

Art and Exceptionalism: A Critique

Arne De Boever

1. To Have Done with the Exception?

In *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, philosopher Santiago Zabala takes on the contemporary talk about emergencies and states of emergencies. He argues, contrary to what one might expect, that in spite of all this emergency talk—in spite of the fact that today, emergencies appear to be everywhere—today’s real emergency is the absence of emergency. We are currently living in a state of “accomplished realism” (2) in which the emergency

Book Reviewed: Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically by page number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

I would like to thank Martin Woessner for his excellent comments on an early draft of this essay. I would also like to thank one anonymous reviewer from *boundary 2*, who helpfully pressed me to make my discussion of anarchy more precise. I should also point out that I am thanked in the acknowledgments of the book under review here and that the thought I develop in this review has come about in part due to my conversations with Santiago Zabala, whom I consider a friend.

boundary 2 45:4 (2018) DOI 10.1215/01903659-7142777 © 2018 by Duke University Press

is lacking. By this, Zabala doesn't mean that "the refugee crisis in Europe, ISIS terrorist attacks, and Edward Snowden's revelations of US National Security Agency surveillance" (3) are not emergencies; rather, they "mark the absence of emergency" because "they are framed within our global system" (3). "They emerge as a consequence of this frame, which is the greatest emergency" (3). Instead, Zabala is interested in what "disrupt[s] the framing powers": "the weak, the remnants of Being, that is, every person and idea forced to the margins of this frame" (5). Those disruptive elements "inevitably [strive] for change or, better, for an alteration of the imposed representations of reality" (5). Such an alteration "is necessary," Zabala writes, "not only politically and ethically but also aesthetically. An aesthetic force is needed to shake us out of our tendency to ignore the 'social paradoxes' generated by the political, financial, and technological frames that contain us" (5). Here we discover what real emergencies he has in mind: "the 'urban discharge' of slums and plastic and electronic wastes; the 'environmental calls' caused by global warming, ocean pollution, and deforestation; and the 'historical accounts' of invisible, ignored, and denied events" (5). Those emergencies are discussed in the engaging second part of Zabala's book, which focuses on artworks. It is those kinds of emergencies that in Zabala's view "will disrupt not only capitalism's indefinite reproduction but also realism's metaphysical impositions" (5). As Zabala's book title reveals, he considers artists and art to have a unique capacity to "'thrust' and 'rescue' us into the greatest emergencies" (5). Rather than saving us from the emergency, they save us *into* it.

As some readers may already have guessed, Zabala's main philosophical guide for such a project is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. It is from Heidegger that Zabala takes the problem that is central to his own book, the absence of emergency, which is the consequence of what Heidegger calls "framing." More precisely, Zabala takes from Heidegger the problem that all of today's emergency talk in fact conceals the greatest emergency. Whereas the former—today's emergency talk—concerns "aspects of law, politics, and society, which belong to the ontic realm of knowledge" (3), the latter—the greatest emergency—"involves senses and feelings, that is, 'existence,' which, Heidegger says, is never an 'object' but instead is 'Being'—it is *there* only insofar as in each case a living 'is' it" (3). In today's world picture and its "frame," Heidegger argues, "Being is marginalized, ignored, and abandoned; it becomes a remnant" (16). To look for the greatest emergency, then, means to look for "the remains of Being" (16). However, those "are not something we see or contemplate; they

instead constitute everything that is beyond the logical, ethical, and 'aesthetic state' [or frame] that Heidegger defined as 'the lucidity through which we constantly see'" (17). Thus, "the remains of Being emerge as an alteration, an event, or an emergency of the world picture, that is, an interruption of the [framed] reality we've become accustomed to" (17). The emergency is lacking "when we realize that everything is lucid and functioning correctly" (17). Heidegger believed the emergency was the greatest "where everything is held to be calculable, justifiable, and predictable, reducing the world to objective measures" (17)—where the frame had become victorious. According to Heidegger, Zabala writes, art is the "extraordinary and unimaginable" something that "discloses itself through the remains of Being. Works of art, as remnants beyond measurable contemplation, instead of being the focus of aesthetics have become its emergency, that is, what will 'help' retrieve, appropriate, and disclose Being" (18). Art thus saves us from aesthetics. More strongly even: it has a unique capacity to save Being, and, by consequence, us (human beings) from our enframing.

Heidegger was, of course, not alone in developing a philosophy of the emergency and the state of emergency. Indeed, the emergency was a central concern of "Weimar thought," the thought developed between the First and Second World Wars. Zabala mentions early on in his book the "popular 'state of emergency' (*Ausnahmezustand*) of Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben" (3), but those are quickly left aside as a "consequence" (3) of the abandonment of Being with which Heidegger is concerned. The abandonment of Being "includes," Zabala writes, "the decision of the sovereign" (3) that is central to the works of Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben: it is the abandonment of Being that in part explains the rise of the sovereign decision on the state of exception in our contemporary moment. At this point, Zabala adds a long footnote (note 16, 136–38) that focuses on the different ways in which *Ausnahme* has been translated in Benjamin, Schmitt, Agamben, and Heidegger, but the footnote has Heidegger as a focus and does not map out the relation of Heidegger to the Benjamin-Schmitt-Agamben grouping in any detail.

