

CULTURAL FORMALISM: THE ENQUIRY OF CULTURAL AESTHETICS

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The study of ‘forms’ is readily associated with the tradition of Formalism in art criticism whereby plastic modes of aesthetic expressions are central to its investigations. My interest in probing cultural forms stems from the question “how might the aesthetic focus of Formalism be applied to cultural analysis?” That is, if forms of arts receive heightened attention for their expressive configuration and manifestation, what about positing enquiries directed at forms of living and ways of life which are nothing short of aesthetic expressions? By asking this question I’m also offering a hypothesis about the concrete existence of ‘cultural form,’ and how it comes with the demand for clarifying certain attentions. Such accentuations orientate us towards discerning and describing forms of cultural experience. Hence a theory of cultural form emerges in marking out modes of attention that indicate certain interests and priorities. Indeed, I suggest that the body of work cohering around (impersonal) senses, affect, “structures of feeling,” and social aesthetics has always already, to varying degrees, pertained to enquiries of cultural form. This essay draws on an array of theoretical work that invoke the aesthetic forms of culture and a mode of enquiry pertaining to cultural aesthetics.

‘Cultural form’ is not a neologism. Rather, it has methodological implications that shape up the ways in which cultural analysis is conceived and undertaken, not least the cultural politics instituted by a formalist mode of enquiry. This essay poses the question of what cultural formalism, by way of its aesthetic disposi-



tions (e.g. the mood of this enquiry) offers to cultural politics? The prominence of “politics of aesthetics” in Jacques Rancière’s political philosophy is brought into focus (Rancière 2004). I suggest that the conceptual rendering of ‘cultural form’ resonates with Rancière’s notion of “sensible” (Rancière 2004). This essay concludes with provocations around creating terms of politicization that re-focus the sites and stakes of cultural politics.

The Significant Form

Prior to discussing cultural aesthetics and formalist attentions applied to cultural analysis, I shall first turn to the tradition of Formalism wherein the association of aesthetic experience with art, and above all the form of the arts, is explicitly expressed. Revisiting what constitutes aesthetic analysis in Formalism, my focus shifts to how cultural analysis may take on parallel attentions which expand the productive lens of Formalism beyond art and towards an aesthetics of living experience. This is done through engaging with theorists—Raymond Williams, Caroline Levine, Ben Highmore, Sianne Ngai—whose work draws attention to the aesthetic forms of experience. The key tenets of Formalism were announced by painters and critics of the modern art movement who considered the ‘form’ of the arts to be the essential quality of aesthetic production. Exemplifying a mode of aesthetic criticism, the analytical focus of Formalism is directed at the plastic expressions of the arts and the sensory experience elicited by them. For the British art critic Clive Bell, the qualities common to all visual arts are rooted in their “significant form.” Getting to the core of his formalist stance, Bell draws attention to a myriad of aesthetic productions whose “aesthetically moving forms” define characters of art (Bell 1913, 3). In 1913, Bell wrote the following:

There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible – significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines

and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call “Significant Form”; and “Significant form” is the one quality common to all works of visual art’ (Bell 1913 [2011], 3).

Bell’s rumination on “significant form” as the defining quality of art appears to transcend historical considerations. For Bell (1913), form is the essential criterion common to all art. Artistic forms are identified by the array of sensuous expressions (e.g. lines, colors) that render the material basis of aesthetic feelings. Formalism focuses on a realm of aesthetics materialized by artistic idioms and expressions, and the ways that they are arranged to stir our “aesthetic emotions.” The emphasis on significant form underlines aesthetic knowledge produced by forms largely bound up with artistic productions. And as the interpretation of Formalism gets skewed towards descriptions of artistic forms, Bell’s invocation of “aesthetic emotions”—implying that affective experience is also of an aesthetic nature—is largely overlooked. The theoretical purchase of Bell’s formalist position hasn’t been taken up much beyond introspective examinations of the arts (and the regressive bourgeois notion of ‘aesthetic’ attached to it).

