

#### Research Article

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# Introduction: Cultural Studies, Marxism and the Exile of Aesthetics

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To reflect on the relationship between "cultural studies" and "aesthetics" is to master the art of holding two opposing insights in mind at once. In theory, at least as set out by some of cultural studies' leading lights, the aesthetic is bound up with forms of privilege, mysticism and elitism that are anathema to the key critical currents in the field. In practice, however, aesthetic engagement and aesthetic evaluation remain popular tools of the critical trade. Cultural studies, it seems, does not "do" aesthetics—except, of course, when it always does.¹ And this constitutive inconsistency has deep (inter)disciplinary roots. While clearly a function of cultural studies' repudiation of philosophical aesthetics and received notions of high culture, cultural studies' fraught relationship with the aesthetic is also a legacy of the field's fraught relationship with Marxist cultural theory, a diverse body of scholarship with a long history of politically- and historically-engaged forms of aesthetic analysis. The theme of 'capitalist aesthetics' that frames this issue, then, is dual in its critical affordances. On the one hand, it points forward, providing a glimpse of what cultural studies might look like if it more explicitly embraced aesthetic attention and aesthetic discrimination. On the other, it points backward, inviting us to trace existing histories of contact and divergence between cultural studies and an array of critical practices that have acknowledged the significance of form, sensation and judgment in shaping the political and social meaning of everyday cultural experiences.

## **Parallel Histories**

"Aesthetics" has not always been a pejorative term in cultural studies circles. For Raymond Williams, a foundational figure in the field, the aesthetic named a key area of critical concern that spoke to both the experiences of everyday people and the political possibilities of form (Bérubé 9-16; Gilbert, "Cultural Studies and Anti-Capitalism" 181-4; Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 151-158). Yet at least as early as the 1980s—that moment when cultural studies made its "full appearance on the intellectual scene [as] an important, ongoing approach to the study of culture" (Szeman et al. xx)—a clear anti-aesthetic position began to crystallise. The position was on full display by the late 1980s and early '90s, with the formative Urbana-Champaign conferences and the influential mega-anthologies to which they gave rise. In the first of those anthologies, 1988's *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, the term "aesthetic" receives only passing mention from Franco Moretti and Fredric Jameson, while Michèle Barrett's contribution foregrounds the term only to forsake the concept, characterizing the rise of cultural studies as the "marginalization of aesthetic questions in the interpretation of culture" (701). By the time of the field-defining second anthology, 1992's *Cultural Studies* (Grossberg et al.), just four years later, this indifference towards aesthetics

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<sup>1</sup> While recognising that cultural studies has diverse and complex origins, we are focusing exclusively on the Birmingham and post-Birmingham manifestations of the field as the key loci for discussions regarding aesthetics, Marxism and cultural studies.

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had mutated into full-on opposition. While the "politics of aesthetics" is listed as an area of conceptual focus in the book's "user's guide" section (nestled between pedagogy and the "culture and its industries" [20]), in practice, the aesthetic is invoked only to be repudiated. This tendency becomes most palpable in the chapter entitled "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," where Ian Hunter declares that "the cultural studies movement conceives of itself as a critique of aesthetics," an assertion that receives no objection in the following (recorded) discussion (347). Elsewhere, Tony Bennett—who in earlier work had argued that aesthetics has political use-value "only for the right" (Outside Literature 148)—contends that cultural studies was founded on "the anthropological plenitude of Williams's extended definition of culture versus its aesthetically restrictive sense" ("Putting Policy" 26). Thus, at a decisive moment in the evolution of the field—a moment widely hailed as the beginning of a newly inclusive and diverse cultural studies (Rojek 141)—aesthetics appeared to be unwelcome.

Nor was this anti-aesthetic sentiment limited to the Urbana-Champaign gatherings and the anthologies to which they gave rise. Rather, it reflected a broader turn against the aesthetic that would come to characterise the expanding field over the coming decades. In his influential British Cultural Studies, Graeme Turner celebrates cultural studies' adoption of semiotics as a method because of its "break with the aesthetic mode of analysis" (British Cultural Studies 22) and presents aesthetic analysis as the opposite of a social or sociological account (British Cultural Studies 45, 88). Although less triumphant in tone, Ioan Davies expresses a similar sentiment in Cultural Studies and Beyond when he suggests that "all of cultural studies has ultimately been a debate with aesthetics, whether it recognised it or not" (67). By the 2000s, the opposition between cultural studies and aesthetics had taken on the status of a received truth, such that David Hesmondhalgh could identify a "prevailing cultural studies tendency to be suspicious of aesthetics" (523); Rita Felski could point to the widely held notion that "cultural studies has declared war on art and aesthetics" (28); Chris Norris could proclaim that cultural studies is characterised by "flat hostility" towards aesthetics (90); and Turner could gloss Stuart Hall's lament for cultural studies' transformation into Soprano studies as a concern that "cultural studies is becoming a performative or perhaps even an aesthetic, rather than a political practice" (italics added, Turner, What's Become 173). No wonder, then, that in 2005 Nicholas Brown could declare cultural studies an "anti-aesthetic" approach to culture (5).

