rousseau’s dream of transparency and totality, just as the civic religion of the Social Contract with its absolute sanction of the death penalty comes perilously close to the Jacobins’ coupling of virtue and terror, fraternity or death. Charles Taylor approaches the question of the two types of festival through the lens of Victor Turner’s distinction between structure and antistructure. He argues that the French Revolution embodied the paradigmatic paradox of revolution as “the anti-structure to end all anti-structure.”³³ The traditional function of antistructure in the ritual process is the suspension, not the destruction, of the social code. Destruction sprang from the conviction that society needed to be completely reconstructed. “The epoch of the French Revolution is perhaps the moment in which at one and the same time anti-structure goes into eclipse, and the project of applying a code without moral boundaries is seriously contemplated. This emerges most clearly in the attempts…to design festivals which would express and entrench the new society.”³⁴ The revolutionary festival in its dual form as antistructure and as structure embodied the two very different senses of equality entwined in Rousseau’s writings on the festival: on the one hand, the utopian idea of community—the strange vita nuova that made the Revolution a sort of dream (Michelet); on the other, the state religion of the Social Contract. The one could indeed demonstrate its antistructural, antitheatrical transparency in the communal impulse that cancels the distinction between actors and spectators. The revolutionary system of festivals could not demonstrate, however, its sublime premise and purpose: “Robespierre tried to impose a cult devoid of all sensible representations, a religion worthy of its sublime project, but in that regard, the Festival of the Supreme Being was a spectacular failure. The theatrical nature of the procession staged by David, of the symbolic scenery built on the Champs de Mars, and even the sacrifice of idols burned publicly at the onset of the ceremony, all framed a stage where Robespierre became an unwilling actor and for some a high priest.”³⁵

If I am insisting on these contradictions of representation that haunt the public space of performance ever since the French Revolution, it is because the idea and the practice of the total work of art will be driven by the same sublime imperative of transcendence as the Jacobin festivals and will confront the same dilemmas. In searching for transcendence, the revolutionary festivals were forced to reproduce

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³² Michele, Histoire de la révolution française, 4–7.
³⁴ Ibid., 51.
the two inescapable dilemmas of representation. The one is political and can be phrased in the following fashion: do the people make the festival or does the festival make the people? The instrumental answer is given by Ozouf: “The festival was an indispensable complement to the legislative system, for although the legislator makes the laws for the people, the festivals make people for the laws.”\(^{36}\) The second is theatrical: how can the public festival escape spectacle if it is already itself a spectacle? In each case we observe an appeal to the sublime in order to transcend these contradictions. But does the sublimity attributed to the Revolution lie in the mind of the beholder, as Kant argued, or does it lie, on the contrary, in the feelings of the actors and participants in the world-historical events that made the Revolution its own sublime spectacle, as the revolutionaries thought? Although Kant speaks of the “participation” (Teilnehmung) that the French Revolution arouses in the observer, even at the cost of danger—a participation close in fact to the enthusiasm inspiring the revolutionaries to fervor and greatness of soul—he holds fast to the distinction between the spectators and the actors in this play (Spiel) in terms of the distinction between the respublica noumenon and the respublica phaenomenon. Since the ideal republic is greater than any realization, the spectacle of the downfall of old states and the emergence of others “as if from the bowels of the earth” cannot be the source of the sublime. Only the idea of the republic, namely that those who are subject to the law are themselves its legislators, can be sublime, because it grounds all forms of the state; only the ideal participation of the observer can be sublime, because it testifies to the moral character of humanity, that is, to a capacity of human being to unite nature and freedom. The “representation” (Darstellung) of the idea in an empirical example, as with the French Revolution, necessarily falls short, may in fact even fail, because its realization can be accomplished only through conflict and war. Kant’s strict separation of spectators and actors protects the free community to come, which arouses our enthusiasm here and now, from inevitable compromise and betrayal.\(^{37}\)

For the Kantian observer the Revolution was itself a play, a representation, played out before the people, the nation, humanity. “No other historical period...has exalted to the same degree the idea of an exemplary politics, an educational spectacle for all mankind.”\(^{38}\) Politics became theatre at the same time as the actors were anxiously striving to preserve the sublimity of the Revolution from theatrical contamination. If the success of the Festival of Unity and Indivisibility was such that dramatic representations of its ceremonies played in Parisian theatres for months, this was not to be the case with the Festival of the Supreme Being. The Commission for Public Instruction rejected as impiety a proposal to reenact this

\(^{36}\) Ozouf, Festivals and the French Revolution, 9.