In his essay “The Uses of Cultural Theory,” Raymond Williams (2007) addresses the potential of employing Formalism for cultural analysis. Williams values the critical position of Formalism since it foregrounds the specificity of art forms, which as he argues, interpenetrate social actualities. The linking of “artistic specificity to the real and complex relationships of actual societies” should end the “formalist monopoly” accorded to art (Williams 2007, 167). Without being subjected to discursive narratives, “the great gain of Formalism” is acquired from detailing the aesthetic effects of artistic productions (Williams 2007, 167). Critically, it is in his mapping out of ‘social form’—as counterpart to artistic form, that the relationship between art forms and cultural processes becomes clear. In the book *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) invokes the palpable existence of social forms which take shape in affective qualities of experience. Contrasted with the sobriety of “official consciousness,” or the “formally structured hypothesis of the social” of which the “fixed” and “deliberate” systems of institutions, belief and systems of explanation are deemed of significance in cultural analysis, Williams (1977) places accent on the experiential qualities of social relations—“a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (131).

Exercising a formalist attention towards living experience, Williams (1977) intimates the pervasiveness of cultural aesthetics. He states: “we are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought

as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity” (Williams 1997, 132). Aesthetic expressions as such—feelings and affective elements, are not only expressed in the field of arts and aesthetic criticism, but also exist as cultural aesthetics. For instance, bearing a formalist’s sensitivity to the styles and genres of literary texts, Williams suggests that as much as there are sensual forms in literature, e.g. the tones and inflections of literary texts, the prominence of the styles in ordinary acts of communication is also of an aesthetic matter. Indeed, the two forms may be contiguous with each other (Williams 1977). Analogous to the ways that the specificity of the arts demand heightened attention in Formalism, the affective form of living exacts aesthetic attunement practiced by social formalism.

Experiential qualities transpose as aesthetic structures. Williams (1977) highlights how affective qualities of experience procure, instigate, and maintain forms of interrelations deemed ‘social.’ Williams (1977) often also uses the term “structures of feeling” (or “structures of experience”) to further elucidate his formalist disposition (the term ‘feeling’ is used loosely to suggest a whole range of affective and stylistic manifestations). As a concept, “structures of feeling” instigates analytical attention that considers and parses out the ways in which aesthetic qualities of living are at the forefront of social formations (Williams maintains that the aesthetic registers of social life are not epiphenomenon). Specifically, the rubric of the ‘structures of feeling’ stresses the capaciousness and sociality of the formal aspects of cultural processes. Social aesthetics are deemed capacious in that they prescribe modes of access, inciting and aligning compositions and relations, exerting “palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action” (Williams 1997, 132). As opposed to being seen as derivatives of social life, the affective/aesthetic qualities of experience are compelling forms of materiality that germinates sociality. They confer social structures when feelings, tonalities, and impulses become shared entities that shroud and occasion the interrelation of beings; ‘structure’ is construed then as permeation and mediation. The concept ‘structures of feeling’ advances the notion of ‘social form’ as not only traversing discursive categories of analysis but also crucially affording formal analysis that traces the effects of ‘form’ as they bear on the sociality of aesthetics. Social forms are congealed upon the patterning of experiential qualities. The sharedness of affectivity in collective experience marks out social forms.

Cultural Aesthetics in Formalism

Occluded by the predominance of semiotics in establishing the social meaning of the arts, it is worth noting a resurgence in theories of formalist dispositions that seek to revive its pertinence for social analysis. Among contemporary aesthetes, literary critics call for a Formalism that unveils the sociality of literary forms. Literary critic Caroline Levine's (2015) broad conception of form is helpful for making sense of the connection: "form" always indicates an *arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*...Form, for our purpose, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (Levine 2015, 3). Echoing Williams' (1977) stance on the primacy of artistic form, Levine (2015) posits a rerouting of literary analysis in which texts are read "not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms" (14). In her book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine (2015) proposes that a social formalist approach to literary analysis considers the ways in which textual forms mirror the characteristic structuring of the sensual material world. Thus, we have literary analysis that traces the fashioning of literary elements (forms) within the context of the social, manifested as "hierarchies", "rhythms", "networks", and "wholes" (Levine 2015). Levine advocates a 'New Criticism' in literary studies when she suggests that social forms or "political structures"—hierarchies, rhythms, networks, and wholes have their resonant corollaries in literature and literary studies (Levine 2015, 14). She proposes to set up a correspondence between literary structures and the arrangement of ensembles of entities that make social forms. In order to demonstrate the sociality of artistic forms, we need to recuperate attentions that foreground forms of cultural life. Indeed, the fluidity with which these terms describe both literary styles and social structures intimates a contiguity of aesthetic experience. Hence, rather than speaking of social forms as "rhythmic" in the metaphorical sense, we need to emphasize that the manifestations of aesthetic qualities are actual.