One feels, in fact, that such a detailed mapping may be missing in Zabala's book, which, in order to truly have been convincing in its adoption of the Heideggerian point of view, likely should have given more of an explanation on how that point of view is different from the "popular 'state of emergency'" that Zabala all too quickly dismisses. For one, while Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben can certainly be discussed together when it comes to understanding the place of the state of exception in their work, it would

be difficult to maintain that they have all treated the state of exception in the same way; and it is in part a careful mapping of those differences and their politics that may have led to a more precise assessment of the ideas of the emergency and the state of emergency in Heidegger as well. Zabala's book may be about art, but it attempts to make a decidedly political point, one that hinges on a controversial reading of a decidedly controversial thinker. Like Schmitt, Heidegger is a politically dubious figure, something that the recent publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* (on which Zabala partly relies) has only made clearer. It is unfortunate that Zabala's book does not address Heidegger's association with antidemocratic, fascist politics in a book dealing with contemporary states of exception—even if *Why Only Art Can Save Us* proposes to leave aside ontic emergencies having to do with law, politics, and society for the supposedly more ontological considerations of art. To have kept those ontic emergencies within this book's picture could have complicated Zabala's thought.

In what follows, I propose to bring issues of law, politics, and society back in, in order to further develop Zabala's compelling thought. This is important from a strictly internal perspective, to assess Heidegger's thinking about the emergency and map it out in relation to Benjamin, Schmitt, and (though I will focus less on his work) Agamben. Second, and as I will explain in the final section of this review essay, it is important from an external perspective, when one is thinking about the politics of art and its association with exceptionalism. "Art is exceptional." Isn't it time we began to trouble art's love affair with exceptionalism, in particular when exceptionalism has become the *mot d'ordre* of a new century characterized by political states of exception (in response to the War on Terror) and economic, neoliberal imperatives to "never let a serious crisis go to waste"? Zabala would have us forget many of those exceptions as "fake," as concealing what Heidegger calls "the greatest emergency," namely the abandonment of Being. But surely such a focus on the greatest emergency risks forgetting about its potential complicities—not only historical but also structural (to recall Schmitt's thesis about all modern concepts of the state), with the exceptionalist kind of government—that have become the rule today? Surely such a focus, too, risks beginning to operate like precisely the kind of frame that Zabala, through his Heideggerian position, seeks to interrupt?

2. Popular States of Exception: A Closer Look

To be clear, when Zabala posits that the abandonment of Being in part explains the rise of the sovereign decision on the state of excep-

tion in our contemporary moment, I think he is correct—at least when it comes to Schmitt and the way in which his work on the state of exception responded to Benjamin. In this second section, I want to consider in some detail Schmitt’s state of exception to see, first, how it compares to Benjamin’s (section 3); and second, how both Schmitt’s and Benjamin’s states of exception compare to Heidegger’s emergency thinking that is at the center of Zabala’s book (section 4).

Consider the first chapter of Schmitt’s *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, which is the most relevant in this context. In the book’s stand-alone opening sentence, Schmitt declares that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 1985: 5) (in the German original, “Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet” [Schmitt 1922: 9]). The sentence is a sovereign decision itself: Schmitt decides, as a sovereign author, who is sovereign. In English, the sentence is suspended between the words “sovereign” and “exception,” which are the most relevant terms here; in German, the language is more precise (“exception” is “state of exception” in the original German) and the sentence is now suspended between “sovereign” and “decision,” which foregrounds the decision rather than the state of exception.¹

Schmitt’s project in the chapter is (as his chapter title announces) to define sovereignty. Some would, no doubt, tend to look at the normal situation to do so: Who guarantees the rule of law? Surely that is the sovereign. But Schmitt’s answer is different. If one wants to find out in any given situation who is sovereign, one must find out who decides on the state of exception. This is why sovereignty, in his view, is a borderline concept: it can only be understood from the extreme limit (“*extremus necessitatis casus*,” an extreme case of necessity [1985: 10]). For Schmitt, the exception comes first (“the rule . . . derives only from the exception” [15]); it “proves everything” (15). Understood in this way, the exception has something “vital” (15) compared to the rule: “In the exception,” Schmitt writes with echoes of Nietzsche, “the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition” (15).

In order to understand the particularity of that break, one has to understand what happens in the state of exception. The situation that the phrase “state of exception” refers to is highly specific: it is a situation or state in which the law temporarily suspends itself in order to enable sover-

1. These minor differences between the English translation and the German original matter when one considers Zabala’s focus on the later Heidegger of the emergency and his forgetting of the early Heidegger of the decision.

eign power to maintain order (and protect the law). This is not a situation of “anarchy and chaos” (12), as Schmitt is careful to point out; it is not a situation in which the law is destroyed (the translator notes that Schmitt has written an entire book about dictatorship, which deals with the latter situation [7]). Rather, we are talking about a constitutionally guaranteed temporary suspension of the constitution (“According to article 48 of the German constitution of 1919 . . .” [11]), a situation in which the law recedes but order is maintained. Schmitt calls this “extraordinary order,” which he distinguishes from “ordinary order.” The state of exception enables him to point to the phrase “*legal order*” (12) to explain that in a state of exception, the two terms that make up that phrase get forced apart, are “dissolved into independent notions” (12), with the law receding to a minimum while order (absolute order, in this case) is maintained. It is in such situations, Schmitt argues, that sovereign power is revealed. Schmitt does not tell us by what criteria the sovereign decides on the state of exception; he does not have the audacity to lay this out—this can only be decided by the sovereign, based on the sovereign’s “competency.” What is certain, however, is that the state of exception is declared in the name of “public safety and order, *le salut public* [public well-being]” (6).

