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Special Issue of Journal of Material Culture
Aesthetics, Politics, Conflict

Tariq Jazeel (University College London) and Nayanika Mookherjee (Durham
University)

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This special issue brings together an anthropologically moored trans-disciplinary set of perspectives that explore the relation between aesthetics, politics and conflict. In his 2012 Firth lecture, delivered to the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) annual conference at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Ghassan Hage (2012) emphasized that aesthetics need not just be about literature, art, cinema, theatre, rituals and carnivals. Focussing on aesthetics as form, or form as an aesthetic subject, he argued for aesthetics as the site for the experience of mutuality. In this themed issue, which comprises papers from a session at that same ASA conference, we follow Hage's recognition of aesthetics as a phenomenological dimension of form and of the social. But rather than just mutuality, through material and immaterial forms we explore the aesthetic dimensions of social and cultural processes linked to situations of politics, conflict and political intervention. As such, collectively the papers in this themed issue mobilize aesthetics as a key domain through which politics, the political, and conflict might be better understood.

We do not seek to be prescriptive about how aesthetics might be used in the task of engaging politics and conflict. Rather, the mobilization of aesthetics in this themed issue is intended as a creative, experimental contribution to understanding politics and conflict as always something more – that is to say something in excess of – the political, economic or sociological. This is not to imply any false opposition between the political-economic and the aesthetic, nor to suggest that the materiality of the social is somehow *anaesthetic*. A rich tradition of Marxist literary theory, notably Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of 'structures of feeling' for example, should serve to remind that something *like* the aesthetic is always implicated in spatial and textual

manifestations of (social) power and its dynamic mutation. In Williams' dynamic interplay of dominant, residual and emergent (ibid., pps.120-127), we find a notion of culture that, in important ways, must be sensibly, or intuitively, apprehended. We find a pre-figuration of the social, or indeed the cultural, thought as aesthetic, even if Williams was careful to disambiguate 'structures of feeling' from the more formal sites and registers of 'Aesthetic theory', like art, theatre, and beauty.

Broadly construed therefore, the take on the aesthetic that authors explore in this special issue opens onto a many-faceted way into the sensible, the felt, the phenomenological dimensions of forms and relationalities that come to comprise the social. Importantly, it also offers a way of evoking interventions into those forms that both include and exceed Hage's (and others) injunction for anthropological engagements of aesthetics to transcend 'literature, art, cinema, theatre, rituals and carnivals'. Here then, creative theorizations of the relationships between politics, the political and the aesthetic become useful for understanding the extra material workings of conflict in its many instantiations.

For these reasons therefore, we explore the potential of aesthetics to make hegemony visible via its emphasis on what Jacques Ranciere (2004) refers to as a certain 'distribution of the sensible'. For Ranciere, who offers an obvious way into *the politics of aesthetics*, aesthetics comprises the 'distribution of the sensible', more accurately translated as the 'partition of the sensible', which itself denotes "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (2004: 12). As he continues, "A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something that is shared and [yet in its] exclusive parts." It is the system of divisions and boundaries that define among other things what is visible and audible within a particular apriori context. Indeed, Ranciere's formulation of the social, of politics that is to say, as a normative and shared realm of sensibility with the potential to become hegemonic, has in recent years become *de rigueur* in Anglophone political theoretical mobilizations of the relationships between aesthetics and politics. There is a certain appeal to his post-Marxist formulation insofar as it opens analytical windows onto the myriad ways that the social is policed, assembled, and made material through immaterial means in any

given context. In other words, once we comprehend how abstract concepts like liberalism, freedom and democracy work aesthetically (that is, how they make us ‘feel’ and ‘want to feel’), we can begin to see the ways that these aesthetics colonize, territorialize and stultify the political imagination, evacuating utopian potentials of *real* political change (see Swyngedouw 2014).