If the lack of attention directed at cultural forms is attributed to a hierarchy of aesthetics where the arts preside over other forms of experience, then we should foreground a re-configuration of the aesthetics of social life at large. The cultural theorist Ben Highmore (2007) invites us to revivify enquiries of aesthetics through his idea of "social aesthetics." He argues that a radical re-imagining of aesthetics is an essential first step toward inciting its social manifestations. Instead of associating aesthetics solely with artistic forms, Highmore (2007) conceives "social aesthetics" as broadly pertaining to the "sensual insertion and immersion of bodily creatures in networks of material, sensate and affective force (which

might also be economic, political, and so on)” (n.p.). The sensing of the material world is no less a sensual experience than that afforded by the arts. Here, the accent of “social aesthetics” placed on sensuous materialities resonates with the tenets of Formalism. Just as the arts acquired idioms pertaining to their fashioning of forms (e.g. composition, texture, pitch), a formalist appreciation of social life demands vocabularies that inflect the affective form of collective experience and the orchestrated qualities of those forms, as feelings, moods, tones and such.

Highmore (2007) makes the point that the theoretical imagination of social aesthetics is grounded in “deep descriptions” that illustrate and perform “social formalism.” To explicate the nature of endeavor, Highmore writes (2007): “Social aesthetics then might be thought of as an intensive formalism, dedicated to close-scrutiny, deep-description and speculative interpretation, with the goal of revealing culture from the inside (from the point of view of the nerves, the gut, and so on)” (n.p.). What’s being stressed here is the compelling force of cultural form—its tangibility as well as the capaciousness attached to doing formalist analysis. Cultural form is actualized at the phenomenological level—the outward, sensual material manifestations and expressivities; at the same, it’s also about mediation and forces that underpin the ordering of cultural life. A formalist analysis of general ways of living assumes an intensity of aesthetic enquiry exemplified by Formalism. Through the cultural life that arises from a sharedness of qualities, a broad range of entities comes into the purview of aesthetic analysis, thus lending a democratic mood to the undertaking of “social formalism.” This is the project that would fall under the rubric of “social aesthetics.”

For a cultural formalist, the matter of social composition is realized in sensuous manifestations. This is to say that cultural experience is primarily constituted by an assemblage of things coming together through sensuous attachments and alliances. The American anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2014) strikes a formalist tone when she puts forward a mode of cultural analysis through the lens of “composition theory.” A composition theorist is attuned to the expressivities that bring forth social formations, “A line, a refrain, a tendency, an icon, a color, a groove of habit or hope, or a rhythm or chaos of living take on qualities, a density, an aesthetic, become somehow legible, recognisable” (Stewart 2014: 119). Here, Stewart (2014) orchestrates the sensual qualities of social life which are made legible by the zealous descriptions of a social aesthete. Note that these singular expressivities may at once become convivial: color setting the tonality

of an encounter, or lines seizing up a kind of energy. Stewart (2014) considers “worlding” as processes of compositions within which the primacy of aesthetics are worthy of theoretical attention. Evoking Formalism’s heightened reception to artistic forms, Stewart (2014) underlines how a cultural formalist may find access to compositions of the phenomenal world; she calls for attention to how “an assemblage of elements comes to hang together as a thing that has qualities, sensory aesthetics and lines of force and how such things come into sense already composed and generative and pulling matter and mind into a making: a worlding” (119). A composition is more than an aggregate of things; the capaciousness of aesthetic qualities prevails in the composition of the social world. Occasioned by sensual material forces, bodies are arranged in this way as opposed to that way so that attachments, constellations and permutations issue sensual forms. We are called up to heed to the qualities-cum-forces that curate an ensemble, a situation, or a span of historical life.

The efficacy of aesthetic forces (e.g. tendency, density, rhythm) renders a composition, that is, a worlding made discernible by formal analysis. As an object of enquiry, ‘cultural form’ has an atmospheric quality which induces social aesthetic dispositions. Stewart illustrates the actuality of ‘cultural form.’ And she does it by tracing out a correspondence between the object of analysis at hand and the aesthetic inclinations of a formalist, i.e. the objects of analysis in cultural formalism invokes aesthetic/theoretical dispositions and vice versa. Stewart (2022) writes:

Cultural form is about how something that feels like something forms up, deforms, falls apart or decays. It’s about aesthetics, the senses, the way that attachments and affects get magnetized to rhythms, tones of voice, qualities of light. It’s about understanding objects of analysis as not just complex but ambient, atmospheric, synesthetic. Cultural form is what pulls things into the consistency of a laugh or an edge. A composition that throws itself together. The intimacy of a collective lunge for sensory design. An attunement that takes form. A world inhabited. An open ambit (n.p).

