Editors' Picks

In our editors' picks we wanted to look at transformations and upheavals and their connection with cultural developments, arts and artists from both a theoretical perspective and reflections grounded in experience.

TAL FEDER

JACQUES RANCIÈRE: The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 121 pp.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE, PETER ENGELMANN: Politics and Aesthetics. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, 121 pp.

Jacques Rancière has become, in the past decades, one of the most notable theoreticians that address the link between politics and art, and it is only natural that his rich body of work would draw the attention of scholars studying art and its political aspects. Although his theories have been widely adopted in art theory and art history, the infiltration of his thought into the field of cultural policy and arts management studies has been more modest but is growing, as exemplified in the inclusion of his work in two recently published anthologies of cultural policy literature (O'BRIEN/OAKLEY 2017; TRÖNDLE/STEIGERWALD 2019).

His books, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* and the more recent *Politics of Aesthetics* open a window to an acquaintance with his work on art and politics. These are two short books that are based on interviews with Rancière. His prose is not always easy to decipher, but the interview format helps to make it more accessible, and the reading is stimulating and thought-provoking.

A fundamental idea in Rancière's thought is the "distribution of the sensible". This multi-layered concept can be described, in broad strokes, as a system of implicit underlying principles that govern the way people perceive reality. The word 'sensible' can be understood in its double meaning: what is to be sensed and what can make sense. The term 'distribution' pertains to the meaning or significance given to these components in a way that reminds the Saussurean idea of the construction of meaning through difference. The fact that these 'distributions of the sensible' bear upon what may be sensed and said give a first hint to why

the artistic expression, which is deliberately meant to produce a sensual experience, may be linked to broader social dimensions.

Rancière is not hasty to connect art and politics directly. The reason that politics and art can be discussed in the same vein is due to the fact that both are affected by the shared fundamental logic of a specific distribution regime. For example, both modern art and democracy are based on a principle of equality – of forms in the former case and subjects in the latter. However, he insists that this affinity does not mean that actions of one field are immediately translatable or transferable to the other since each domain has its own internal logic, its idiosyncratic 'truth procedure' in the words of Badiou (2005).

Rancière uses the term *aesthetics* not as synonymous with a theory of art. Our perception of art as an aesthetic product, which he calls the *aesthetic regime of art*, is contingent on our times and thought systems. Different historical periods were marked by other regimes of art that still exist as optional possibilities today. The *ethical regime of images* considers images in terms of their use and external effect rather than as objects belonging to the particular field of art. As an example of the regime of images, Rancière mentions the Taliban's act of destroying the Buddha of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. This idea can also explain other recent iconoclastic manifestations from Europe and North America. The *representative regime of art* liberates the work of art from its adherence to a moral appraisal, but at the same time subjects it to a set of artistic norms that produce artistic hierarchies of thematic content, genre, technique, etc. The recognition of such norms that guides the perception of art corresponds to recognizing a social order based on social norms and hierarchies. Artistic production is conceived as a practice of specialists who are the only ones who can produce legitimate works of art.

The *aesthetic regime of art* that characterizes the current point in time and can be observed as a basic principle of contemporary art is a distribution mode that entails the dissolution of artistic hierarchies. It offers an egalitarian mode of experience that "wants to break down the boundaries between art and life, art and politics, work and recreation, leisure and work" (RANCIÈRE/ENGELMANN 2019: 49f.). The artwork under the aesthetic regime is not perceived as a creation intended for consumption, but as an expression of a form of life. Therefore, artistic expression has implications also for the question of who is allowed to participate in social life. Since the norms for evaluating art (that were clear in the representative regime) are blurred now, the weight turns

from *what art is made of* to *who makes it* and endows any iteration of an artwork the force of a claim for social legitimacy.

Politically involved art becomes possible not because it conveys a particular message (Rancière is skeptical of this possibility), but because it expresses this contestation of hierarchies by its very existence. Art can be an act of stepping out of a social position that was forced from the outside and therefore becomes an emancipatory practice.

