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Beyond a Mere Aesthetic Theory: a Review of Michael Feola's The Power of Sensibility: Aesthetic Politics through Adorno, Foucault, and Rancière (2018)

Abstract

A critical book review of Michael Feola's The Powers of Sensibility: Aesthetic Politics through Adorno, Foucault, and Ranciere

Keywords

aesthetic theory, Michael Feola, Jacques Ranciere, Michel Foucault, Theodore Adorno, sensibility, critical theory

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By glancing at the back of Feola's book, you would be encouraged to find a captivating interweaving of Adorno's, Foucault's, and Rancière's aesthetic theories toward the creation of an emancipatory politics that privileges sensibility and the feelings of others. While Feola does provide an in-depth analysis of each of these three thinkers' philosophies in a modern context that could lead to developing better political strategies, it fails in connecting Adorno, Foucault, and Rancière together and in producing an actual strategy towards an emancipatory politics.

Feola poses pointed and relevant questions regarding the general lack of concern for the aesthetic within the political, such as, "what could it mean when theorists apply patently aesthetic criteria *as* political resources" (5). His writing is meticulous and demonstrates a careful grounding of this work within political theory literature. Feola maintains concerns about oversimplifying his approach to either de-legitimize politics or to remove the thoughtfulness and creativity from the artistic process (10). Overall, Feola wants to salvage the aesthetic from the trash heap it has been placed in due to the shadow of Nazism's abuse of the aesthetic image and Walter Benjamin's (rightful) criticism of it as the "aestheticization of politics." For Benjamin, Hitler's fascist regime was altering the way in which politics and art were socially connected. Art was intended to create a beautiful imagery of the political goals of the regime without doing much to better the structural issues plaguing Germany at the time. Feola's goal is to encourage us to "take seriously the material practice of a political aesthetics – how it produces unplanned, unanticipated effects – and how it resonated in ways that cannot be domesticated by a theory that would simplify, sanitize, and reduce its meanings" (12).

The book is smartly organized, with the first three substantive chapters being dedicated to Adorno, Foucault, and Rancière, respectively. Of these three chapters, it seems as though Feola struggles the most in dealing with Adorno without succumbing to the use of dense jargon. Because there is a dual critique Feola must anticipate – namely, defending his choice of Adorno over another Frankfurt School theorist, in addition to his core thesis, – the Adorno chapter takes a long time to cover very little ground. Of the three central chapters of the book, this one seems the most disjointed in its explanation of Adorno's "aesthetically informed reason" and the need for a shift towards discussing deliberative communication as a response to displays of suffering (44). Feola, however, does do a good job of bringing forth the importance of re-evaluating aesthetics through Adorno to focus on speaking and listening. Essentially, he draws our attention to the ways in which certain kinds of speech are privileged or trivialized depending on the extent to which they appeal to our neoliberal values – values that reinforce "dominate discourses of justice" and highlight the achievements of 'productive' members of society (38-9). What an aesthetics of sensibility, Feola argues, requires is a mechanism for these voices to be heard, what he writes as a need for "an insistence to attend to those remainders that are excluded, silenced, and bracketed from the forms of reason that structure what is (or can be) recognized as authoritative" (42). In other words, those with the most to lose are incapable of adequately having their needs and demands met because these issues require a vocabulary of justice that those in power would need to dramatically alter, and who have no desire to do so. Feola uses the example of climate refugees to highlight this point. These individuals are essentially forced to communicate their hardships from within the context of a not-so-natural "natural" disaster rather

than in terms that acknowledge and criticize the government and nongovernmental organizations that should be held accountable for their suffering (40).

The chapter on Foucault appears to start off much more clearly on what the intention of it will be, how it is made to relate to the previous chapter, and what questions of sensibility it will address. Overall, this chapter is exceptionally well-written and clarifies Foucault's oft-difficult oeuvre. The chapter itself seems well-suited for an introductory chapter of Foucault's aesthetic thought for undergraduate and graduate students, removed from the general argument of Feola's book. The discussion on Foucault also seems better suited to the argument prefaced in the introduction, and while the link back to Adorno seems a bit weak, Feola expertly discusses Foucault's political thought, particularly in the form of the "specific" intellectual Foucault names as one that is suited to partake in emancipatory action at the grass-roots level, and partly by expanding this individual into a structural frame for political action in general. The "specific" intellectual stands in contrast to the "master" intellectual, the intellectual historically privileged as (typically) he who is able to address the concerns of others from up high. The "specific" intellectual, by contrast, aids his or her community in a resistance that can only be communicated in local terms for the specific needs at the time. This demands that we give up on the idea of the 'armchair philosopher' who can develop generalizable modes of resistance and take cues from affected communities themselves. The focus of this chapter is to illuminate the various ways in which resistance can occur via the demand of a new culture. Foucault highlights this in his discussions of radical black activism that strived to go beyond a politics of respectability, and in gay and queer protests that sought to alter our perceptions of men and sexuality broadly. As a result, this chapter makes the most compelling argument for the serious consideration of aesthetics of the entire manuscript.