\(^{37}\) Kant, Der Streit der Fakultäten, part 2, secs. 6–8.

religious festival in the theatre. The God of nature must not be confused with the God created by the fantasy of poets and painters, priests or tyrants.

What stage with its cardboard rocks and trees, its sky in rags and tatters, can rival the magnificence of 20 Prairial or erase its image? The drums, the music, the roaring bronze, the cries of joy rising to heaven...the humid veils, these clouds blown around above our heads, and parted by playful winds to let the rays of the sun shine through, as if they had meant it to be witness to the most beautiful moments of the festival; finally the victory hymn, the union of the people and its representatives, all with their arms raised toward the sky, swearing under the sun the virtues and the republic.\(^{39}\)

The commission repeated Rousseau when it declared that the spectacle of the united people under the open sky—“there was the Eternal, nature in all its magnificence”—defied representation: “To place this sublime spectacle on stage is to parody it.” The Committee of Public Safety joined the commission in condemning the proposed substitution of lifeless images for the unity manifested in national festivals, and decreed the banning of such representations.

As this decree indicates, this sublime religious spectacle was meant to transcend the lifeless images of the theatre, but precisely as total work of art. The description of the revolutionary festival, given by Marie-Joseph Chénier, poet, dramatist, and leading collaborator of David, in a speech to the National Convention 15 Brumaire, Year II (5 November 1793), provides, we might say, the founding definition of the total work:

Liberty will be the soul of our public festivals; they exist only for it and through it. Architecture raising its temple, painting and sculpture retracing as they wish its image, eloquence celebrating its heroes, poetry singing its praises, music conquering all hearts for it through proud and touching harmonies, dance lending gaiety to its triumphs, hymns, ceremonies, emblems, varied according to the different festivals, but always animated by its genius, young and old bowed before its statue, all the arts magnified and sanctified by it, uniting in order to make it cherished: these are the materials available to the legislators when they are called upon to organize festivals of the people; these are the elements on which the National Convention must impress movement and life.\(^{40}\)

Chénier’s definition, enthused by liberty and forged in the fire of the Revolution, brings all the elements of our discussion together: the civil religion of a free people to be celebrated through the combined contribution of the arts. Animated and


sanctified by their public function, the arts’ united powers of expression appear as both product and producer of communal unity and identity, and as such the visible medium and manifestation of the (invisible) spirit of the assembled people. It is important to stress the reciprocity at work here: if the arts are magnified and sanctified by the civil religion (indeed only this higher purpose can effect a synthesis of the arts), it is equally the case that the civil religion needs the arts. Thus, despite Rousseau’s original distinction, the festival partakes of “theatre,” just as theatre repeatedly strives to partake of the festival by escaping from the confines of representation that separate action and spectators.

The festival therefore appears as simultaneously the soul and the supplement of the revolutionary spirit. As the aesthetic pledge of totality, the festival makes the Republic manifest to the people and the people to itself. As total work of art, the festival functions as the supplement of presence (the people present to itself under the open sky) in the double sense elucidated by Derrida. The supplement enriches nature, that which is sufficient in itself, through the addition of art, techne, image, representation, but it also functions as substitute by taking the place of that which is absent, not sufficient in itself. Thus we can say that just as Rousseau’s idea of nature is invented at the moment of the “sentimental” consciousness of its disappearance, so the idea of the festival is revived at the moment of the collapse of the ancien régime. In inheriting and displacing absolutism’s will to representation, the revolutionary festival inherits all the ambiguities of aesthetic illusion. If we take the festival’s two essential but contradictory features—presence against representation, the collaborative union of the arts—it is clear that these two, “real presence” and aesthetic illusion, exclude and include each other in equal measure. Exclusion is written into Rousseau’s utopian conception of the communal festival, inclusion into Chénier’s “festivals for the people” with their fusion of liberty and the arts. This intended fusion exemplifies in a particularly acute, namely “absolute,” fashion a recurrent impulse in European art since the French Revolution and romanticism that is directed to a fusion of art and life. We could call this impulse the bad conscience of modern art—it has generated a stream of manifestos and programmes proclaiming the sublation of art in terms of a critique of aesthetic illusion. This critique and its goal—the reunion of art and life—is of necessity ambiguous and totally ambiguous insofar as it is inspired by a totalizing impulse. Odo Marquard underlines this ambiguity when he defines the constitutive impulse of the total work of art as the abolition of the boundary between art and reality that manifests itself as a potentiation of illusion. 