For Ranciere then, the political as a more emancipatory form of intervention is made possible by the penetration of this sensible manifestation of things by those who have (or that which has) no name, and who may thus transform the aesthetic coordinates of the community. It is a disruption of common sense (Dikec 2012: 264), and thus succinctly, in Ranciere’s terms:

To the extent that it sets up scenes of dissensus, politics can be characterized as an “aesthetic” activity. (Ranciere, n/d)

We explore the potential of conceiving ‘the political’ and political articulation as aesthetic practice, though we certainly do not disregard the co-constitution of art and violent events. Thought this way, art can be conceived as subjects and objects while aesthetic practices are immaterial processes of apprehension, emergence and forms of experience. That is to say, the arts and aesthetics may indeed overlap, they may even precipitate one another, but they are not necessarily the same. However, as many of our essays suggest, the slippage between this notion of the political – thought as dissensus – and the bureaucratic orchestration of the social order, what Ranciere refers to as ‘the police order’, is itself central to the mechanics of conflict in ways that complicate identifications of ‘the political’ in contexts of violent events.

What this offers to anthropologists and beyond is a sense that a politics of aesthetics can refer equally to the entirety of the social, to the hegemonic as it were, as well as to interventions that succeed in effectively re-distributing the form of that entirety (Jazeel 2013: 21). Attuned, therefore, as the discipline of Anthropology is to actually existing and contextual cultural articulations rather than theorizations of the political in abstract terms, Ranciere’s understanding of the relationality of politics, aesthetics and political intervention offers an injunction toward the careful ethnographic work of disentangling interventionary speech acts, performances or performativities from the suturings of power. In the context of conflictual situations,

this themed issue begins this hard work. In this context, however, Ranciere's thesis also poses a significant analytical problem: that of temporality and politics in relation to the *re*-distribution of the sensible. Quite simply, how can we recognize the when of the dissensual moment, event, or intervention, *as* a political effect? How and when, in Williams' language, does the emergent become residual, and eventually dominant? What is it that distinguishes genuinely political interventions from what we might otherwise regard as anodyne postpolitical re-orchestrations of the social order (see Swyngedouw 2009; 2010; 2014)? And in the same vein, how can we be attuned to the passing, the duration that is to say, of the genuinely dissensual political moment, its reconstellation by the social, its reincorporation *as* hegemony? These abstract questions necessitate the kind of context specific analytical and empirical work that authors in this collection pursue through ethnographies, critical reading and creative artistic practice. They are questions that require ethnographic answers.

But Ranciere's thesis offers anthropology something else as well as this analytical challenge. And that is the potential to map, or bring into representation, forms of commonality and difference that are not reducible to the familiar Enlightenment concept-metaphors that taxonomically and categorically (fail to) describe the social everywhere. To give one example, if we are aware that the category 'religion', or the adjective 'religious', fails to describe the non-secular forms of communion enjoyed by therevada Buddhists in Sri Lanka (see Scott 1999), then mapping the *aesthetic* coordinates and everyday instantiations of a nation felt by so many to be normatively Sinhala-Buddhist, provides a useful mechanism for making power and its ethnicizing exclusions visible (Jazeel 2013). In other words, the empirical labour of tracing Buddhist structures of feeling in Sri Lanka is politically useful work, even as it is absolutely not the same thing as pointing to the doctrinal and institutional spaces of Buddhism. And as the artist Thamotheampillai Shanaathanan's visual essay in this themed issue also shows, aesthetic labour equally becomes a useful means of intervention in the face of such orchestrations of power.

Drawing upon these kind of critical theoretical resources, anthropological studies have shown how politics in its various forms have evoked, triggered, and regulated multiple senses through various aesthetic manifestations of power and conflict (Mookherjee and Pinney 2011). If following Ranciere we think of politics and the political as the tensions between a common sphere of experience and interventions in that commonality, as well as the reality of objects and the common capacities of

subjects, then part of the work of this special issue is to highlight the political interventions that emerge through various forms of aesthetics in contexts of conflict.