The expressive dimensions of things testify to their sociality. At the level of singularities—rhythms, tones or qualities of light—cultural forms are outward expressions that get diffused in the sinews of social (and writerly) compositions. We are reminded of this structural pull since expressive qualities spawn attachments (things being pulled into place or magnetized). Recurring affectivities and experiential qualities draw out aesthetic forms, and they surface to attention as “aesthetic categories” in Sianne Ngai’s (2012) exploration of the “cute,” the “zany,” and the “interesting.” The delineated “aesthetics categories” in Ngai’s work serve as descriptors that aid imaginings of cultural aesthetics. Beyond notions

of “beauty”, “sublimity” and traversing the tradition of singling out “aesthetics” from broader lived experiences, Ngai’s conception of aesthetics is grounded in “senses” that mediate social relations. The three descriptors of aesthetic forms (i.e. the ‘cute’, the ‘zany’ and the ‘interesting’) stem from shared sensorium and sensual logics, and as such they become points of access to cultural analysis. Her analysis veers away from categorized spheres of experience: “the mass mediated postbourgeois public sphere”, or “the global multitude and its immaterial labour,” and the “private or domestic sphere” (Ngai 2012, 238). Ngai (2012) argues that the purpose of establishing aesthetic categories is to evoke “images of contemporary commonality” (239). Ngai makes explicit the structural connotation of aesthetic categories by demonstrating how they are categories of affectivities that saturate postmodern capitalistic conditions, that they get at some of the most basic dynamics that bind processes of production, consumption and the informational system.¹ Here, she notes the formative capacity of social aesthetics “call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose” (Ngai 2012, 11). Ngai’s aesthetic stance exemplifies cultural formalist attentions in that it enlists descriptions of cultural forms which make visible the affective structuring of social relations.

“Politics of Aesthetics” in Formalist Enquiry

What does the focus on cultural form offer to the shaping of cultural political debates? If cultural aesthetics are central to its enquiry, in what ways might a “politics of aesthetics” be addressed by a formalist undertaking of cultural analysis? These questions invite discussions around the specificities of polity arising from cultural formalism. I maintain that theoretical attentions inhere in temperaments that are integral to the shaping of cultural politics. It is an attempt at being reflexive about the aesthetic disposition undertaken in cultural formalist enquires. Contrasted with the polemical heat of antithetical positions or the certitude of discourses (e.g. politics of race and gender), a cultural formalist disposition beckons enquiries of another kind. It is to ask, for instance, in what ways would a heuristic temperament in regard to the probing of cultural forms (an effusiveness felt in sensing and describing cultural form) procure politics of a different kind, of one that evades ideological conceptions of cultural politics?

This section attends and attunes to instances of cultural enquiry that operate beyond the discursive, and above all how they incite modes of doing politics with their own set of aesthetic dispositions. I am pursuing how a non-antagonistic temperament might engender cultural politics. In Roland Barthes' (1978) writing on the "neutral," for instance, the theorist is reflexive on the mood one carries with them when conceiving and relating to matters of cultural debates and politics. He considers the style with which he enters socio-political debate "to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time" (Barthes 1978, 8).² Barthes (1978) distances himself from the "weariness" he senses in discourses of ethics and politics. He ponders over how the "neutral" eschews themes readily associated with "doxa" and ideological construction of politics. He likens the mood of political debates to the indefatigable energy of banal conversations that elicits weariness. He writes, "the present-day world is full of it (statements, manifestoes, petitions, etc.), and it's why it is so wearisome: hard to float, to shift places" (Barthes 1978, 19). In the world that Barthes refers to, one is ordered incessantly to stake positions and counter-positions whereby "every object is converted by some analysis, interpretation, into the contrary of its name, of its appearance" (Barthes 1978, 125). Barthes saw the mood of "weariness" traversing an epistemological paradigm founded on dogma and readily divided opinions. In particular, the sensibility and discursive logic of "conflict" presides over knowledge production (oppositional groups and counterparts) (Barthes 1978, 125-6).³ Diverging from the "ideosphere" of debates, the "neutral" encapsulates an array of temperaments and analytical orientations set out to "outplay the paradigm" (Barthes 1978, 8). For Barthes (1978), the neutral is charged with a "stubborn affect"; it's "an ardent, burning activity" which expands the basis for making theories and positionalities (7).⁴ Relishing the non-coded, unclassifiable sites and states of being ("society doesn't recognise intensities" [Barthes 1978, 18]), the object of enquiry may arise from twinkling scintillations that are benign and ambivalent. The neutral assumes a mood/mode of enquiry founded on "intuitive, empirical exploration" (Barthes 1978, 17). Indeed, Barthes' "neutral" position befits cultural aesthetic enquiries that elude the grip of "ideosphere."⁵ Marking out a space for a non-coded aesthetic analysis would foreground an idiosyncratic mode of pursuing cultural politics. One could go so far as to say that what is at stake in politics may only arise from the ardent explorations of cultural aesthetes.