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(civil religion, pedagogic festivals, aesthetic education, mythology of reason, etc.)
that responds to the dialectic of secularization unleashed by the Revolution.

The Abyss of Political Foundation

If the belief in the sublime effect of festivals could serve to dispel the dilemmas of
representation, it was because the sublime spectacle of the assembled people trans-
cended the distinction between actors and spectators. This presence of the peo-
ple to itself, this manifestation of the divinity of the Revolution, belongs, however,
to the liminal moment of rupture, the interregnum between the old and the new
symbolic orders, described by Michelet as the crossing of the abyss from local to
national identities. He compares this rite of passage to a dream, in which the dis-
solution of the old order uncovered the social bond, the social as such that found ex-
pression in the festivals of federation. Ozouf describes the subject of her book as the
meeting of this dream, this liminal experience of original equality, with the Revo-
lution.42 On the other side of this encounter lies the Jacobin republic of virtue and
the indivisible people, modeled on Rousseau’s General Will and sharing Rousseau’s
deep attachment to Sparta. The revolutionaries’ identification with the heroic vir-
tues of the ancient republics (so well illustrated in David’s neoclassical paintings),
above all the identification of the Jacobin leaders with Sparta and Rome, imbued
the idea of revolution with the fateful illusions of regeneration through a return to
the ancients, as Benjamin Constant with his contrast between ancient and modern
conceptions of freedom would later charge. This identification elevated “the public
virtue which brought about so many marvels in Greece and Rome” (Robespierre)
to the presiding spirit of revolutionary government. Sparta was the lens through
which Robespierre and Saint-Just “saw their own society as transparent, ideally
united, a society whose very essence repelled conflict between different classes, in-
terests and parties, conflict that was the sole preserve of traitors and rascals, whom
it was perfectly legitimate to eliminate.”43 The amazing vitality of Sparta as a po-
litical ideal, so attractive to the utopian imagination in antiquity and since the Re-
naissance, was due above all to Plutarch. Lycurgus figured as the supreme example
of the legislator, who had established the communal and military organization of
Spartan life, based on an egalitarian division of land, the refusal of industry and
commerce, and a morality of obedience and courage. The rule of law, the primacy
of the group, and the power of the state to form and educate its subjects, this—
and not Athenian democracy—furnished the imaginary of the republic that re-
mained dominant up to the end of the eighteenth century.44 The conviction that

42. Ozouf, Festivals and the French Revolution, 8.
the Athenian and Florentine essays in democracy had failed ensured the primacy of egalitarianism in utopian thought and in the French Revolution. Pierre Vidal-Naquet sums up the consequence of this fateful illusion: “The Sparta of Robespierre embodied at once a rejection of history and a desperate rejection of politics.”

We may indeed call this rejection of history and politics sublime; it was, however, the sublime of negation, a *creatio ex nihilo*, that led with inexorable logic to the Terror’s “frenzy of destruction” (Hegel).

In his study of the sublime in politics, Marc Richir interprets the French Revolution through the eyes of Michelet and his contemporary, the historian and liberal politician Edgar Quinet. Richir’s starting point is Michelet’s and Quinet’s reading of the Revolution as a religious event, the birth of a new religion in response to the collapse of the despotic machinery of the absolute state. For Richir the collapse of the classical theology of politics signifies the advent of the sublime in politics, by which he means the abyss of political foundation: the sublime encounter with and traversal of death (the death of the old symbolic order, the death of old identities), from which the people emerges and with the people the modern question of democracy. Richir works with the contemporary conception of the sublime provided by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1791). Kant interprets the encounter with and traversal of (the fear of) death as the rite of passage through which the subject discovers a higher form of self-preservation, the idea of humanity in himself. This discovery of the moral self beyond the fear of death is the moment of the sublime, which is equally the moment—for Michelet and Richir—of the discovery of the social bond and of the birth of the new religion of humanity, liberated from the yoke of despotism. But, as Kant argued and the Revolution demonstrated, the sublime religion of man is always under the threat of the return of the repressed, the return of despotism and its logic of the debt (the original debt of death). Kant underlines the religious significance of the sublime by distinguishing between religion and superstition, the latter characterized not by reverence for the deity but by fear and anxiety with regard to the overpowering god, to whose terrifying will humans must submit.

