

Panel 30

Writing, Aesthetics and the Politics of Engagement

After Representation: For an Aesthetics of Resistance

David Lloyd

University of California, Riverside

German author Peter Weiss's novel, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975), weaves a seemingly autobiographical narrative of a working-class German youth confronting the rise of Nazism and finding his way to fight in the Communist forces in the Spanish Civil War through a series of meditations on art works, from the friezes of Pergamon in Berlin to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). His encounter with that painting in the French journal *Cahiers d'Art*, even as the Spanish Republic faces defeat, leads to his extended analysis of a series of classical paintings that stand behind *Guernica*: Goya's *Third of May* (1814); Guéricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19); and Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). Picasso's painting has become an iconic work for the era of aerial warfare and of the total war that is directed at civilian populations. It also seeks to seize hope from a moment of absolute destruction and defeat. Weiss's meditation on the painting and its genealogy deliberately engages with the role of art in moments of revolutionary failure that are also the traces of defiance containing the promise of future resurgence. But his account of the paintings remains ambivalently tied to an aesthetics and an ethical dilemma that turn around representation, both its belatedness and its projections. What if the intersection of aesthetics with the politics of representation fails precisely at the moment of revolutionary failure? Where Weiss's work, moving and intelligent as it is, seems to get caught in the very dilemma that is that of the Communist Party in its desire to represent or stand in for the Spanish working class, might the rupture towards which these paintings and their own belatedness gesture open the way to an alternative conception of the "aesthetics of resistance", predicated not on representation but on the life-in-common of those denied access to representation whom Aimé Césaire described as subject to *thingification*? I turn finally from Weiss and the moment of the anti-fascist struggle of the 1930s to the struggle that seems both its contemporary counterpart, that of Palestine in the present day, and the culmination of the brutal forms of war pioneered by the air forces of the Axis. The extremity of Israel's war on the civilian population of Gaza and the cultural forms of their resistance pose us with the question as to what place the work of art and reflection on art practices may have in a world in which *thingification* promises to be the end of "the human" as it has been conceived for over two centuries.

Biography

David Lloyd is Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus at the University of California, Riverside. Books include *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* (2016) and *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2019). *Rage, Shame, and Dread* is forthcoming with Seagull Books. Poetry collections include *Arc & Sill* (2012) and *The Harm Fields* (2022), and *The Press, Shelter and The Pact: Three Plays* appeared in 2025.