Yet while these pronouncements seem definitive, in practice they failed to completely exorcise the aesthetic demons from cultural studies practice. A key case in point is the 2005 anthology, The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies, which presents itself as the last word on the couplet "cultural studies" and "aesthetics." Michael Bérubé's breezy, urbane editorial introduction sets the tone of the collection. Coolly dismissing the field's detractors, Bérubé ascribes cultural studies' reputation as "anti-aesthetic" to a mixture of ignorance ("Few of the champions of beauty seemed to know very much about the work of Raymond Williams" [3]) and defensiveness (where cultural studies' effort to multiply the objects, experiences, and judgments that might legitimately fall under the rubric of the "aesthetic" put it on a collision course with the defenders of high culture [7]). And he goes on to conjure a captivating vision of "a branch of cultural studies" (14) that combines the critical suspicion of Marxist hermeneutics with the textual sensitivity of the New Criticism. This is a cultural studies that, to quote Bérubé himself, "takes seriously the discourse and the history of aesthetic theory" (14) and "stress[es] the functional and situational character of judgment," (8) while also asking "what various cultural practices do ... [and] how they strike the senses" (8). In this reading, far from opposed to aesthetics, cultural studies is fundamentally concerned with the politics of aesthetic form, experience and evaluation.

Unfortunately, while Bérubé's vision of cultural studies has immediate appeal, it does not quite stand up to scrutiny. Asked to piece together a picture of a field called "cultural studies" on the basis of this collection alone, a rookie scholar could easily walk away convinced that contemporary cultural studies scholars were the direct inheritors of a tradition established by Russian Formalists, deepened by the Frankfurt School, popularized by Raymond Williams and exemplified by Dick Hebdige. But while routinely invoked in key journals and anthologies, Adorno is hardly a natural candidate for founding father of the field. In fact, as Imre Szeman has put it, the Frankfurt school has tended to serve as cultural studies' "'bad' other," "its importance deriv[ing] almost entirely from the *negative* lesson that is to [be] taken from it" (61). Nor, for that matter, is Raymond Williams, whose influence upon the field began to wane in the 1970s, around the

time that his colleague Stuart Hall emerged as "without question ... the central figure in the development of the internationally dominant version of cultural studies" (Sparks 71). And although Hall was certainly not the opponent of aesthetics that he is sometimes made out to be, the post-Althusserian Gramscian theoretical apparatus with which he came to be associated certainly did not afford aesthetic concerns anything approaching a pride of place. Cultural studies and aesthetics, then, were far stranger bedfellows than Bérubé's charming revisionist history of the field might suggest. As he himself acknowledges, "[this] is not, in fact, the dominant strain of cultural studies" (8).

Or is it? Could it not be that what fell out of favour was rather the term aesthetics and the immediate analytic traditions the term evoked and that the *practice* of aesthetic analysis remained in play? In part, this is what Bérubé does suggest, and in part, we concede, he is right. It is certainly true that, whatever the official line on aesthetics, many critics within—or at least within stone's throw of—cultural studies have continued paying attention to culture's sensuous and formal properties, and to the cultures of evaluation that form around them. An important case in point is Dick Hebdige's Subculture, a field-defining work from one of the central figures of 1970s cultural studies that takes its cues from the rich textual awareness of Roland Barthes. Similarly, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, another foundational classic, is deeply concerned with the aesthetic as a site for the political articulation of new syncretic forms of identity and community. Yet although both authors were key figures of the second generation of cultural studies (Gilbert Anticapitalism 30), it is not clear that they still exert particular influence over the field. Unlike their contemporary Lawrence Grossberg, they are no longer active players on the international cultural studies conference circuit, and neither is institutionally situated within the field: Hebdige is now a Professor of Art, Film and Media Studies, while Gilroy is a Professor of English and American literature. As enticing as it might be, then, to imagine a cultural studies retrofitted to accommodate aesthetics and populated by Hebdiges and Gilroys, it is not enough to point to a pro-aesthetic counter-tradition within cultural studies. Rather, we must grapple with the fact that it's a counter-tradition in the first place, tracking the changing fortunes of an aesthetic approach to culture in a field whose dominant energies, we suggest, have worked to suppress it.