Richir defines the sublime in politics as the utopian moment of the Revolution, in which the dissolution of all existing social institutions reveals, in the anarchy of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the image of the sublime community as the symbolic horizon of humanity (79–80). Richir’s sublime in politics denotes this abyss of

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46. Richir distinguishes *le politique* of his title (the political) from *la politique* (politics). “The political sublime” might be a better translation, but I prefer to keep to Richir’s title by speaking of “the sublime in politics.” Parenthetical page references in the text refer to Richir, *Du sublime en politique*.

foundation, from which the new gods of political modernity—humanity, nation, the people—surged forth, and with them the dialectic of the desacralization and resacralization of politics. “The sacralization of the nation, spread throughout Europe by the French Revolution, put the relationships between politics and religion in a new light; it made politics religious and gave an educational role to the state.”

But, as Richir argues, this sublime passage from death to new life can only be a liminal experience, that of the return of the social to its origins, in which the community appears to itself in a kind of dream outside the space and time of history (470). It is the moment of society’s search for self-incarnation from below, which attained its fullest expression, as Michelet saw, in the festivals of federation and was betrayed in the Jacobins’ attempt to incorporate society from above (Richir, 468). The failure to grasp that the sublime community, Kant’s respublica noumenon, is unrepresentable underlay the Jacobins’ illusion that there could be an unmediated institution of society. The very attempt to symbolize the unpresentable idea of the republic in a Festival of the Supreme Being highlights what Richir calls the “transcendental illusion” of the Revolution. The Jacobins’ short circuit of state and society by means of a “sublime” politics was the vain attempt to occupy the vacant space left by the demise of the Christian God. Hegel spells out the consequences of the Jacobins’ usurpation of the General Will: “Before the universal can perform a deed it must concentrate itself into the One of individuality and put at the head an individual self-consciousness; for the universal is only an actual will in a self, which is One.”

All other individuals are thereby excluded from the entirety of the deed, negated in the pure generality and abstraction of the General Will. Therefore the only deed of which general freedom is capable is death: “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage” (Hegel, 360) Pure negation thereby attains its most sublime (erhabenste) and ultimate form: to see its pure reality disappear immediately and turn to empty nothingness (mocking the effigy of Nothingness burned in the Festival of the Supreme Being). The Terror is this frenzy, this fury of destruction. As Hegel puts it, the vacuous Être suprême is nothing but the exhalation of a stale gas hovering over the corpse of independent being (358).

Edmund Burke, the father of the modern theory of the sublime, declared the ruling principle of the sublime to be terror. We must recognize, with Hegel, in addition to Richir’s Kantian theory of “the sublime in politics,” the sublime politics of the republic of virtue and terror. On the one side, with Michelet and Richir, we

48. Emilio Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics in Italy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9. This totalizing vision of the identity of the political and the religious, of God and the people (Mazzini), has been an ever-renewed response to the question that Chateaubriand posed at the end of his Essai sur les révolutions, published in 1797 in London: “What is the religion that will replace Christianity?”

have the Revolution as itself the creation of a new religion that, in opening modernity’s symbolic horizon of freedom and democracy, institutes nothing (Richir, 124). On the other side we have the attempt to institute a political religion of the state, the model for the “totalitarian democracies” of the twentieth century. Both forms of the political sublime are manifested in festivals; where the essence of Rousseau’s and Michelet’s festival lies in the spontaneity of communal feeling, the festivals of the Revolution served purposes of mass mobilization and propaganda and thus embraced the theatricality they were designed to transcend. The General Will manifests itself, however, not only in the festival as total work of art but also, as Hegel demonstrates, in its “most sublime and ultimate form” as Terror. We have here two completely opposed conceptions of the sublime: if both involve the transcendence of the empirical self and therefore can lay claim to the sublime enthusiasm of the people, sublimity for Kant lies in the consciousness of moral individuation beyond the terror of annihilation, while for Hegel the sublimity of “absolute freedom and terror” lies in its absolute negation of all real individuals. As we shall see in part 3, the countertheory to Kant’s sublime, Nietzsche’s theory of Dionysian de-individuation, is crucial to the interpretation of the totalitarian total work of art.