Schmitt argues that the decision on the state of exception has always been at the core of sovereignty. He finds it in Jean Bodin, for example, in the sixteenth century, and while “the vivid awareness of the meaning of the exception” (14) is maintained in the seventeenth century, Schmitt notes that by the eighteenth it had been lost: “the exception was something incommensurable to John Locke’s doctrine of the constitutional state and the rationalist eighteenth century” (13–14); “emergency law was no law at all for Kant” (14). But, Schmitt argues, “it should be of interest to the rationalist that the legal system itself can anticipate the exception and can ‘suspend itself’” — “from where does the law obtain this force, and how is it logically possible that a norm is valid except for one concrete case that it cannot factually determine in any definitive manner?” (14).

What Schmitt tells us, in 1922, is that the key activity of sovereign power is to decide on the temporary suspension of the law in the state of exception. To do so, sovereignty takes up a peculiar position inside/outside of the law (“although [the sovereign] stands outside . . . he nevertheless belongs” [7]). What makes sovereignty? The state of exception. What makes the state of exception? The law, which includes the sovereign possibility of its own suspension—a kind of “violence,” as Schmitt puts it (9)—in cases where the law could not possibility anticipate (future situations, as

Schmitt makes clear: “the precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated” [6]). The exception makes the sovereign and the sovereign makes the exception.

3. Schmitt’s Antagonist: Divine Violence

Schmitt was by no means the only thinker to address these topics. In his book *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben relies on Samuel Weber’s research to show how Schmitt’s *Political Theology* was actually a response to Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” essay (the German title is “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” or “On the Critique of Violence”—the difference matters, as I will explain below), which appeared before Schmitt’s book and which we know Schmitt read (Agamben 2005: 52–64).² How does Schmitt’s argument relate to Benjamin’s, and how might a return to Benjamin help us assess Zabala’s Heideggerian position?

Most of Benjamin’s text covers what he calls “legal violence” (Benjamin 1996: 236–52).³ What is a critique of violence? Benjamin doesn’t just mean a criticism of violence here—he is not taking a position against violence in this text or criticizing violence in this or that way. He is practicing, rather, a critique in Kant’s sense of the word; he is trying to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, in the same way that Kant was trying to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of reason. How might one determine whether violence is legitimate or illegitimate, legally founded or not? To engage in a critique of violence, which Benjamin presents as a moral assessment of violence, some problems have to be dodged. First, one must sidestep the means/ends distinction. Usually, the ends are used to justify the means: violent means are legitimate, for example, if the ends are just. Both natural law and positive law, Benjamin points out, are caught up in this means/ends distinction. He states several times (1996: 236, 237, 238) that he wants to assess violence outside of the means/ends sphere. He wants to focus on the means alone, cut off from the ends. This leads him to reconsider the difference between “sanctioned force and unsanctioned force” (237), between legitimate and illegitimate violence. His position is that violence is deemed unsanctioned

2. I will leave aside here Heidegger’s influence in Agamben’s work—Agamben was one of Heidegger’s students, and the connection between the two deserves to be assessed in this context.

3. “Legal violence” appears throughout the text. For the German original, all page references are to Benjamin n.d.

or illegitimate when it is in the hands of the individual (it's the state that, according to Max Weber's familiar argument from 1919, holds the monopoly on violence). This is because law must be preserved against such individuals. This explains, Benjamin argues, the public admiration for "the 'great' criminal" (239), who is an individual who practices violence. He also mentions the example of the great strike, a topic to which he returns later in his text. Strikes that seek to overthrow the law, Benjamin argues, will be confronted with military violence; the latter is sanctioned, the former unsanctioned violence. Military force needs to preserve the law; it is a law-preserving force (to be distinguished from a law-making force). Against the great criminal, the law has capital punishment, a sanctioned violence that is legitimately used as a deterrent, to keep violence out of the hands of the individual. Capital punishment, in Benjamin's view, reveals that "there is something rotten in the law" (242) because it practices a violence (in the name of the collective) that it seeks to deny (to the individual). One could call this the paradox of legal violence. Benjamin also discusses the police in this context, noting that it is in democracies where the police are not invested with "the power of the ruler in which legislative and executive supremacy are united" that the existence of the police "bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence" (243).

The origin of every contract, Benjamin writes, "points toward violence" (243). Of course, nonviolent conflict resolution is possible in both the private and the public spheres. In the public sphere, it comes from conferences, understanding, the realm of language, even if Benjamin also shows through a short commentary on fraud that even the realm of language has become infected by violence. The text then shifts to discuss two forms of strike: specifically, political strike and proletarian general strike (a distinction Benjamin takes from Georges Sorel). The first is violent and law-making because it merely brings a change of masters; the second, even though it destroys state power (he writes, "vernichten" [n.d.: 120], "ausschalten" [120], and "aufheben" [121]—the difference between all three is worth considering), is nonviolent because it leads to a "wholly transformed work" ("eine gänzlich veränderte Arbeit" [121]). He calls the second "anarchistic" (1996: 246).