Echoing Barthes' proposition for a 'neutral' paradigm of knowledge, the cultural theorist Jane Bennett (2020) expands the purview of what counts as political matters. In my reading of Jane Bennett's book *Influx and Efflux* (2020), I was struck by her ardent pursuit of politics which diverges from any fixed discursive viewpoints. Her analysis of Walt Whitman's poems and of their aesthetic evocation of political ethos instantiates a compelling approach for doing cultural politics.

As she follows Whitman's sensing of the phenomenal world in which forms and senses exude ethos of living, we are invited to explore a mode of analytical attention in which physical forms, styles of movement, and bodily configurations ("stylised mode of encounter") generate matters of politics (Bennett 2020, 65). Bennett (2020) likens this formalist attention to the act of "doting." To dote on things (how apt is the word doting for describing enraptured states of love and care adopted by an aesthete?), Bennett (2020) claims, is for one to engage in a "cultivated practice of perception": "As a cultivated practice of perception, doting pays slow attention to ordinary things in ways that accentuate our existence as *earthlings*" (65). It is a practice marked by a receptivity to visceral impressions and material forces operating beyond subjective wills. The doting attention of a poet, or in Bennett's case, that of a theorist, assumes a degree of intensity in following ordinary yet stylised encounters. 'Doting' sidesteps discursive judgement, yet it initiates a poetic assessment that no less eludes positions assumed in judgement. Bennett (2020) captures the force of poetic judgement in Whitman's line: "Judge not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing" (48). The sensibility of judgement-as-doting is such that "the pleasure of float" presides over "the pleasure of closure" (Bennett 2020, 49).

Far from being an indulgent pursuit that circumvents cultural politics, the compassionate heeding of physiognomy (bearing forms of experience) yields matters of concern that constitute a stake for cultural politics. For instance, in her analysis of nonchalant bodily postures that 'dilate' to outside influences, (2020) suggests that Whitman's poems invoke interests in bodily inclinations and movement styles that accrue egalitarian sentiments. Prompted by her sketches of gesticulations inspired by Whitman's poems, we are presented with "dilating" bodies that assume an affable nonchalance readying itself for being affected by the world. According to Bennett (2020), "dilate" is Whitman's term for "a body's capacity to open its pores to the outside" (15). Dilation alludes to an effusiveness notion of personhood that sympathises with others. In focusing on the form of a body in its interrelatedness with others, Bennett invokes a mode of attention that is at once pertaining to a politics of aesthetics.

Here, physiognomy is felt as a sensual inclination of the body which unveils manners of attachment, in other words, of styles of relating to others that make worlding compositions. Or in the case of doting over the physiognomic features of plants, Bennett (2020) suggests that descriptions of our encounters with their

bodily shapes and expressive tendencies enunciate a “solidarity” that expresses egalitarian sentiments. To investigate the shape of chicory root, one needs to assimilate their form, to allow “your inner plant to resonate more freely with the rhythms and styles of chicory” (Bennett 2020, 101). Again, we have a dilation of body at the ready for incorporating other living forms (doesn’t this evoke the ethos of ‘inclusiveness’)? The orientation of building a sensuous alliance with the non-human institutes a form of politics that circumvents pre-established classifications of analysis. Doing away with discursive hierarchies and a polemicist mood of analysis, we see how vigorous phenomenological expressions await descriptions that substantiate the sensing of an egalitarian ethos: an egalitarian sensibility is inscribed in this analytical disposition from the outset. It necessitates explorations of the sensual forms of alliances which aren’t just indulgences on the part of the empiricists but unveil influences and styles of attachments that politicize matters. Founded on sensual material sympathies, Bennett (2020) invokes a mode of analysis that makes the ubiquity of affective forces more susceptible to being inflected towards egalitarian politics.