Rancière challenges Bourdieu's ideas on aesthetic taste and art. For Bourdieu, aesthetic judgment is part of the elite's project of asserting their superiority over the lower classes and reproducing their dominant positions (BOURDIEU 1984). In this view, cultural policy can be regarded as a conservative "ideological state apparatus" that serves political and social elites. Rancière, on the other hand, claims that "reaching an aesthetic attitude is the basis for the possibility of social upheaval" (RANCIÈRE/ENGELMANN 2019: 32). Therefore, his theory suggests an outlook on cultural policy instead as a way of regulating this emancipatory force whose potential is constantly circulating in society.

Rancière sees in the "Arab Spring" events an example of this indirect link between art and politics. He suggests that the emergence of the social movements that fueled the Arab Spring events are connected to the work of local artists in the MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) region who liberated this emancipatory power by expressing their agency in "trying to create anew the visibility of what was happening in their countries and questioning the traditional depictions of the rulers and the victims, or of the relationship between society and religion" (RANCIÈRE/ENGELMANN 2019: 103).

ANKE SCHAD-SPINDLER

RITA STEPHAN, MOUNIRA M. CHARRAD (Eds.): Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring. New York: New York University Press, 2020, 432 pp.

The deep crisis of democracy fueled by a lethal pandemic, raging wars, and on-going struggles against authoritarian regimes goes together with violent attacks on activists, emigration, and mass displacement. In light of the tumultuous and escalating incidents of 2020 and 2021, events that initially gave cause for hope have received comparatively little attention.

What is the legacy of the series of uprisings and protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) labelled with the expectant title of "Arab Spring" over ten years on? These revolutionary developments also sparked the interest of Western cultural institutions, academies, and universities in Middle East and Northern Africa and led to exchange projects as well as networking and capacity development programs. Using Google as a simple tool to scratch the surface of Western media coverage on the legacy of the Arab Spring, many sources use managerial terminology, talking, for example, about "The unfinished business of the Arab Spring" (*Washington Post* 2021) that comes with a negative balance sheet. The assessment of the attempts of civil society actors to democratize Arab states amounts to certifying them as failures. One has to dig deeper into analyses to find critical comments on the entanglements of Western democracies in conflicts and authoritarian regimes as well as references to the damage done by colonialism. This leads to the following questions: Can we really measure complex social, political, and cultural development processes at longue durée, with progress, setbacks, and ambivalences in terms of their overall efficiency? Who entitles Western commentators with the authority to make this assessment? What does the devaluation mentioned above imply for those people who were actively exposing their bodies and minds in these dangerous situations?

The volume "Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring," edited by Rita Stephan, Research Fellow at the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University and Mounira M. Charrad, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas, Austin, offers a differentiated perspective on the events that have been labelled, mystified, and assessed as "The Arab Spring". There are three aspects that specifically distinguish the book and make it relevant for cultural policy research:

Firstly, the volume is portraying the Arab Spring not as an unexpected, unprecedented awakening but as an intensification of a long, arduous, and on-going process of developing just forms of government, functioning polities, progressive education, cohesive communities, and fair constitutions in the aftermath of destructive colonialist interventions.

Secondly, the book brings women as well as queer, artistic, POC, young, and Islamic voices, and their agency to the forefront. It thereby represents and reflects these people's perspectives and struggle in claiming space, rights, and positions in society not as marginal, but as central for the processes and achievements of democratic development. Although, as our interview with Freemuse and Artists at Risk show,

women and LGBTQIA+ people are often the victims of illiberal regimes, they themselves have transformative powers precisely because they challenge oppressive norms. The book also demonstrates that cultural transformation and political participation are closely linked to intersectional feminist work on equality, rights, and social justice as well as care for food, education, and future generations, which ultimately has the power to set aside class, race, religious, and gender divides and to foster solidarity in the fight for basic values and principles. For striking moments, these people united and created what Laclau and Mouffe would call a "chain of equivalence" (LACLAU/MOUFFE 1985).

Thirdly, "Women rising" makes the lived experiences and academic analysis of women activists and academics (often mentioned as hyphenated academics-activists, which is a sign of the strong connection between female education and intellectual engagement and political activism in the Arab region) accessible to Non-Arabic readers. It is thus both a living archive and, more importantly, an invitation to overthink and undo stereotypical images of Arab women as well as reductionist assessments of democratic transformation along in terms of either success or failure.

The book is divided into five sections: The first part "What they fight for" features women activists' demands for political, economic, legal, sexual, and social rights and makes clear that the realization of these demands must go hand in hand with a cultural transformation. One of the potential spaces of everyday revolutions is the classroom. "What kind of future do I want to create with my students?" asked Rula Quawas (*Barefoot Feminist Classes: A Revelation of being, Doing, and Becoming*, 15–27, 26) deceased founder of the Women's Studies Centre at the University of Jordan, in her contribution. A question that could resonate among university faculty everywhere.

The second section "What they believe in" unravels the belief system of women in transformations and upheavals. The contributions in this section analyze the dichotomy between the feminist ethos and Islam as well the question of intellectual integrity. Asaad Alsaleh (*Failing the Masses in Syria: Buthaina Shabaan and the Public Intellectual Cri*sis, 135-142) traces the case of Syrian writer and professor Buthaina Shabaan who turned from feminist scholarism to propagating the regime – also pointing at the failure of European intellectuals in the 20th century to act according to their public responsibility.

The third section "How they express agency" explores film, photography, graffiti, song, performance, literature, blogging, and social

media as forms of agency. To pick one among the variety of contributions, in her ethnographic study, Nisrine Chaer (*Sensing Queer Activism in Beirut: Protest Soundscapes as Political Dissent*, 173–184) explores the protest soundscapes and acoustic affects created and embodied by queer and feminist-leftist activists in Beirut 2015. The fourth section "How they use space to mobilize" explores both urban and rural spaces as well as the creation of safe spaces and the claim of public spaces. This section contains excerpts from Margot Badran's (*Marching with Revolutionary Women in Egypt: A Participatory Journal*, 225–232) participatory journal on the revolutionary experience of women in Egypt in 2012. The chapter shows the immersion of analytical reflection and embodied experience as well as the force of protests to overcome the barriers of gender, age, and class. The fifth and final section "How they organize" assembles contributions referring to the tactics, strategies, institutionalization, and accommodation of activism, thus touching more explicitly on the politics of protest. Using the example of Kuwait, Emanuela Buscemi's chapter (*Reclaiming Space(s): Kuwaito WOmen in the Karamat Watan Protests*, 348–353) illustrates the deep detachment of young generations' wishes for their future in terms of government decisions – again, a development that resonates everywhere but with different consequences for young people daring to raise their voice in public spaces.

Overall, the book is an entrance ticket for any researcher and observer of cultural policy and cultural management who would like to look beyond Western perspectives, who would like to expand the concept of cultural politics to the political as a whole and on the role of civil society and women specifically. The chapters give an insight into very complex societies in countries that, when they make it into the international press, often make negative headlines. Behind dramatic events, however, lie individual, sometimes intergenerational and always intersectional struggles for law, justice, and democracy which – however valuable their close monitoring is – cannot simply be measured in categories of efficiency.

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Weitere Rezensionen / further Reviews

ORIAN BROOK, DAVE O'BRIEN, AND MARK TAYLOR: Culture is Bad for You. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2020, 361pp.

Culture is Bad for You is a timely monograph, foregrounding ongoing inequalities in UK culture that are perpetuated through cultural production and consumption in its creative industries. Authors Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien, and Mark Taylor challenge dominant 'good news' narratives from successive UK governments that culture is *good* for us. Culture, we are told, is *bad* for us. As producers or consumers of culture we are complicit in perpetuating inequality, because inequalities in culture are inseparable from inequalities in society; which is not just *bad* for us, it's *bad* for everyone.

The authors combine rigorous qualitative and quantitative methodologies with research interests, including social mobility (Brook), intersectional approaches to class and culture (O'Brien), and cultural consumption related to race, gender, and class (Taylor). As the third phase of joint investigations into inequalities in cultural occupations, the book builds on previous studies, including *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* (2018), which analysed survey data from 2,487 key cultural workers carried out in 2015 to better understand social mobility in the UK arts sector.

The results present how cultural occupations and culture itself are gatekeepers of class destinations, and how deep-rooted inequalities for working classes, people of colour, and women are maintained through them. Myths of meritocracy and a 'golden age' of social mobility are debunked, corroborating current debates situating its decline. Instead, this thinking is transposed as responsible for marginalisation, constricting