It is only after making these distinctions that Benjamin appears to come to his key question. What kinds of violence, he asks, exist outside of those envisioned by legal theory? This is where we arrive at the "On" or "Zur" moment in his title. Having done the critique bit, he now leaps beyond mere critique into transgression. At first, he suggests that mythi-

cal violence exists outside of legal violence, but a little further along in the text, it turns out that mythical violence is ultimately “identical with all legal violence” (249). A true outside is found only in what Benjamin calls “divine violence” (257), which he considers to be opposed to myth (as the Gods, he writes, always are). Divine violence is law-destroying, it destroys boundaries, it expiates, it strikes; mythical violence, on the other hand, makes law, sets boundaries, works through guilt and retribution, and threatens. “Educative power” (250), “erzieherische Gewalt” (n.d.: 126), is mentioned as an example of such a violence outside of legal violence; his final paragraph characterizes such violence as “waltend” (129), translated as “sovereign” (1996: 252).

What kind of violence does Benjamin have in mind here? It is hard to tell, and it has been a topic of much scholarly discussion—Slavoj Žižek, who blurbs Zabala’s book, has contributed to it (Žižek 2008). What can be said is that the realm of legal/mythical violence, the realm of critique, is interrupted here, or perhaps is not so much interrupted as transformed into something else—a realm of violence outside of law and myth. Benjamin calls it “waltend” or “sovereign.” The translation is worth noting. It is supposedly when Schmitt comes across this text, and its theory of a sovereign violence that transgresses legal/mythical violence, that he writes *Political Theology*, which represents an attempt to rein in such violence. Indeed, Schmitt folds it back within the law through the theory of the state of exception. This is a conservative move in response to Benjamin’s anarchic radicalism.

It is through such a discussion of the difference between Benjamin and Schmitt that one can understand how Schmitt’s theory of the sovereign as he who decides on the exception can be read within Zabala’s Heideggerian point of view as an emergency that is “framed” within the dominant political and legal systems of the world order. That is indeed Schmitt’s project: to reframe the violence that Benjamin theorizes as outside of the law within it. Zabala, following Heidegger, is not interested in emergencies that are framed in this way; instead, he is after “the greatest emergency” that pertains to Being. He wants to lay bare the remains of Being that interrupt the frame.

4. Some Political Questions

While this explains Zabala’s rejection of Schmitt for Heidegger, it leaves his relation to Benjamin unaddressed. Benjamin’s “Critique of Vio-

lence” isn’t engaged at any point in Zabala’s book, even if it seems indispensable for addressing Schmitt’s relation to Benjamin. Given also that Zabala derives his book title by substituting “art” for “a God” in Heidegger’s infamous statement that “only a God can still save us” (1), this seems to propel us into a discussion of art’s “divine” violence in Heidegger.

But Zabala *does* turn to another text of Benjamin’s that is also part of this discussion, namely Benjamin’s much later “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” One understands why Zabala would engage with this text, which explicitly uses the term “state of emergency” to refer to a situation in which oppression has become the rule, but which also calls for a “real state of emergency” that “will improve our struggle against Fascism” (Benjamin 1968: 257). In other words, exceptionality seems to go two ways: both in the direction of oppression and fascism, and then in the direction of something else that might defeat fascism (one imagines that Benjamin’s conversation with Schmitt is continuing here). What is this something else? It appears to involve practicing history otherwise. For one, Benjamin seeks to bring theology into historical materialism, as he proposes in thesis I through the famous image of the puppet and the dwarf. In addition, he is rethinking the idea of “progress” (258), which he captures, negatively, by the image of the Angel of History being pulled into the future, with its back toward the future, beholding a single catastrophe, its wings caught in a storm blowing from “Paradise” (257). “This storm we call progress,” he writes—the last word dripping with irony. The text also seeks to rethink messianism, which Benjamin reconceives from a traditional messianism that is focused on the end of time into an alternative, *weak* messianism (thesis II) that would contract the future into the now. In Benjamin’s by now famous terms, which I invoke in anticipation of a later part of my argument, this means crystallizing a certain configuration of thoughts into “a monad” (263), into “now[-time]” (261); he describes a kind of slowing down or arrest, a “stop, that—against the accelerationism of “progress”—presents “a revolutionary change in the fight for the oppressed past” (263). The “continuum of history”—one single catastrophe—is thus “blast[ed] open” (262), and a new sense of history, a new calendar, is established. This process is captured, in thesis XVII, as an “Aufhebung”—a cancellation or destruction that also preserves (262).⁴

Going back to “Critique of Violence,” one might also surmise that Benjamin had already theorized this “real state of exception” (257) in 1921 as “divine violence”—the “sovereign” violence beyond the sphere of legal/

4. There is a translator’s footnote that draws this out (Benjamin 1968: 263).

mythical violence that writes contracts in blood. In other words, Benjamin may be theorizing a state of exception here against Schmitt's state of exception that would be able to end the fascist state of exception with which Schmitt had become associated. The political stakes though are clear: we are dealing with fascism throughout.

Fascism, however, does not come up—at least not by name—in Zabala's book, perhaps because it is not the kind of emergency he is interested in. Still, given that his main philosophical guide is Heidegger, one might have expected something more than the quick dismissal of the issue in Zabala's first paragraph as Heidegger's "political adventure of 1933 as rector of the University of Freiburg, in other words, after the failure and error implied by this political involvement, which inevitably caused him so many academic, public, and psychological difficulties, as the recent publication of his *Black Notebooks* (once again) confirmed" (1). Art, Zabala goes on, took Heidegger out of these "ontic" troubles, directing his thinking toward the lack of emergency and the greatest emergency of Being's abandonment; the art that Zabala draws our attention to in the long, second part of his book manages to present the remains of Being in such a situation of emergency lack.