The third chapter, on Rancière, aims to fill a void that Feola identifies as being "that this aesthetic turn ultimately reflects the fate of politics within a time of devitalization and disillusionment – a situation in which subjects seek to change themselves once they have lost faith in changing the institutions that form (or deform) their lives" (72). Rancière is a natural choice for Feola's project because Rancière foregrounds the aesthetic, typically as performance, as playing an important role in the moments that politics occur. How re-considering aesthetics as political resources can be fundamentally helpful for an emancipatory politics is most clearly delineated in this chapter, particularly with Feola's analysis of Rancière's 'the part which has no part' as a potential mechanism to unsettle what and whom is typically considered a political subject where audible communication from those that are othered by society can be understood by others and not simply interpreted as "noise" (78-80). To clarify, Rancière, and by extension Feola, acknowledge that within communities inequality exists that determines *who* has the right to speak and make demands, and who is 'othered' by being outside of this core group. Typically, those within 'the part which has no part' are minorities or other social outcasts who can physically speak and address their grievances "but whose questions will not matter, whose reasons will not be counted as such, whose challenges will be translated into terms that hollow them of force, and who will be answered in terms that do nothing to transform the conditions they find objectionable" (80). We can see this in the general disregard society takes to the homeless or veterans, where, being confronted each day by their needs, other justifications emerge to claim that their demands are superfluous or that fulfilling them would be a waste of resources on a group of people irresponsible enough to squander them or, especially in the case

of veterans, their needs function as an excuse to not provide sufficient resources for other marginalized groups, such as immigrants or the currently and/or formerly incarcerated—resources that despite not being provided to these other groups never seem to find their way to the veterans who need them.

Chapter four, “Bringing the Threads Together,” leaves behind a feeling of incompleteness. It never seems fully able to bring these threads together in a way that looks like a finished seam and not a haphazardly pinned collection of raw edges. Each of the previous chapters independently make compelling claims on aspects of aesthetic sensibility that are typically undervalued. The chapters on Foucault and Rancière can serve as important educational material for undergraduate and graduate students engaging with aesthetics and its importance for political mobilization for the first time, but together, the three chapters seem haphazardly related. The connections between each are weak at best and the threads are left dangling separately due to a lack of a coherent plan towards emancipatory politics with the aesthetic aims that Feola promises in the introduction. In fact, there is more discussion in the concluding chapter of Arendt and Habermas, and how their theories also lend themselves to critically re-evaluate the position we have held on aesthetics, than of the three theorists named in the title. We are ultimately left without an answer to the proverbial question ‘what is to be done?’—and perhaps more relevant to scholarship working at the intersection of aesthetics and politics, *how* is it to be done?

What is exceptionally frustrating about Feola’s work is that while it cites the few other major figures (including Crispin Sartwell) who argue for re-evaluating the ‘aestheticization of politics’ towards politicizing aesthetics for emancipatory aims, the book never truly goes beyond these prior texts to provide a clearer roadmap on what this use of aesthetics would actually look like. How might one silence the ‘noise’ that surrounds ‘those who have no part’ in an effective way to provide legitimacy to their claims? How might a radical view of listening to the speech of others aid in allowing them to create their own identity and culture in meaningful ways? How do we shift from a politics privileging listening to one that makes adequate use of the aesthetic for long-term emancipatory action? These are all questions that are not sufficiently addressed in Feola’s work, but which, if engaged with and developed further, would give the book a significant edge over previous works that attempt to argue for the re-evaluation of the aesthetic in politics. Thus far, works in this field have left too much of the theoretical work that would be useful for those activists and organizers in struggle towards the creation of an emancipatory system utilizing aesthetics to its readers. Feola’s work does not resolve this lack. Perhaps a better utilization of Foucault’s “specific” intellectual and a prioritizing of grassroots’ aims would better address the question of how this kind of politics can or should be done.