#### Blame the Marxists

Accounting for these anti-aesthetic energies leads us to the second term that shapes our special issue: "Capitalist." While the connection is not exactly intuitive, cultural studies' relation to the aesthetic has long been bound up with its equally fraught relation to anti-capitalist, and particularly Marxist, agendas. Not only has Marxism been one of the most important frameworks through which cultural studies scholars have grappled with the question of the aesthetic, but, prior to the emergence of cultural studies as a field, Western versions of Marxism were one of the key intellectual spheres in which the social and political status of culture was examined in depth (Milner 7). Indeed, aesthetics was absolutely central to the early twentieth-century cultural theory of Marxist thinkers such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Galvano Della Volpe, Herbert Marcuse, Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldmann, and Theodor Adorno. In contrast to earlier practitioners of Marxist theory, who focused on the role of the state, these critics channelled their "major intellectual energies and gifts" into discussions of "Art [and aesthetics]" (Anderson 76, italics in original). In the work of scholars associated with the Frankfurt School, then, we can locate an aesthetically-orientated tradition of cultural criticism that serves as both cultural studies' putative antecedent and its foil.

Moreover, while the standard account of the relationship has it that "British cultural studies has tended either to disregard or caricature in a hostile manner the critique of mass culture developed by the Frankfurt School" (Kellner 31), the connection between cultural studies and Cultural Marxism has not always been so straightforward or so antagonistic. This is especially true in relation to the work of Raymond Williams, who writes of the "excitement of contact with more new Marxist work" in the 1970s and who, upon reading Marcuse's *Negations*, celebrated a "sense of meeting, after a long separation" (qtd. in Mulhern 34). Commenting in particular on Marcuse's concept of "affirmative culture," Williams speaks of the

intellectual affinity between Marcuse's work on this topic and his own seminal Culture and Society, which Jeremy Gilbert refers to as the "founding text" of cultural studies (Anticapitalism 182). Francis Mulhern goes even further than Williams himself, declaring an "objective parallelism of early Williams and the Frankfurt critique of culture" and locating strong analogies between Williams' later work and that of Lukács (35). Such accounts seem to suggest then that, at least in its earliest moments, cultural studies as it manifested in the work of Williams was in absolutely no way opposed to the Marxist aesthetic tradition; instead the two traditions shared a set of concerns about how culture could function socially and politically. Repudiating the unidirectional causality implicit in an earlier base-superstructure model, Williams, like his European comrades, emphasised experience and meaning, while at the same time testing a model of "culture" that had been monopolized by the investments of the elite against a new, anthropological notion of culture as a "whole way of life" (Williams, Culture and Society xvi). It is perhaps little surprise then that Williams recurs as a theoretical touchstone for those who seek to install aesthetics as a legitimate part of the history of cultural studies.

However, this sense of a shared theoretical project between cultural studies and cultural Marxism would not last. Writing about the work of influential early figures in British cultural studies, such as Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, Paul Smith argues that "the most surprising thing about this strand of [early] cultural studies is how little it seemed to know about the similar kinds of work in other contexts; notably absent is the work of the Frankfurt School with its stress on both the industrial and the ideological aspects of mass culture" (61). This is perhaps not as surprising as Smith makes out. Classic works of the critical tradition were only just being translated in the early 70s, and the intellectual content of Western Marxism was largely unknown in the UK at the time of Hall and Whannel's The Popular Arts (Jay xiii-xiv).<sup>2</sup> What is perhaps more surprising, however, is the apparent disregard among critics like Hall, Hoggart and Whannell of the Marxist trajectory of Williams's work. This disregard can be understood as a function of a broader shift away from Williams, a shift that would culminate in the early 1980s, when Hall would repeatedly cast Williams' work as simultaneously inspirational and deeply flawed, an outmoded form of cultural studies that must be superseded ("Cultural Studies and the Centre" 60-1; Cultural Studies 1983 53). As part of this process, Williams was recast as representative of the "Culturalist" tradition that Hall famously opposes to cultural studies' "Structuralist" tendencies (which he describes as possessing a "more impeccably Marxist lineage" ["Two Paradigms" 64]), and thereby stripped of both his structuralist connections and his Marxist credentials (Milner 114). Over the following decade, a range of scholars would downplay Williams's contributions to forms of analysis that that dovetail with Marxist aesthetics and he was progressively reconstructed as either a post-Leavis scholar of "experience" (Scannell 115) or the purveyor of a "mechanistic and reductionist" model of "cultural materialism" (Barker 39).