Yet, we *do* learn from Zabala that "democracy" doesn't get a good rap in Heidegger's thinking about how art rescues us into the emergency: "As it turns out, democracy, which is the political stance currently supposed to liberate the public, does not need to impose pleasantness because it is already resigned to its indifference. Words, sounds, and images, as Heidegger explains, have become means to govern the masses" (21). If art thrusts us into the greatest emergency, this is a thrusting that appears to go against democracy and its governing of the masses.

Just what *are* the politics of Heidegger's rescue mission here? I gather from Zabala's book that they are not democratic. I'm not one of those anti-Heideggerians who automatically marks Heidegger's position as fascist—I'm hesitant to do so given that I consider his position (at least the late Heidegger's position) to relate critically to Schmitt's. It also remains unclear how Heidegger relates to the politics of Benjamin's "real state of exception" in this context. Benjamin is clear that such a real state of exception will bring about the end of fascism. What are the politics of that end? Do they connect to Heidegger's politics? And if so, how?

5. Heidegger, the Anarchist

For such questions, the third and final part of Zabala's book, titled "Emergency Aesthetics," is the most useful. In a short section on interpretation, Zabala traces the notion of hermeneutics back to "the messenger god Hermes, whose name points back to his winged feet." I quote at length:

This messenger was renowned for his speed, athleticism, and swiftness; he exercised the practical activity of delivering the announcements, warnings, and prophecies of the gods of Olympus. In the *Cratylus* (407e), *Ion* (534e), and *Symposium* (202e), Plato connects the term "*hermênea*" etymologically to the name of the god Hermes and presents hermeneutics both as a theory of reception and "as a practice for transmission and mediation": Hermes must transmit what is beyond human understanding in a form that human intelligence can grasp. However, in this transmission, Hermes was often accused of thievery, treachery, and even anarchy because the messages were never accurate; in other words, his interpretations always altered the original meanings. Hermes, as Gerald L. Bruns put it, was "the many-sided, uncontainable, nocturnal transgressor." (114)

In Zabala's rephrasing, interpretation, contrary to description, "adds new vitality" (115). Presumably this is a different "vitality" than the one that Schmitt finds in the state of exception, when he writes that "the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition." Based on what we know about the Heideggerian position by now, the vitality that would be referred to here should be what one might want to call "the greatest vitality," a vitality that exceeds the one residing within the frame of Schmitt's thought. Zabala (a representative of the exceedingly rare position of left-Heideggerianism) ends up labeling it—working through Gianni Vattimo and Bruns on the topic—as "'anarchic' in Rainer Schürmann's sense of this word; [hermeneutics] does not try to assault its *Sache* but rather tries to grant what is singular and unrepeatable an open field" (117).

At this point, though, further complications arise. Zabala seems to be adding here to the difference between Schmitt and Heidegger, because Schmitt, in *Political Theology*, leaves "anarchy and chaos" aside as a realm where law, and the exception, do not apply. The exception, for Schmitt, is *not* anarchy and chaos. This is crucial to his thought. Also relevant here is the Benjamin text that Zabala ignores, "Critique of Violence." In it, Benjamin characterizes the proletarian general strike as "anarchistic": even though

it destroys state power, it is nonviolent because it leads to a “wholly transformed work.” If Schmitt once again appears to be an opponent here, a possible positive connection with Benjamin is also once again brought to light.

Zabala wants his state of exception to be anarchic, not fascistic. But why turn to Heidegger for this? It is worth pointing out, as Zabala does, that “Heidegger never refers to ‘anarchic interpretations’” (117), even if he was very interested in hermeneutics and made it a crucial part of his method. This is the closest we come in Zabala’s book, however, to a name for Heidegger’s politics, and that name is neither fascism nor democracy but anarchy—in Schürmann’s sense of the word, as a politics that would “try to grant what is singular and unrepeatable an open field” (117). At this point, we should likely tie this back to Being’s abandonment and the way in which art according to Heidegger thrusts us into the remains of Being, those singular and unrepeatable elements that reside in the margin—to grant them an *open field* rather than a *closed frame*.

As I have already indicated, Zabala refers to this frame that he wants to break down throughout his book as “realism.” When he talks about the “accomplished realism” of the frame early on, he puts some of the blame for this on the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, who “demands a return to ‘the Great Outdoors’ (‘le Grand Dehors’)” (4). Meillassoux is quickly mentioned here, one assumes, due to his criticism of correlationism, or the philosophical position that considers there is no reality outside of human observation. With the notion of the great outdoors, however, Meillassoux seeks to assert a human-independent reality—a position that Zabala labels “accomplished realism.” Strange, then, at least at the superficial level of terminology, to see the project of “granting things an open field” return here as the “anarchic” gesture that exposing the greatest emergency requires. Strange also, at least to those who have read Meillassoux, that his work is not so much associated with an “accomplished realism” but with a “speculative” one that, for example, in its investigation of the literary genre/philosophical modality of science fiction, calls precisely for another philosophical modality, perhaps not quite a literary genre, of what Meillassoux calls “extro-science fiction,” which hails as its key literary expression “stories of uncertain reality, those in which the real crumbles gradually, from one day to the next ceasing to be familiar to us” (Meillassoux 2010: 60). Such stories would capture the extro-science fiction world in which the irregularity of events “is sufficient to abolish science but not [human] consciousness” (52). I wonder how Zabala might combine what Meillassoux writes here with Heidegger and his criticism of science, which *frames*, and through its framing

abandons Being. It seems to me Meillassoux is *anything but* a representative of “accomplished realism.” Zabala also mentions Graham Harman as another representative of “accomplished realism.” Given that Harman is in part also a scholar of Heidegger, it would be good to see this worked out in detail as well; one certainly wonders how Zabala’s reference to Harman on this count can be squared with the “weird realism” that Harman, in a book on H. P. Lovecraft, puts forward (see Harman 2011). But this too is a confrontation that does not happen in Zabala’s stimulating book.