What, then, is the role, place and work of the aesthetic specifically in situations of conflict that this special issue sets out to explore?

* * *

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. (Adorno 1967 [1949]: 34)

Adorno's dictum suggests at one and the same time the danger of abstract Aesthetic (with a capital 'A') reifications of cultures of barbarism, and the unrepresentability of violence through aesthetic forms. But as Jean Franco (2013) has recently argued in her harrowing analysis of violence in Latin America, cruelty and state-perpetrated torture are no aberration of modernity, but have rather been central to it insofar as cruelty precipitates the kinds of fraternal affiliations integral to nation-building projects, to boundary making and consolidations of imagined modern communities and subjects. In this sense, institutionally perpetrated violence finds something of a legitimating motor in the promulgation of aesthetics, that is to say of shared senses of the necessity of barbarism for transitions into modernity; in other words, modernity itself has in some contexts been contingent upon an unwritten, unsayable, social pact regarding the necessity of violent and performative excisions of the *unmodern*. So, if for Franco "[v]iolence is not only beyond politics, but also beyond representation" (2013, p.248), this should remind us of the urgent task of understanding just how the necessity for such unspeakable violence could come to seem like so much common sense to so many. Equally, of course, Franco reminds us of the importance of bringing narratives of violence and barbarism into representation, into the political. In this sense, contra Adorno, we should emphasize that Aesthetic artifacts *have* been able to capture the performance of feelings and memories, of public hurt existing outside legal procedures, when people have sought to redress instances of past injustices (see Mookherjee and Pinney 2011). Even Adorno himself came to counter his own assertion, stressing that "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (1973 [1966]: 362-3).

Aesthetics, however, is never merely expressive, nor is it just redemptive and therapeutic, though we would stress it can indeed be all of these. It is also emancipatory; it signifies and precipitates change and/or conflict. In this sense, we are interested in examining the ways in which these emancipatory forms of aesthetics are deployed by organisations, institutions, states and individuals, as well the therapeutic and recuperative potential of aesthetic work. For Deleuze and Guattari, aesthetics can be seen as an ‘affectuation’ (1988) – a sense event – which is non-representational and hence disruptive. This kind of heretofore unknown disruptiveness is central to understanding the work of the aesthetic in understanding how dissident political articulation must work to *be dissident*. Just as the legitimately political’s non-representability (in particular social and spatial contexts) is central to its capacity for political intervention, this kind of aesthetic ‘re-territorialisation’ of the everyday is also made possible by the circulatory and imaginary flow of the form of the distribution of the sensible. The papers that follow explore politics by and through such means: they explore alternative zones of the sensible, and the sensible’s relationship to a politics of everyday life in conflictual situations; the productive tensions that surface when aesthetics are located, named; they explore how objects as indexes highlight the unsayable hierarchies in aesthetics; the role of sublime and horrific sublime; how forgetting is enabled through the aesthetic forms.

In all these ways and more, contributors to this special issue engage with the role of the aesthetic in the precipitation, mechanics, and signification of conflict. Sepideh Bajracharya, for example, examines the circulation and work that rumour does in relation to the *potential* communal conflict in Nepal, stressing the direct relation to violence that something as immaterial and proleptic as rumour embodies. Deepak Mehta’s contribution also explores the role of the aesthetic in communal conflict by examining the place of mythic mobilizations of time and space in the legalistic documents and case history surrounding India’s Ayodhya dispute. In her essay on representations of the figure of the *birangona* (‘war-heroine’: women raped during the Bangladesh war of 1971), Nayanika Mookherjee critically examines the political work in relation to sexual violence and post-war dynamics that images achieve, or do not achieve. Switching continents and registers, Roger Sansi’s article places Jacques Ranciere at the centre of his ethnography (not theoretically, but empirically) of urban protest in Barcelona over the contentious role of art and the creative economy’s gentrifying and alienating effects in urban regeneration projects.