There is a salient mood of openness in Bennett’s pursuit of an affective, materialist enunciation of cultural politics. As social aesthetics are explored in ways to inflect and institute cultural politics, they invoke a field of enquiry that embraces aesthetics in cultural political analysis. While there is no short supply of attention given to examining political problems through aesthetic registers of experience, a theoretical approach summed up as “ways of practising politics that takes stock of the affective way power operates now” (Massumi 2015, 36), I argue, means that assumptions made about ‘power’ or ‘politics’ remain unchallenged.⁶ Instead of tracing how power manifests as affective aesthetics, the ordering of attention may be reversed to uncover the ways that forms and shared sensual conditions prescribe what’s at stake in politics. In times when the arts and cultural criticism are invariably hauled in front of beleaguered social conditions and crises, and as they are called up to represent political debates, it is worth examining the assumptions and terms of analysis that underline the “politics of aesthetics,” not least for it to foreground the generative capacity of aesthetics for configuring political debates. By putting into focus the sentiments and dispositions of doing politics (Barthes’ “stubborn affect” that refuses doxa and Bennett’s reading of Whitman’s aesthetic “doting”), I draw attention to discussions that widened the basis, assumptions, terms of analysis and not least the mood with which certain issues are addressed as ‘political.’

When exploring the politics of cultural formalist enquiries, I suggest that the theoretical work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière is instrumental for thinking about how a formalist aesthetic attention is integral for setting the terms of practising politics. Within a large body of writing on the subject of aesthetics, Rancière refers to a realm of experience and knowledge that registers the sensuous form of living, which issues general ways of doing and making. The sensual condition of social life (i.e. aesthetics) is emphatically addressed by the Rancierian idea of the “sensible.” In his book *Politics of Aesthetics*, the “sensible” is endowed with a distinct set of analytical orientations. It doesn’t refer to felt senses; instead, it points to the sensual forms or conditions upon which sense perceptions take place, or the affective conditions upon which something may be felt and recognized in certain ways (Rancière 2006). To extend this line of thinking, his theory of the “sensible” also prescribes a relationship in which singular entities (e.g. social subjects) are made intelligible through sensual structures. Thus, ‘singularities’ are discerned through sensual logic. The singular–structure relation accentuates forms of partaking that makes the singular coincide with structure—for instance, in modes of perceptions that inscribe them in a commonality. Rancière’s (2010) notion of the “distribution of the sensible” elucidates this: “a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed” (44).

For Rancière (2010), the notion of “sensible” is generative for instituting cultural politics; in his words, politics is activated by “instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible” (45).⁷ He elucidates the type of politics spawned by the “sensible”—“Politics revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2006, 13). At first, his explication of politics may easily allude to the convention of identity politics couched in debates around cultural representation. Yet, the ‘who’, or ‘what’, in other words, the ‘subjects’ of politics, is far from pre-formulated identities, since these “singularities” are yet to emerge in analyses of aesthetics. At the heart of redeeming politics in aesthetics is the recognition that aesthetic forces and structures are *a priori* forms that determine the intelligibility of singular forms by way of how something presents itself as quality of experience. And the process of distinguishing a “singularity,” to make it intelligible, or conversely in the case of it being obscured within structures of experience, engenders a “politics of aesthetics.” Here, we have a conception of politics premised on sensual forms and logic of

senses that enable us to recognise actors and assemblages which may not fall into specific categories of identification. Senses, perceptions, and styles underscore the intelligibility of singular form—from the human body to vegetal bodies, from the arts to all manners of conduct in vernacular experience, the act of discerning singularities-in-structures on account of aesthetic forms and styles of partaking (not antagonistic but one is inscribed in the other) widens the terms of analysis pertaining to cultural politics. Indeed, probing of the “sensible” concurs with the structural notion of cultural form (structures of experience). Thus, the endeavour of instituting politics in cultural formalism is in the nature of unveiling the *a priori* forms of experience as they are emphatically considered as conditions, possibilities and determinations. In this vein of thinking, the formalist mode of doing cultural analysis is ineluctably political from the outset.

Within the ruse of intelligibility, we arrive at terms of instituting politics other than those established by antithetical positions. The disjunction of sensual forms, as Rancière evokes in the idea of “dissensus” (“the essence of politics is *dissensus*”), posits theoretical interests for configuring the ground for politics (Rancière 2010, 46). He explicates the concept as follows: “Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière 2010, 46).⁸ The actuality of “sensible” experienced as the affective condition of living is always already a multiplicity. At the level of form, “dissensus” may be expressed as a rupture in the sensual form of experience, or as orchestration of heterogeneous sensual perceptual conditions. And the idea of a “gap in the sensible” call for analysis of aesthetic differentiations that are endowed with political significance (Rancière 2010, 46). Rather than oppositional stances in ideation, “dissensus” calls into attention senses and sensual structures that sustain, diminish, reinforce, or extinguish within the multiplicity of the sensible.

As cultural formalism contends with the “sensible,” the idea of “dissensus” evokes formalist descriptions of the “gap” in the way that it seizes analytical attentions. Sensitivity to forms of being and relating is conducive for mapping out sites of “dissensus.” Thus, the political is played out in the toggling of styles and characteristic experience of living. Looking at how the sensual fabric of experience is disturbed, or expressions that couldn’t find their place in a system of perceptions, the mode of attention specific to cultural formalism is poised to uncover the ‘subjects’ of politics. “Politics of aesthetics” emerge in instances of divergent sensing of time-space, and the general incompatibility of affective inclinations, styles, and bodily orientations. A formalist description of “dissensus” is helpful for staking out politics in the vocabularies of hinderance, irritation, disorientation, and asynchrony. As emphasized in the notion of “dissensus,” politics of aesthetics arises from relations of formal effects. For instance, social arrhythmia indexes

a sensual mode of inhabiting space-time that imply an ‘Other’ with which one couldn’t coalesce without scrambling its own configuration. Arrhythmia suggests a jarring patterning of the sensible (arrhythmia as partitions of the sensible), or a gap of formal alliances. Considered as an idiom of cultural politics, it posits the foundational logic of the multiple rather than oppositional.

The sites and stakes of politics lie as much in divisions as in isomorphic relations. Take ‘equality’ as a foundational ideology that underpins cultural politics, the phenomenological similitude of forms and styles evoke equality not as something endowed to individuals but as agreeable forms that harmoniously co-exist and as such are ‘recognized’ by one another. Instead of it being an idea derived from the conception of hierarchies and its assumed counterparts, equality takes effect in sensual forms as agreeable sensibilities and forms that *affirm* a structure of feeling. That situations of equality aren’t necessarily solely recognized in matters of representation (as in classified social groups ratified by governmental discourse and mass media); rather, equitable entities are identified by their analogous style of partaking in social life. Rancière (2004) notes the demonstration of equality in “banal” situations such as the simple fact that “two interlocutors can understand one another” (85). In this case, ‘equality’ is an affective affirmation that goes beyond shared linguistic tools, but in the dispositions, styles of inhabiting the world, and the sharing of sensual structures. The formal/affective effects of ‘(in)equality’ are explored in the realm of politics of aesthetics. Conversely, ‘exclusion’ manifests when a fissure, a disruption of sensual structure marks out a singular entity from a shared system of perception—in the case of a commonality of senses failing to affect the singular, participation is kept at bay. ‘Commonality’ doesn’t equate with ‘low’ culture; rather, it refers to shared sensual forms that predicate and provide effects of equality. Indeed, as cultural formalism is concerned with a commonality of senses, a democratic attention is already exercised in looking at structures of experience which provide access to communal life. Here, ‘democracy’ isn’t indicative of an absolute ideology; it operates as an open-ended ethos that invites us to trace the ways in which affective conditions (i.e. cultural forms) occasion effects of equality. While the ideology of participation, inclusion, and equality keeps us in a closed loop of political reckoning, studies of cultural form are well placed for retracing aesthetic relations that wield ethical awareness, and it is done through pronouncing the sites, processes and formations which fall outside identifiable categories of political analysis. In doing so, it may radically redescribe terms of ideology (e.g. ‘equality’ as ‘isomorphism’) with the view of reviving spaces of political imagination.

The interminable crisis of our times is often seen through the prism of polemical reasoning from presupposed ideological positions. Raymond Williams (1977) cautions against the jeopardy of doing politics via fixed forms of thinking as he stresses the fallacy of “taking terms of analysis as terms of substance” (129). The stable foundations of pre-established positionings, as often instantiated by identity politics (race, gender, human–nature divide in climate crisis), may easily overshadow the desire for redescribing forms of experience that elude the preponderance of power politics.

When we let fixed discourses dictate objects of analysis, as is often done at the expense of doting on things, we blunt our sensitivity to the ways in which politics resides with and operates through social aesthetic registers. The politics of cultural formalism is contingent, in the sense that the loci and stakes of polity aren’t inherent in any social groups. Without making intelligible the affective structuring of experience and relations, the true grounds of doing cultural politics are still concealed. Beyond coupling ideological ethos with discursive interpretation of political struggles, the theory of a ‘politics of intelligibility’ (the meta-politics that persists in Rancière’s politics of aesthetics) unravels cultural politics by way of illuminating sensuous forms and sensual relations (as it delineates the endeavour of cultural formalism). One could say that a “neutral” and yet ardent form of attention infused in cultural formalist analysis has always already performed a “disturbance” in the mood and orientations of doing cultural politics. And the mood of cultural formalism is germane to uncovering “dissensus” that then leads to political interventions. To make this point more emphatic, one could see the affinity between explorations of cultural form and the nature of political art. The latter is specifically conceived by Rancière (2006) as work that causes a “sensible or perceptual shock” without signification—“disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle” (63). Indeed, the undertaking of cultural formalism is precisely in the order of such works. Since the ‘form’ of living, or our multiple ways of life are also the condition that (dis)enables the intelligibility of entities, we may acquire a manner of doing cultural politics where ‘terms of substance’ orientates ‘terms of analysis.’

Endnotes

1. “the domestic and commodity-oriented aesthetic of cuteness, the informational and discursive aesthetic of the merely interesting, and the occupational and cultural performance aesthetic of zaniness help get at some of the most basic dynamics underlying life in Western industrial societies. No other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to these everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way” (Ngai 2012, 1).

2. The publication of *The Neutral* was based on the eponymous course which Barthes gave at the Collège de France extended over thirteen weeks, from February 18 to June 3, 1978.

3. On the predominant discursive logic of “conflict,” Barthes (2005) states: “That everything in the universe, in the world, in society, in the subject, in reality is formatted by conflict: no proposition more widely accepted: Western philosophies, doctrines, metaphysics, materialism, ‘sensibilities,’ ordinary languages, everything talks about conflict (about the conflictual) as if it were nature itself” (125-6).

4. See Roland Barthes, *The Neutral* (1978): “the Neutral doesn’t refer to ‘impressions’ of grayness, of ‘neutrality’, of indifference. The Neutral—my Neutral—can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. ‘To outplay the paradigm’ is an ardent, ‘burning activity.’ I took the word ‘Neutral,’ insofar as its referent inside me is a stubborn affect (in fact, ever since *Writing Degree Zero*)” (Barthes 2005, 8).

5. For Barthes (2005), the ‘ideosphere’ refers to the established discourse that is experienced as ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ (89).

6. Brian Massumi (2015) discusses the ways in which studies of affect yields politics. He notes: “The crucial political question for me is whether there are ways of practising a politics that takes stock of the affective way power operates now, but doesn’t rely on violence and the hardening of divisions along identity lines that it usually brings. I’m not exactly sure what that kind of politics would look like, but it would still be performative, and it would resist personification in peak individuals. In some basic way it would be an aesthetic politics, because its aim would be to expand the range of affective potential—which is what aesthetic practice has always been about” (Massumi 2015, 36).

7. Throughout Rancière’s writing on politics, he maintains the position that politics need to be uncovered as opposed to the readily established “purist” model of which “the relation between the political relationship and the subject get interpreted; that is, in the assumption that there is a way of life that is ‘specific’ to political existence, enabling us to infer the political relationship from the properties of a specific order of being” (Rancière 2010, 36).

8. “Dissensus” is a key concept in Rancière’s political philosophy. He contrasts the foundation of politics instituted by the concept “dissensus” with the model of “communicative action” which presupposes “partners that are already pre-constituted as such and discursive forms that entail a speech community, the constraint of which is always explicable” (Rancière 2010, 38).

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