Leaving those admittedly smaller points aside, the main issue here is clearly what to make of the (somewhat unlikely) “Heideggerian anarchism” with which Zabala concludes his book. How are we to conceive of it? Zabala’s answer to this question brings to light new problems. For Heidegger, a work of art “is not an implement equipped with some aesthetic quality but rather the disclosure of a new origin, world, and truth,” a truth that is “a *Streit*, strife or conflict, between two opposed inclinations: ‘*lichtung*,’ clearing, and ‘*verborgen*,’ concealing” (120). It is within this conflict—which, again, one could be reading in Schmittian terms, as a Heideggerian version of the friend-enemy distinction that according to Schmitt constitutes “the political”—that art institutes itself through what Heidegger calls a “*Stoß*,” “a shock”: “art happens, whenever, that is, there is a beginning, a shock enters history and history either begins or resumes” (121). But, Heidegger continues (and Zabala helpfully quotes this as well):

there is nothing violent about this multidirectional shock, for the more purely is the work itself transported into the openness of beings it itself opens up, then the more simply does it carry us into this openness and, at the same time, out of the realm of the usual. To submit to this displacement means: to transform all familiar relations to world and to earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work. The restraint of this dwelling allows what is created to become, for the first time, the work that it is. (121)

The shock that we find here is then not the kind of “shock” that has also been associated with en-framing: the kind of shock that Naomi Klein (whose book on climate Zabala quotes) analyzes as a technique of government in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) (Klein’s book on disaster capitalism, which Zabala does not reference). Art delivers a different kind of shock: nonviolent, transformative, restraining, so that we are able “to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work.” To my ears, especially when Hei-

degger associates this with history beginning or resuming, this sounds like Benjamin: not only the Benjamin of the “Theses,” who writes about the “continuum of history” being “blasted open” and a new sense of history, a new calendar being established, but also the Benjamin of “Critique of Violence,” who characterizes the proletarian general strike as nonviolent and leading to a “wholly transformed” kind of work. In both cases, Benjamin uses the verb *aufheben*—to destroy and to preserve—to characterize the transformation that he has in mind. It is not clear from Zabala’s book whether there is any engagement with or even simply allusion to Hegel in Heidegger on this count. Looking more closely at Benjamin may have provoked this question.

Zabala does end up distinguishing between the shock of “Erlebnis,” which Hans-Georg Gadamer associates with “the appeal to immediacy, to the instantaneous flash of genius, to the significance of ‘experiences’” and that of “Erfahrung,” which refers to “the binding quality of the experience,” which has to do with “the claim of human existence to continuity and unity of self-understanding” (123). It appears to be on the latter side that Heidegger’s shock of art, its thrusting us into Being’s emergency, comes down. It is thus along the latter lines that one must read the particular “anarchy” that is proposed in the closing pages of Zabala’s book. It is not the anarchy or chaos, the kind of vitality that is immediate and instantaneous. It doesn’t flash, like genius. Instead, it is associated with continuity and the unity of self-understanding. The language here seems to necessitate a modification of the relation to Benjamin, who famously writes of history “flashing up” at a moment of danger in his “Theses”; if there is a shock here, it is one that is ultimately folded back within continuity and self-understanding, even if it marks the instant when “history either begins or resumes.” We find here something like a conservative use of the idea of anarchism. The occasion to engage with Benjamin occurs in Zabala’s afterword, when Benjamin’s “real state of exception” is explicitly mentioned (129; there is no footnote for the quotation). But the reference is not explored further.

6. Against Exceptionalist Theories of Art

All of politics . . . is played out in the interpretation of democratic “anarchy.”

—Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”

When Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben return in the book’s afterword, Zabala writes that “the goal of this afterword is not to confront these

thinkers,” even if he also notes that their contributions are “central in the development of aesthetics and the problem of emergency.” Instead, Zabala sets out to show “how other radical contemporary aesthetic theories in the twenty-first century have also developed in relation to current social, political, and environmental emergencies” (128). He mentions in particular the work of Arthur Danto, Jacques Rancière, and Gianni Vattimo (who, in addition to Heidegger, is another major reference in the book; Vattimo was Zabala’s teacher, and they have coauthored a book together). I want to consider here, given the framework I set up above, Rancière’s role as a contemporary representative of democratic thought (Rancière’s oeuvre is interesting amid the French theory scene in which he is situated, in part due to its commitment to democratic politics). When Zabala quickly mentions Rancière early on in his book and in the afterword, it is because of his notion of “the distribution of the sensible” (128), which refers to what Rancière characterizes as a “police” order of what can be seen, heard, felt, et cetera. Art, according to Rancière, is political in the challenge it poses to that police order: in how it thrusts us (to use Zabala’s Heideggerian language) into what cannot be seen, heard, felt, et cetera. In the quote from Rancière’s *Dissensus* that—along with quotes from Danto and Vattimo—opens Zabala’s book, this means that art (or at least what Rancière calls “critical art”) “aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation” (unnumbered page).