Omotayo Jolaosho also engages protest in her essay, but through the representational, performative, and embodied potential of *song* in her examination of protest songs in South African townships. And the artist Thamoatharampillai Sanaathanan's visual essay in this special issue shows, through an elaboration on his artwork produced in the context of Sri Lanka's civil war, that art's potential to foster feelings of mutuality can variously express, memorialize, mediate, facilitate loss in relation to home in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Departing from such politico-intellectual lines of flight as we have stressed above, we seek here simply to explore how politics and conflict are always entwined with aesthetics, be that through art objects and artistic labour, through sensibility, feeling and performance, or through circulations of sayable and unsayable anxieties. Aesthetics offers a way of making visible – and thus open to critique – forms of pervasive political and cultural hegemony. Aesthetics can also be those immaterial feelings of mutuality or disjuncture that precipitate interventions in political and cultural hegemony, that which is mobilized as a way of staging conflictual articulation. But all of this raise questions regarding how aesthetics can be both theoretically and ethnographically mobilized – and for that matter 'researched' – to explore how events of conflict, or violent events, are constituted by and through sensibility, whether those sense perceptions are constituted by art or otherwise? What, in essence, is the value of thinking *with* broader notions of aesthetics to delineate spaces of hegemony, conflict and politics?

In thinking about aesthetics and politics this way, that is to say in relation to conflict, we hope this special issue is able to highlight the various hierarchies that exist within conflictual contexts. Jolaosho and Sanathanan's contribution highlight how aesthetics is used by those resisting various authorities, Mehta and Sansi's paper shows how hegemonic aesthetics is deployed by the powerful (here the museum and the juridical institutions) and Bajracharya and Mookherjee's papers show how aesthetics are deployed and circulated among different publics, thus becoming hegemonic through their circulatory logics. While some of these papers focus on the circulation of intangible feelings of rumour, anxiety, sublime (of that of potential communal violence, raped woman, absent mosque) (Bajracharya, Mookherjee, Mehta), others focus on material objects like images/paintings of lost home, songs about protest, resistance against estheticisation of museums (Sanathanan, Jolaosho,

Sansi). In following Hage's (2012) argument that aesthetics is the non-material site for the experience of mutuality, Bajracharya, Mookherjee, Jolaosho and Sanathanan explore this mutuality through rumour, sublime, protest songs and loss of home. While the sublime is explored in varied ways in Mehta and Mookherjee's paper, temporality, space and landscapes are further examined by Mehta, Bajracharya and Sanathanan. Anxiety and rumour circulate in Bajracharya, Mookherjee and Mehta's paper, embodied affect in Jolaosho, Sansi and Mookherjee's papers as well as a critique of this embodied affect.

The majority of our contributors are anthropologists by training, but the papers and perspectives comprising this special issue represent a broader range of social science perspectives, including Human Geography, Women's Studies, Sociology and Political Studies. The papers use ethnographic research variously on media, film and the visual (Bajracharya, Mookherjee), rumour and sublime (Bajracharya, Mookherjee and Mehta), art, performance, songs and activism (Sanathanan, Sansi, Jolaosho), across a range of geographical contexts mostly in South Asia, but in South Africa, and Spain as well. The collection also contains a visual-essay by one of Sri Lanka's foremost contemporary artists, Thamorampillai Shanaathanan, which though showcasing his fine art that itself could be said to be based on ethnographic work, also offers a 'working example' of dissensual – that is to say interventionary – practice.

The papers collectively push at exploring aesthetic dimensions of, and ways into thinking about, conflict and politics. Overall, they offer a critical theoretical and experimental engagement, primarily through ethnography, critical reading and artistic practice, of the relationships between aesthetics, politics and conflict. In doing so, we hope the issue stakes out new terms of analysis and styles of interpretation for anthropologists to show the contradictory forms through which politics in conflictual contexts is inexorably intertwined with and constituted through aesthetic registers, both materially and immaterially.

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