In fact, Williams' cultural Marxist-adjacent iteration of cultural studies can be understood as one of the central casualties of the rise of Structuralist Marxism in cultural studies between the 1960s and 1980s, what Colin Sparks refers to as the "heroic age' of cultural studies" (84). Despite Hall's presentation of cultural studies as a synthesis of culturalism and structuralism, in practice, this period of the CCSS is more widely remembered as a break from the former in favour of the later (Davies 119; Gilbert Anticapitalism 27-8). Central to this theoretical transformation was a profound engagement with the work of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci (Rojek 43), two of the very few Western Marxists not to place aesthetics at the centre of their conceptual frameworks. The emphasis upon the ideological concerns of the two theorists leads to an odd situation where, despite the centrality of aesthetics to the majority of Marxist theory in the twentieth century, it was aesthetics that dropped out at the moment that cultural studies explicitly adopted Marxism. This absence was further compounded by the fact that a deeply structuralist version of Althusserian Marxism not only became the "orthodoxy of the Birmingham Centre," but came to "stand for 'marxism' in its entirety" (Sparks 82). Conceived in these terms, the turn to Althusser was not only another step in the new, structuralist direction of British cultural studies but also the beginning of a "new marxist cultural studies" (Sparks 84), a historically revisionist narrative that erased earlier parallels between Williams and

<sup>2</sup> That said, when those works were eventually translated, Hall, for one, was certainly aware of them: he identifies Lukács and the Frankfurt School as central to the "break into a complex Marxism" in cultural studies (281 n. 48).

the Frankfurt School. This tendency was only amplified by the similarly influential incorporation of Gramsci in the mid-1970s that reflected the Italian theorist's broader popularity in the British Left of the time (Gilbert *Anticapitalism* 26). Although Williams had also engaged with Gramsci at length, Gramsci's integration into the cultural studies project was situated primarily in relation to Althusser (Milner 113), as a set of theoretical resources for making sense of culture as a system of ideology-delivery and negotiation, rather than formal expression. Symptomatic of the shifting theoretical landscape, both Gramsci and Althusser are covered in depth in Hall's account of the intellectual development of the centre ("Cultural Studies at the Centre" 32-38) and loom large in the lectures he delivered at the first Urbana-Champaign conference (*Cultural Studies* 1983 2016.) Conscripted to the field through the lens of the culturalist-structuralist binary, Marxism was mobilised in cultural studies as a theoretical framework of ideology and determinism that left little room for engaging or even apprehending the rich conceptual resources of the broader cultural Marxist project.

The full consequences of this intellectual collapse would only become apparent later, however, when during the 1990s this structuralist approach would become the subject of repeated criticism as an overly reductionist and deterministic model of culture (Garnham 618; Milner 2; Sparks 88-97; Turner *British Cultural Studies* 219-225). Aggressively refuting Nicholas Garnham's suggestion that cultural studies ought to reconcile with Marxism, Grossberg would vehemently reject the idea that there was ever any familiarity between cultural studies and its "reductionist' cousins" (630). The expulsion of Althusserian structuralism thus in no way occasioned a re-engagement and re-assessment of earlier culturalist work or any rapprochement with the cultural Marxism of Lukács or Lefebvre—after all, Althusser had stood for all Marxism—but rather led further afield theoretically. For many, this took the form of a turn towards the post-Marxist theory of Laclau and Mouffe (McRobbie; Valentine), most notably in the work of Hall (Sparks 90-95), while in the USA, Derrida and Deleuze became popular points of reference (Rodman 174). However, by and far the most influential theorist in this new moment was (and still is) Michel Foucault.

While Foucauldian theory is not inherently opposed to aesthetic analysis, its integration into cultural studies under the sign of 'cultural policy studies' entailed a further de-emphasis on the aesthetic. Driven by a group of Anglo-Australian scholars, in particular, Tony Bennett, the 'cultural policy' approach "took a remarkably circuitous route" through Foucault's work on governmentality in order to advocate for a pragmatic form of cultural studies that engaged with policy-makers and government bureaucracies (Sterne, "Cultural Policy" 60). While much has been made of the anti-theoretical impulses of the "cultural policy" school" (Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies'" 29; Gilbert, Anticapitalism 67-69; Sterne, "Cultural Policy" 61-62), just as central to this project was an unequivocal hostility toward aesthetics as a meaningful site of concern (a hostility that sounds particularly clearly in the aforementioned essay by Bennett's fellow-traveller, Ian Hunter). Indeed, while cultural policy studies served to reunite the twin strands of aesthetics and Marxism that were severed in the Structuralist moment, it did so the better to denounce them both, with Bennett, for example, bundling Althusser in with his critics, Adorno, Lukács and Benjamin, and convicting them collectively of the crime now monolithically dubbed "Marxist aesthetics" (Bennett, Outside Literature 30-32). Although the influence of Bennett's pugilistic attitude should not be overstated in terms of either cultural policy studies (Yúdice 1) or Australian cultural studies more generally, the interpretation of Foucault central to Bennett's work has continued to shape practice in both those areas. Indeed, Meghan Morris identified the debate between "'policy' and 'aesthetics," as one of the guiding tensions of Australian cultural studies (454), albeit one that would almost always be resolved in favour of the former. Consequently, the rise of "Australian" cultural studies in the 1990s and early 2000s (Turner, "Afterword" 609) saw the growing international influence of a Foucauldian species of cultural studies that, while not necessarily as inherently antagonistic to aesthetics as the work of Bennett and Hunter might suggest, had little space for either political economic or aesthetic concerns, where it was not dismissing the first as totalising and the second as trivialising. It is no coincidence, then, that many of those cited as celebrating or advocating for the end of aesthetics in this short, potted history, have been Australian scholars.

All of which makes it somewhat ironic—perhaps even oxymoronic—that this special issue had its origins in a meeting of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia under the theme of "Cultures of Capitalism." Certainly, none of the critical histories traced above was apparent to us at the time. Rather, 2017 simply seemed like a timely moment to revisit the subject of capitalism. Yet to the extent that—as we've suggested—

cultural studies' repudiation of Marxism and its repudiation of aesthetics go hand in hand, it should come as no surprise that the invocation of "capitalism" also raised the spectre of "aesthetics." Invited to yoke "culture" to "capitalism," and thus to return to some of major traditions for reflecting on the connection between the two, from Williams to Adorno to Benjamin, many of our speakers took direct inspiration from the questions of form and style, of experience and evaluation that dominate those traditions. This is not to say that polemical struggles over the meaning, status and value of the aesthetic emerged as prominent themes in the conference. In fact, among the many things we appreciated about both the gathering itself and the writing that rose out of it is that rather than fretting over whether or not cultural studies could viably accommodate aesthetics, our contributors simply "got on with it," drawing on cultural studies and cultural Marxist traditions in equal measure. With little fuss and even less fanfare, the contributions to this special issue provide excellent grist for our argument here: that an aesthetic cultural studies, or a cultural studies of aesthetics, have both been long with us and is also long overdue.

### Let's Talk About Aesthetics

But what exactly would "an aesthetic cultural studies, or a cultural studies of aesthetics," look like in practice? As a concept, "the aesthetic" is the lynchpin of a range of philosophical and critical traditions, and has accrued manifold different meanings across a critical career that spans texts as disparate as Aristotle's Poetics, Kant's Critique of Judgment, and Bourdieu's Distinction. Barrett's contention that aesthetics can mean three quite strikingly different things—"(1) received by the senses; (2) referring to beauty; (3) superior taste"—draws attention to just a few of the term's valences (697). And many of those meanings, to say nothing of the philosophical and theoretical frameworks that inform them, are a tough sell in the context of politically-minded and committed scholarship. For the record, we'd quite happily eject from a rebranded, aesthetics-friendly cultural studies a number of the paradigms that Bennett, Frow, Hunter and Turner have targeted under the rubric of "aesthetics." We are far from wedded, for example, to a reified model of aesthetic as an ontologically distinct category detached from the domain of social and political reproduction, nor, for that matter, to a reified model of the distanced or disinterested spectator. We'd be more than happy to ditch the logic of universalism that animates traditional philosophical aesthetics, foregoing the search for static, ahistorical aesthetic truths in favour of accounts of situated, strategic and functional judgments tied to particular aesthetic "regimes" (Frow 1995). And we'd be delighted to do away with the proscribed version of aesthetics enshrined in the traditional English lit or art history curriculum, which, to quote Ben Highmore, has helped "ruinously ... narrow" aesthetics' purview to "art and beauty" (xiii).

Contra Hunter and Bennett, however, it's not at all clear to us that one needs to buy into any of these frameworks in order to value a critical practice attentive to aesthetic experience and aesthetic evaluation. As Williams explains, while "art" and "beauty" have monopolized our understanding of the aesthetic, these rubrics are ultimately functions of a broader concern with the sensuous properties of the material world ("Aesthetic" 32-33): that is to say, with what Felski calls "the 'how' rather than the 'what' of symbolmaking ... and the distinctive pleasures that arise from that 'how'" (34). At stake in aesthetics, that is, is ultimately sensation, experience and perception, and-where these last are invariably mediated through a roster of culturally situated aesthetic categories—evaluation (Ngai 948). Having jettisoned some of the more distasteful dimensions of classical philosophical aesthetics, then, it's easy enough to imagine an "aesthetic" cultural studies—a cultural studies that, systematically rather than surreptitiously, actually does aesthetics. In fact, in this light, cultural studies looks like the natural home for a politicised form of aesthetic analysis. Whereas classical philosophical aesthetics emphasises aesthetic autonomy, aesthetic universals and aesthetic distance, cultural studies emphasises the need, as Grossberg and Cary Nelson put it, to "break down the barriers between ... domains of culture, social, economic and political activity," by "politicising interpretative and cultural practices, by looking at the economic determinations of cultural production, by radically historicizing our understanding of signifying practices" (1). And whereas classical philosophical aesthetics focuses on "Art' as a ... body of objects" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 153), cultural studies grants aesthetic credentials to mobile applications as well as *Madame Bovary*, and accepts,

as legitimate aesthetic experiences, "suspense" as well as "sublimity." It's easy, then, to see the value of cultural studies for aesthetics.

But it's equally easy to see the value of aesthetics for cultural studies. There's no doubt, for one thing, that cultural studies needs to enrich its aesthetic palette. Between "beauty" and "ugliness," elite culture and mass culture, pleasure and un-pleasure: abstracted from our everyday aesthetic chatter—our cries of "crap," or "cool," or "clever"—the aesthetic categories that circulate, however, covertly, through cultural studies today seem strangely impoverished, their rich, descriptive flesh stripped back to axiological sinew. While cultural studies scholars, for example, mull over the politics of the "pleasure" of commodity consumption, in everyday discourse these pleasures are mediated by a changing roster of far more historically and affectively specific categories, extending from the "epic" to the "emo." And while cultural studies scholars fret over the politics of neoliberal "beauty" practices, everyday aesthetic aspirations and evaluations are expressed in a far more flexible parlance, stretching from the glamorous to the sexy, the cute to the pretty. From "transparency," to "comfort" to the odd phenomenon of the "A E S T H E T I C": contributors to this special issue on "Capitalist Aesthetics" begin this work. Throughout, they trace specific aesthetic configurations that mark out objects and bodies in ways that are differently racialised, gendered and classed, are differently affectively charged, and quite differently "classify the classifier" than the root terms of which they not mere variations (Bourdieu 62).

It's not just that we need an aesthetic cultural studies; it's that we cannot afford to do without one. As Jonathan Sterne points out, to neglect aesthetics is to overlook the reason for so much of the appeal of culture: the reason why cultural forms are produced, circulated, consumed, discussed, debated, even studied ("Burden" 81). Without this awareness, we are always at risk of collapsing into a solely instrumentalist approach to aesthetics whose analyses focuses exclusively on the question of how this or that singer or movie is placed in "the war of position against late capitalism" (Bérubé 7) at the expense of the question of how they "organiz[e] ... the human senses" (Hansen 393); To ignore the aesthetic aspects of culture, in fact, is to flirt with bad faith by downplaying the aspects of culture that led us to it in the first place, and that sustain us as we engage with it as an object of scrutiny. In neglecting the aesthetic, we neglect what is in practice an inalienable and essential means by which a text engages its audience, and by which the audience, in turn, engages the text. While conceding the Bourdieusian insight that "the aesthetic realm is fraught with dangers of power games: strategies of social distinction, universalism and speaking for others" (Hesmondhalgh 514), such an observation does not exhaust the function and relevance of aesthetics to the study of culture. The pieces in this collection begin—or rather, begin again—to address these aspects of the aesthetic. Combining careful attention to the formal, sensual and evaluative level of cultural experience with a broader focus upon the conditions of its political possibility under capitalism, they show us-or remind us—us what a properly aesthetic cultural studies might look like. More specifically, they show that consideration of the formal aspects of the text, of the affective experiences through which we respond to them, and of the aesthetic judgments that organise those experiences, is essential to understanding both the affective appeal and the political labour of particular symbolic forms.

## **Dreaming of Aesthetics**

If late capitalism involves the diffusion of "the aesthetic function" (Mukarovsky 21) across an increasing number and variety of domains, David Crouch and Katarina Damjanov's article, "Sensational Interfaces and the Aesthetics of Space Apps" (440-450) bears powerful witness to this process. At the heart of the essay are what Crouch and Damjanov call "space apps," smartphone-enabled applications that use creative visualisation to package the techno-scientific data gathered through space exploration into consumerfacing digital "experiences." Combining wide-shot accounts of life in digital capitalism and close-up accounts of the apps themselves, Crouch and Damjanov convincingly show that as a function of a broader process by which Earth's planetary exterior has been "progressively colonized by logics of capital," space apps mark a crucial "meeting point between the 'society of the spectacle' and 'the society of control'… in emerging economies of extraplanetary attention". Also charting the extension of the "aesthetic function"

across new material frontiers is Ameeth Vijay, whose essay "Dissipating the Political: Battersea Power Station and the Temporal Aesthetics of Development" (610-624) explores the role of aesthetics in projects of urban redevelopment. Vijay's analysis focuses on the wide-ranging marketing materials associated with Battersea Power Station, a high-concept corporate, retail and residential development in south London centred on the restoration of an early twentieth-century coal power plant. Through the close analysis of these materials—corporate manifestos, a regular magazine, and other design and planning documents—the author shows how a trio of specific aesthetic configurations (the aesthetics of "place and placemaking," of "creativity" and of "the garden," respectively) serve to dissimulate the consolidation of cultural hegemony at play in processes of urban gentrification.

Where Vijay and Crouch and Damjanov draw attention to the role of the "aesthetic function" in sustaining social and geographical spaces that might once have fallen outside the ambit of aesthetic experience, others do the reverse, drawing attention to the political and historical weight of phenomena that have conventionally been understood in "purely" aesthetic terms. Ricky Crano, for example, examines "complexity" ("A Context for Complexism" 341-352), one of the guiding formal precepts of the subset of algorithmic or generative art to which it gives its name. Deploying computer algorithms to demonstrate how complex phenomena can emerge through the repeated enactment of simple rulesets, "complexist art" is indebted to the so-called "science of complexity," a flourishing interdisciplinary field of research dedicated to the analysis of complex and dynamic systems. Yet, as Crano demonstrates, the historical and political roots of the concept at the heart of this body of scholarship—i.e., the concept of "complexity" itself—have largely passed without critical interrogation. In "fill[ing] in the missing backstory" of the term, then, Crano reveals its ideological affinities with the work of the controversial social theorist and political economist Friedrich Havek, whose thinking was instrumental in capitalism's neoliberal turn. Robert Payne's "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure" (528-539) meanwhile, makes a similar gesture, if to a more reparative end. Payne's essay points to the unexpected queer significance of moments of "infrastructural failure"—moments when, as Payne puts it, "We struggle to watch a film in a room with too much light, we strain to hear dialogue over the engine hum in an aeroplane, and we are frustrated as we mistype an SMS on jolty public transport." Zeroing in on five semi-autobiographical scenes of media encounter, and drawing from a rich tradition of queer and feminist analyses of affect, Payne shows that moments of "infrastructural failure" not only reveal the impossibility of seamless or frictionless transmission, but provide a generative opening for queer affections, affinities and dispositions.

Zoë Druick, Jorge Valdovinos, and Caroline West, meanwhile, take a more meta-critical approach, interrogating mainstream "activist" projects through attention to the specific aesthetic principles in which these projects trade. Druick's article, "'A Wide-Angle View of Fragile Earth': Capitalist Aesthetics in the Work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand" (396-405), mounts a critique of the work of a French environmentalist filmmaker avowedly committed to "reform[ing] the excesses of capitalism." An exacting analysis of three of the directors' most prominent works, Home, Human and 7 Billion Others, Druick's article shows that Arthus-Bertrand's central visual strategies—the use of "fly-over" cinematography and a reliance on the "database" are also mainstays of the capitalist/imperialist mentality he claims to resist. Caroline West's article "The Lean In Collection: Women, Work and the Will to Represent" (430-439) broadens this critique of mainstream forms of political activism to contemporary liberal feminism. At the heart of West's essay is the so-called Lean In Collection, a series of stock image photographs of "women in the workplace" resulting from a collaboration between Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Organization and Getty Images. As West's judicious visual analyses show, while claiming to provide "a new visual paradigm for women, work, and the family," these images traffic in a rhetoric of "balance" and "equilibrium," that, reifying individual female empowerment over collective political action, provides devastating insights into capital's appropriation of the politics of identity. Also invested in querying the role of aesthetic categories and practices in sustaining popular forms of critique is Jorge Valdovinos's "Transparency as Ideology, Ideology as Transparency: Towards a Critique of the Meta-Aesthetics of Neoliberal Hegemony" (653-666). Noting that "one of the dominant responses to the crises that our global economy has experienced in the last few decades is a call for 'more transparency," Valdovinos suggests that "transparency" has emerged as a kind of consensus value among critics of government on both the left and the right in late capitalist (neo-)liberal democracies. Resisting this logic of demystification and exposure, Valdovinos approaches transparency not as an undisputed epistemic or informational good that can be either realised or withheld, but as an aesthetic and ideological operator that serves to perpetuate the "informational asymmetries" at the heart of neoliberal hegemony. In all three articles, then, close consideration of aesthetic questions enables the authors to trace profound performative contradictions within dominant forms of social, political and ecological activism.

Andrew Hickey and Martin Fredrikkson, by contrast, seize on specific aesthetic configurations with an eye to setting out alternative directions for activism and analysis. In "Comfort: A Project for Cultural Studies" (463-474), for example, Hickey turns to "comfort" as one of the essential dimensions of everyday life among the middle and upper classes in affluent late capitalist countries. For Hickey, comfort is both an ideal object for cultural studies, as a form of "inquiry focused on the clarification of the 'everyday' dimensions of living now," and a particular challenge for cultural studies, as an "activated" project that aims to effect radical social change. Yet as Hickey persuasively shows, comfort is also, potentially, an opportunity for cultural studies—an object that, if approached carefully, could help "reactivate" the practice of cultural studies by prompting us to "unsettle those comforts that mark the practice of the discipline." A similar gesture shapes Martin Fredrikkson's "Authors, Inventors and Entrepreneurs" (319-329). In Fredrikkson's telling, as a legacy of eighteenth-century romantic aesthetics, "the author" was put on notice by critics in the twentieth century, from the historical and semiotic critiques of the author figure initiated by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in the late 1960s, to the devastating deconstruction of an author-centred IPR regime mounted by law scholars in the 1990s. Fredrikkson's innovation, however, is to press these now well-established analyses of the author into the service of our understanding of a contemporary ideological persona: the entrepreneur. In doing so, Fredrikkson does not just provide a genealogy for this late capitalist cultural archetype, but draws much-needed attention to the privatisation of culture and creativity that shapes it.

Mobilising and/or interrogating a host of aesthetic paradigms, categories, and formations, the contributions described thus far have demonstrated the value of aesthetic analysis for advancing a critique of capitalism. Other contributions to this special issue, however, take a more reparative approach, turning to specific aesthetic practices and paradigms to provide openings to a different future. Claire Henry's "The Temporal Resistance of Kelly Reichardt's Cinema" (486-499), for example, looks to the work of a leading independent American director whose unique cinematic style, according to Henry, both explores and enriches the "temporal order" of everyday life in late capitalism. While questions of time have animated a great deal of existing scholarship on Reichardt, Henry shows not only that "capitalist temporalities" are far more heterogeneous than the rubric of "24/7 time" suggests (Crary 1), but that Reichardt's answer to this situation moves well beyond the "slowing down" of time (Fusco and Seymour 56). In three of Reichardt's less prominent pictures, Henry traces the contours of a series of "alternative temporalities," from the logic of "coevalness" modelled in Certain Women (2016), to the "teardrop-shaped universe" envisioned by one of the characters in Old Joy (2006). Sarah Baker's essay "Post-work Futures and Full Automation: Towards a Feminist Design Methodology" (540-552) is also exemplary here. Baker takes as her point of departure Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' polemical assertion that instead of looking "backwards" towards an idealised, pre-capitalist past, the left should wed itself to a post-work and post-capitalist future characterised by full automation and a universal basic income. Baker's intervention in these debates turns on her astute observation that "a significant burden is left at the designers' door in the post-work/postcapitalist imaginary," especially if the "post-work" future is to fully incorporate feminist critiques around the role of reproductive labour after capitalism. By way of answering this need, Baker considers the limits and possibilities of existing design methodologies in relation to the gender politics of post-work, with an eye to "creat[ing] alternative designs for the future."

For Andrew Whelan and Raphael Nowak, as for Padraic Killeen, the critique of capitalism is similarly, if perhaps more decisively, besides the point. Both essays examine the contemporary internet-based musical microgenre Vaporwave. And both essays seek to sidestep apprehensions of the genre that reduce it to a move in the "war of position against late capitalism" (Bérubé 7). Characterised primarily by the appropriation and manipulation of "mood" genres from the 1980s and 90s, Vaporwave has come to be understood, thanks to intensive academic and vernacular commentary, as an ironic or ambivalent critique of capitalism. Yet

as Killeen argues in "Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave's Affective Potentials" (625-637), while not precisely disputable, the popular conception of vaporwave as a "capitalist critique" is overdetermined. As Killeen tells it, "in its exhumation of the sounds and images of this expired era, vaporwave retrieves the affective remainders that still echo within these insignia of the now outmoded, depleted myths of 1980s popular culture." The effect of this affective "exhumation," moreover, is more affirmative than critical, serving to expose the latent liberatory potential of "our affective capacities right now," and obliquely entreating us to register and assume that potential. Whelan and Nowak's essay, "'Vaporwave is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in an Online Music Scene" (451-462) also offers a corrective to the kinds of political claims that have been made on behalf of the genre. Their essay takes these claims as the springboard for a striking reconceptualisation of the boundaries of genre in the context of popular music. They argue that the discursive labour of discussing and contesting Vaporwave's positioning as anticapitalist is less a gloss on the genre than a central feature of it, constituting a form of "genre work" that serves to consolidate the genre's intelligibility and coherence.

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