Interestingly, when, in his “Ten Theses on Politics,” Rancière seeks to characterize “democracy,” he mentions Cleisthenes’s famous democratic experiment, wherein “democracy is characterized by the drawing of lots, or the complete absence of any entitlement to govern. It is the state of exception in which no oppositions can function, in which there is no principle for the dividing up of roles. . . . Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *archè*” (2010: 31). Rancière takes this understanding of democracy from Plato’s *Laws*, in which Plato “undertakes a systematic inventory of the qualifications (axiomata) required for governing and the correlative qualifications for being ruled” (30–31). Plato retains seven, four of which (Rancière notes) are based on “natural difference, that is, the difference of birth” (31). “The fifth qualification . . . is the power of those with a superior nature, of the strong over the weak” (31). The sixth, which Plato considers most worthy, is that of “the power of those who know over those who do not” (31)—hence, his preference for philosopher-kings. But, Rancière notes, Plato adds a seventh qualification, which produces what he considers a “*break with the*

logic of the archè” (30). Plato calls this seventh qualification “the choice of God” or “the drawing of lots” (31). Echoing Heidegger, perhaps, Rancière turns this into an understanding of democracy as the regime that “only a god could save” (31). It’s in this way that Rancière arrives at his understanding of democracy as “the state of exception.” If such a democratic state is “anarchic,” this is not because of its total absence of *archè*, but because it produces a break with the *logic of archè*, in that *it turns the absence of the entitlement to rule into the entitlement to rule*—into a “commencement without commencement, a form of rule (*commandement*) that does not command” (31). In other words, there is rule—but not as before. This is a state of exception, as Rancière sees it—but one “that more generally makes politics in its specificity possible” (31). This is why democracy for Rancière is not so much a political regime but the name of politics as such. Democracy, like politics, is what produces a break within the logic of ruling as such. This has something to do with the particular anarchy that it brings. Anarchy, then, does not so much refer to the absence of all rule but to the democratic break in the logic of a rule that is exercised by one “determinate superiority” over “an equally determinate inferiority” (30). It refers to the rule of equality.⁵

In other words, Rancière claims democracy as anarchic and, in that sense, as politics, due to its rule of equality—its rule that is based on the absence of any entitlement to rule. While such a position obviously marks a kind of shock, and an exception in this sense—it does, after all, accomplish a break with the logic of the *archè*—it is worth noting that such a shock or exception does not do away with all rule. Indeed, it is folded back

5. This understanding of anarchy is clear throughout Rancière’s work, from his early book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991), to *Dissensus*. In the first chapter of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière develops a criticism of the “*archè*” of “explication.” This is clear from the fact that he distinguishes the following two dimensions of explication: “On the one hand, [the explicator] decrees the absolute beginning” (6)—“*archè*” in the sense of “beginning.” “On the other,” he continues, the explicator, “having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, . . . appoints himself to the task of lifting it” (6–7). This is “*archè*” in the sense of “rule”—the master rules through appointing her- or himself to this task. This is what Rancière later calls the “hierarchical” setup of explication. Of course, by making the case for an ignorant schoolmaster, Rancière seeks to intervene in this. But how exactly? He proposes a kind of an-archy, but not the loose sense of anarchy that gets rid of the master altogether—it is an an-archy that is “not . . . without a master” (12), as he points out. This is the anarchy of an emancipatory teaching situation, of an equality and democracy of intelligences, freed from the hierarchy of *archè*—or rather, operative after a radical transformation in the logic of *archè*.

within the rule—but into a wholly transformed rule. In other words, there is something “conservative” about Rancière’s position, as well, that ties it back to Heidegger (and Rancière’s characterization of democracy as the regime that only a god can save appears to accomplish as much). However, we’d have to note here that the particular “conservatism” that both Rancière’s and Heidegger’s positions bring is a “radical” one, one that operates through extensive transformation, transformation of the kind that Benjamin describes when he imagines the effect of the strike to a “wholly transformed work.” To go back to Heidegger’s issue of framing, then, the point would not so much be to have done entirely with the frame but to frame otherwise—that would be the project of “the greatest emergency” and the careful attention it pays to the remnants of Being. Heidegger may not want to call this “democratic,” but that is perhaps because he has a flawed understanding of democracy as the indifferent rule of the masses through aesthetics. Rancière, on the other hand, shows us that aesthetics, the politics of aesthetics, can also accomplish something else, something like the “anarchism” that Heidegger (in Zabala’s reading) appears attached to and that Rancière defines as democracy and, by extension, politics.

The risk of this entire conversation may be clear: How does one distinguish the democratic state of exception that can be found in Rancière, and that can also—via anarchy—be associated with Heidegger, from the other state of exception that can be found in Schmitt? It seems that politically, Rancière and Schmitt are very much opposed. Yet how can it be that in their work on politics—one associated with democracy, the other with fascism—they sometimes sound remarkably similar? I ask this question about Schmitt and Rancière, but this concern can be expanded to art theory at large, which often characterizes art’s politics in exceptionalist terms.⁶ Since we are talking philosophy here, I am thinking, for example, of someone like Alain Badiou, who considers the role of art to be a force, “a thinking to declare, in its area of concern, a state of exception” (Badiou 2007: 160). Can one really ignore the echoes of Schmitt here, as Jean-François Lyotard already asked in an early response to Badiou’s *Being and Event* (Lacoue-Labarthe et al. 1989)?

I am, of course, not saying that Badiou is a fascist, or Rancière a fascist in democratic guise. But it seems worth asking the question about echoes of Schmitt in their thought, especially given how pervasive exceptionalist discourses about art are in philosophy, art theory, and culture. To

6. I discuss this issue in particular in chap. 8 of De Boever 2016.

be sure, there are plenty of exceptions, as I have shown, and it just will not do to call all of them Schmittian. But if one wants to hold on to an exceptionalist theory of art, as Zabala (following Heidegger) seems to want to do, then it seems important to me—especially given the importance of Heidegger in Zabala’s argument—to do so with some care for the troubling political complications that such an exceptionalism of art may bring. Rancière, perhaps recognizing the potential problems of Badiou’s thinking on this count, has in a recent interview insisted that if there is an exception in his theory, it is different from Badiou’s theory of the event: for him, the exception is always ordinary, he insists, coming “not out of a decision or out of a radical rupture” but out of a “multiplicity of small displacements” (Geil 2014). This might, again, resonate more with Heidegger than with Schmitt. But the issue remains to be pursued—and it feels like it *should* have been pursued in *Why Only Art Can Save Us*.

The project of *Why Only Art Can Save Us* appears to be to oppose art’s exceptionalism, its greatest emergency, to the “aesthetic exceptionalism” that (in Zabala’s Heideggerian view) in truth marks the absence of the exception. There is no doubt that this is an important point: it targets the ways in which art’s critical edge has been blunted. Plato is not usually considered the artist’s best friend, but the least that can be said about him is that he took art seriously. At least he still considered the artist dangerous, enough so to ban them from his ideal *polis*. But which artist still risks to incur this charge today in liberal democratic states? Even the artists who, in Zabala’s elaborate readings, thrust us in the emergency rarely do so at the risk of being banned. Many of them are supported by art councils and international grants and fellowships. Art sells. Zabala quotes Mark C. Taylor’s analysis of how the financialization of art has softened its critical bite (29). This is true even for the art that Zabala embraces. Even the exceptional art that Zabala brings to our attention fits fairly easily within the overall frame in which we live today. I understand why its exception is greater than the “aesthetic exceptionalism” that Zabala targets; but I also wonder about the extent of the challenge that such art really poses to the frame.

One might further wonder if insisting on another, greater exceptionalism in response to aesthetic exceptionalism—as Zabala, following Heidegger (and Benjamin) would have us do—is the proper solution to the political problem of exceptionalism.⁷ From another point of view, one should

7. In my view, Frédéric Neyrat’s most recent book (2017) suffers from a similar problem, in other words it levels one kind of exceptionalism against another and thereby risks perpetuating the problems it addresses.

surely also wonder if exceptionalism captures the politics of art correctly. Is art really all about the exception, about the suspension of the norm, the innovation and extraordinariness that is almost as a matter of fact associated with it? For many, art surely seems to suspend the law. Some would likely confuse such a suspension with art's law-breaking capacity (Schmitt, of course, does no such thing). Some might call it anarchic—but not in Rancière's sense of the term. One might also look at it from the other side, however, and focus on art's law-making or law-transforming capacities. This means moving toward, rather than away from, the frame, of which Heidegger is so critical. I bring up this idea in light of Benjamin's use of the verb *aufheben* to characterize the effect of divine violence or what he calls "the real state of exception." I do so also with reference to Rancière's insistence (contra Badiou) on an exceptionalism that would consist in "the multiplicity of small displacements." I do so also with respect to Gadamer's insistence on "Erfahrung" versus "Erlebnis," which Zabala embraces. What would it mean to be done with *both* aesthetic exceptionalism *and* art's exceptionalism? What would remain of the politics of art?

We can even leave art out of it. In a time when governments (statal and inter-statal) quite normally rule by exception, surely one should wonder whether the most effective response to this is to insist on a greater exception. Perhaps such a response ultimately risks perpetuating the very problems it addresses?

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Badiou, Alain. 2007. *The Century*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. Cambridge: Polity.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken.
- . 1996. "Critique of Violence." In *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913–1926, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- . n.d. "Zur Kritik der Gewalt." Accessed May 23, 2018. <https://rechtkritisch.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/walter-benjamin-zur-kritik-der-gewalt.pdf>.
- De Boever, Arne. 2016. *Plastic Sovereignties: Agamben and the Politics of Aesthetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Geil, Abraham. 2014. "Writing, Repetition, Displacement: An Interview with Jacques Rancière." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 47, no. 2: 301–10.

- Harman, Graham. 2011. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Winchester (UK): Zero Books.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Picador.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, Jacques Rancière, Jean-François Lyotard, and Alain Badiou. 1989. "Liminaire sur l'ouvrage d'Alain Badiou 'L'être et l'évènement.'" *Le Cahier (Collège Internationale de Philosophie)* 8: 201–25, 227–45, 247–68.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. 2010. "Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction." Liner notes translated by Robin MacKay for Florian Hecker, *Speculative Solution* (CD), 25–60. Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic.
- Neyrat, Frédéric. 2017. *Échapper à l'Horreur: Court Traité des Interruptions Merveilleuses*. Paris: Lignes.
- Rancière, Jacques. 1991. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2010. "Ten Theses on Politics." In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, translated and edited by Steven Corcoran, 40–41. London: Continuum.
- Schmitt, Carl. 1922. *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel Zur Lehre Von Der Souveränität*. München: Duncker & Humblot.
- . 1985. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador.