

Panel Five: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Political

“Ethics and Aesthetics at the Intersection: Doris Salcedo’s Art and the Problems with Art Theory”

Carolina Drake

UNC-Charlotte

ABSTRACT

In the artworld, artists are engaging with reality by presenting works that refer to violence, suffering and marginalization. The works of Doris Salcedo are examples of art constitutive of an ethical dimension apprehended affectively. Yet prominent art theories have generally excluded ethics from the field of aesthetics, leaving them unable to account successfully for works such as Salcedo’s, among others.

I argue that to bring ethics back into the field of aesthetics, what we need is an approach that, first, bridges these two fields and, second but most importantly, can account for works that are apprehended affectively prior to being recognized as art. My goal is, first, to present my approach to these types of works while turning to Judith Butler, second, to present my critique of the standing essentialist theory of Arthur Danto, third, to show how Umberto Eco’s approach, although more successful, does not go far enough to account for these works of art.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Affect, Butler, Danto, Eco, Ethics, History.

In recent aesthetics, much has been said about bringing ethics back into the field of art theory.¹ One reason is that we find in the contemporary art world artists who are producing works that display a clear affective dimension often related to the reality of violence, suffering, and marginalization, that make moral demands on us. In these cases, the affective and ethical dimensions ontologically constitute the work as art. For example, Doris Salcedo, an artist from Colombia, creates art of this sort. Yet many philosophers tend to separate the work of art from its historical context, where the ethical dimension is found. That is, a tradition often rooted in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, characterizes the “aesthetic attitude” and makes disinterested pleasure the defining feature of the aesthetic.² Thus, it is not concerned with the contextual field of art, where violence, suffering, and marginalization are portrayed affectively and ethically. This tradition, rather concerned with beauty characterized through a disinterested aesthetic judgment, makes the joining of ethics with aesthetics implausible. Another tendency in this tradition is to be preoccupied with defining art essentially rather than with engaging in the contextual field. So, in both cases, art is separated from its ethical dimension.

Yet it is evident that art continues to engage reality, with artworks exhibited every year that refer to the trauma of war, the marginalization and dehumanization of minority groups, and exploitation of persons. Surprisingly enough or not, art theory that either relies on a disinterested attitude or on essentialism has fallen behind in accounting for art that has a central ethical dimension dependent on its historical context. The significance of these artworks also reveals an urgent call for aestheticians to give more attention to the ethical aspects of art with the goal of ending this artificial isolation between ethics and aesthetics. To end this

¹ For work on this recent debate, see Hagberg, Garry, editor. *Art and Ethical Criticism*,. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009. Also see, Costello, Diarmuid, editor. *Life and Death of Images*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.

² On the problems related to this, see Mark Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” *Beautiful Suffering, Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. He relates it to the problem of aesthetization, and addresses thinkers such as Kant, and more recently Jerome Stolinz and Marcia Muelder Eaton, who make disinterested pleasure and beauty central in aesthetics. (pp.13-37).

isolation, I propose, we need a different approach that does not exclude ethics from aesthetics, but rather can account more successfully for the ethics and the historical context of art.

I will discuss two of Salcedo’s works, *Shibboleth* (2007) and *Unland* (1999), because they clearly denote how art can have ethical value that is necessarily apprehended affectively and is relevant to the work’s recognition as art. I further argue, turning to Judith Butler, that the ethical dimension of these works comes prior to their ontological recognition as art. This being the case, we would now need a theory able to account for works where the affective experience is prior to their recognition as art. Prominent art theories account for art by separating it from its ethical dimension and, in my view, defending that recognition is prior to any affective experience, such as empathy or compassion, which is apprehended. I defend an approach to art that will more successfully account for works where apprehension precedes recognition. As I am doing philosophy in the intersection between ethics and aesthetics, I first present my approach to bridge ethics with aesthetics and, second, critique an essentialist theory of art in that it separates ethics from aesthetics. I later argue that a theory that includes history as part of the ontology of art is helpful, but does not go far enough to account for works such as Salcedo’s. Finally, my goal is to reconstruct an approach that will prioritize the work’s affective apprehension of the ethical dimension of art.

To represent the reality of violence in her art, Salcedo traveled to the northern heartland of Colombia’s civil war and, over a period of three years, spoke to children who had witnessed the murder of their parents. These testimonies inspired a series of three sculptures given the collective title *Unland*. In one piece, Salcedo conjoins two fragmented tables to suggest the dysfunction caused by extreme trauma. The closer we get to the object, the better we perceive how parts of the table are covered with human hair sewn over it. These human traces may or may not belong to the actual victims of violence, but what is relevant is that there is an ethical dimension in this artwork, where sorrow achieves a public form.

Here, the work of art, if apprehended affectively, can make a moral demand upon us. For example, the work can urge us to secure the precarity of the lives lost to violence, cause outrage, or motivate a call to action. Such is the importance of this ethical dimension, that without it, the work could be reducible to furniture, or an indiscernible object. And such is the importance of an affective experience, that without it, the viewer would feel plain indifference to the reality the work refers to. Further, this entails that we are not limited by our perceptual recognition, which is a cognitive experience. Salcedo is not attempting to show us a mere piece of furniture or create a cognitive experience of conceptual art, but rather to give us an affective experience. So there is a central affective dimension to Salcedo’s work of art that is a crucial element of its ethical dimension, which comes in even before we start to recognize the work as art. To account for this statement, my initial goal is to support the claim that the affective experience of these works of art precedes our recognition, and for this I turn to Judith Butler.

Butler’s general project in *Precarious Life* is to assess how the ontological notion of life has been constructed through the notion of framing. Her emphasis is on the question of “the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life...as precarious, and those that make it less possible” (p. 2). Specifically referring to the visual field of war, she argues that there are delimiting conditions placed on our visual field. In this visual field we can recognize lives as human by the way the world is framed, and we can also apprehend that lives exist outside the frames of recognition. Butler’s further goal is to critique traditional ontology, in this case arguing that life precedes the notion of discourse and the normative frames that, precisely, construct the ontology of life. I suggest that her philosophical endeavor can be successfully applied to the ontology of art if we focus on how artists “frame” reality through their works and on how the viewers apprehend, through affect, empathy or compassion, what the work is attempting to bring into the field of recognition.

Specifically relevant to aesthetics, Butler explains that within a visual field there are conditions that simultaneously allow and prevent our apprehension of what is a life. Starting with the assumption that those who gain representation have a stronger opportunity of being humanized, while those that fail to be represented are not regarded as human, she argues that there are norms, explicit or tacit, that operate in many ways, one of which involves frames that exercise a delimiting function on the perceptual field. But Butler acknowledges that this normative framing is not solely limiting. To begin with, under these conditions there is a viewer who assumes to be in an immediate visual relation to reality, and, she writes:

“There are ways of framing that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness that will allow us to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded. (p. 77).”

I.

This relationship between viewer, conditions under which a life becomes apprehended, and frames, plays in the visual field of war and, also, in the field of aesthetics where the artist can frame a reality. So Butler's theory, I suggest, meant to be applied to the visual politics of war, can be applied to works of art that "frame" an ethical reality, also, within a visual field. The ontological question referring to the being of life inside these operations of power leads Butler to distinguish between "apprehending" and "recognizing" a life (p. 4).

Recognition is a stronger term, linked to cognition, but apprehension is less precise and can imply "marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition" (p. 5). This last concept is linked to sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not yet conceptual forms of knowledge. With this idea, and after clarifying what normative powers are at work when something is "framed," Butler suggests that we are not limited by the stronger, cognitive, forms of recognition, but rather that we can apprehend something as "not being recognized by recognition" (p. 5).

This last suggestion entails that apprehension can become a basis for the critique of the norms of recognition, because, Butler states that we can "apprehend or fail to apprehend the lives of those that are lost or injured" (p. 3). Following this account, it can be suggested that apprehension is a form of sensing that can precede recognition.

The constitutive ethical dimension of a work such as *Unland*, relies on the viewer's apprehension through his/her affective experience to recognize the work as art. Without the ethical dimension being recognized, the work would be incomplete ontologically as a work, so apprehension in this case necessarily precedes recognition. Because the affective experience takes place before we make an aesthetic judgment, and before we can make an ontological claim about the work being art, what this reveals, moreover, is that the ethical dimension of a work is not accounted for successfully, or at all, with current art theories. The reason for this, I argue, is that theories that rely on either essentialism or a "disinterested" aesthetic attitude are already basing their approach on the assumption that recognition precedes apprehension. So the ethical dimension of works of art such as Salcedo's, among others, cannot be successfully accounted for using a theory that situates the artwork in the field of logic and perception, setting aside or leaving out the affective experience of the work. Moreover, as I show, an approach that includes the historical dimension of the work into its ontology makes a move that, although more successful, falls short in grasping the ethical dimension I want to account for.

II.

I argue that Arthur Danto's philosophy of art is not successful in accounting for the kind of work Salcedo creates. Danto separates art's essence, which is universal, from the historical and contextual dimensions of the work, which are contingent. By focusing on art's essence, he excludes the historical dimension of the artwork. Consequently, the ethical and affective dimensions are excluded as well from art's ontology. So the affective experience central to the ethical dimension of Salcedo's art is accounted for only after the work is recognized as art. The ethical dimension and the historical realm of the work, in this theory, are not a part of its essential definition but are rather part of the interpretive dimension of art, which is excluded from its definition and, most problematically, separate from its ontological constitution as art. This leads me to claim that an essentialist theory of art cannot successfully account for works such as Salcedo's, among others. With the cases I present, where the affective dimension comes prior to the recognition of the work as art, these works would remain ontologically incomplete, or unsuccessfully accounted for.

After the End of Art is a compilation of lectures in Fine Arts given by Danto, wherein we find the central claims of his essentialist theory, previously argued in his earlier works, such as *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and in his article "The Artworld" (1964). Arguing that what matters is *not* what art is, but rather what makes the difference between art and non-art, Danto focuses on the problem of indiscernible counterparts.³ In this case, *Shibboleth* (2007) can be perceived as sharing the same physical properties as its mere real counterpart, a crack on the floor, so it has indiscernibility issues. For this reason Danto argues that we need to define art philosophically by including its non-perceptual, ontological properties in this definition. Yet these non-perceptual properties have nothing to do with the affective experience the work provides, but rather with the essential conditions a work of art must meet to be art.

³ This focus is clearly stated in "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1981. (pp.1-33).

It is clear that *Shibboleth* is a good example of a work that, at first glance, presents indiscernibility issues. It was exhibited at the Tate Modern museum in London in the form of a 548 foot long meandering crack on the floor that works as a dividing line. Yet it is relevant to ask if the essentialism that defines it can account for the work’s ethical dimension. The title of this work comes from a biblical word used to exclude those who don’t belong to a particular social group or class by not being able to pronounce this word correctly. In her proposal for the project, Salcedo writes that it is about the “absolute indifference⁴” of the privileged to the sector of society that remains excluded, invisible. The crack, which occupies the negativity of space, disturbs the Turbine Hall, the same way that, to Salcedo, “the appearance of immigrants disturbs the consensus and homogeneity of European society.” The interpretation of this dividing line and its boundaries leads us to the ethical issue raised by this work, which is exclusion: historical, racial, and religious. Salcedo is working with aesthetic strategies that help the viewers apprehend, through affect, that there are lives disregarded as such and considered less human which are excluded and marginalized.

Yet, *Shibboleth*’s indiscernible similarity to a crack on the floor demands that the viewer’s experience of the work allow her to bring in the historical field, along with the work’s ethical dimension, in this case experienced affectively, to recognize it as art. For example, by feeling empathy for these marginalized groups, the viewer will grasp the moral demand the work is making, and respond to it effectively. An effective response is, ideally, linked to a call to action to secure the precarity of these lives, or a response of outrage.⁵ This moment where interpretation takes place is prior to our perceptual recognition of the work as art. So apprehension precedes recognition. That is, if there were no apprehensive experience, there would not be an affective response. Without this affective response, the work’s ethical dimension fails to reveal itself, so the work fails to reveal itself ontologically as art. I defend the claim that, if the affective apprehension of the ethical dimension in these works is posterior to their recognition as works of art, then the ethical dimension is not accounted for. Under this claim, Arthur Danto’s essentialist theory becomes problematic as I further show.

Danto, precisely, accounts for the ethical dimension of the work of art as posterior to the work’s ontological recognition as art, so recognition is prior to apprehension. With this theory, works such as Salcedo’s would fail to be completed ontologically as artworks. A reason why recognition comes prior to apprehension in this theory is because by focusing on art’s essence, Danto excludes the historical dimension of art, separating with it, its ethical dimension. In “The Artworld,” Danto’s view is that we have reached a point in the history of art where an artwork cannot be perceptually differentiated from a mere object, so that we need a theory that will differentiate artworks from other things.⁶ Not only does Danto exclude the historical context of the work (and with it, the ethical) but we also find his claim about art to be now post-historical. In *After the End of Art*, Danto explains how “there is a kind of transhistorical essence in art, everywhere and always the same, but it only discloses itself through history” (p. 28). Although this claim is sound, in that history has a role, what Danto does not regard as sound is that this essence can be identified with any style of art, so history does not have an ontological role. While in the past other definitions such as the Vasarian idea that art is imitation, or the romanticist idea that art is the expression of feelings, failed because new artworks appeared that could not be accounted for with these definitions, the essence of art cannot convey to historical contingencies if it is to remain universal (p.29). Danto can now declare the end of these historical narratives. In his view it is not the role of art to search for its definition, but rather, once art is indiscernible from reality, the question of definition belongs to philosophy.

Danto, by establishing two minimal conditions, meaning and embodiment, defines art essentially. So a crack on the floor such as *Shibboleth* can be art if it has meaning embodied in the work. This aesthetic experience constrains the viewer to the field of logic and perception, demanding that we first identify the work as art if it conveys an essentialist definition, and later, in the process of interpretation, refer to the embodiment of the work, which is its contextual dimension where history and ethics are brought in only after the work is defined as art. So with this account, recognition comes prior to apprehension. This consequently

⁴ See Achim Bordchart-Hume. *Doris Salcedo, Shibboleth*. Unilever Series. 2007. (p. 35).

⁵ I don’t have space to develop this argument further, but when I refer to the “effectiveness” of a work making a moral demand on us, I imply that there are two conditions for apprehension to precede recognition. 1) The affective response from the viewer, where the ethical dimension of the artwork is apprehended and 2) This response should generate a “call to action,” outrage, or an urge to secure the precarity of those lives. Judith Butler specifically addresses this issue when she explains how, “It could be that the apprehension of precariousness leads to a heightening of violence.” Following this claim, I suggest that, if not secured through affect, apprehending that lives are precarious can lead to further destruction or injurability. See *Frames of War*, London: Verso Press, 2007. (p.ii).

⁶ Danto, Arthur. “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.61, No.19. (p. 572).

generates an interesting problem given that the work of Salcedo would remain incomplete, or unaccounted for, with an essentialist theory of art.

Another problematic issue in this theory is the tension generated between the universal definition of art and its interpretation which is historically contingent.⁷ Danto argues that something has to have meaning and embodiment to be identified as an artwork, so it has to be *about* something. This claim entails that *what* meaning something has, or *what* the work is about, is articulated in the interpretation of the work, which is historically situated, and does not necessarily constitute something as art. So his thesis makes a distinction between 1) something being art by having meaning and 2) *what* meaning art has through its interpretation. To interpret the work is to be committed to a historical explanation of it, determined by the artwork's mode of embodiment, but interpretation is separated from art's essence. With this move, Danto confidently embraces essentialism, claiming his definition of art captures the essence of art that is universal across history. But here he questionably makes a distinction between art's essence, which is transhistorical and universal, and its interpretation, which is historical, as he intends to make both of these compatible by embracing point 1 and dissolving history by separating interpretation from essence and declaring that art is now post-historical.⁸

What is most important about this tension is that Danto appears to generate ambiguity within his own thought, given that, aside from the theoretical definition of art, we find in works such as *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* his claim that interpretation is constitutive of its meaning.⁹ This makes his initial claim about the universality of essentialism ambiguous because the more "constitutive" interpretation is of art's meaning, the more subjected it is historical change, and thus, the more ambiguous is his claim to essentialism. This ambiguity is relevant in that it sustains my view, that interpretation is, actually, constitutive of art's meaning. Further, that interpretation, necessarily making use of the historical and ethical dimensions of the work of art, comes prior to our ontological definition of art.¹⁰

In conclusion, the more Danto insists that we need theoretical criteria (through his essentialist definition) to distinguish art from non-art, the less contingent upon history and the more unsubstantial aesthetic experience becomes. Danto makes a claim that compromises the autonomy of his theoretical approach, given that if interpretation is fundamental to the meaning of the work, then essentialism loses its universality. Defined through essentialism, *Shibboleth* and *Unland* would remain ontologically incomplete. The ambiguity in Danto's own thought is a clear sign demanding for an aesthetic approach that will account for the historical dimension (and with it, the ethical) of the work of art, to bridge the artificial isolation between ethics and aesthetics. To begin with, it may be that losing this universality can only open space for a more successful approach to art, as I subsequently show.

III.

I now evaluate Umberto Eco's approach and argue that, although more successful than Danto's, does not go far enough to account for the central, affective experience of Salcedo's works. It being the case that the historical contextual dimension of the work could be accounted for in a theory prior to our ontological recognition of the work as art; it would follow that its ethical dimension, apprehended through affect, would be accounted for as preceding recognition. Umberto Eco does not fully give such an account, but in *Open Work* he approaches art without excluding or separating it from its historical context (and, thus, its ethical dimension) like other art theorists do. So he disregards the universality of an essentialist definition, and instead argues that the work is completed only when it is interpreted in the historical context in which it is embodied. His approach is useful for my argument, because although Eco does not specifically address ethics,

⁷ For a further critique of the conceptual tension between universality and historicity, see Kelly, Michael *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Danto particularly, as I point, resolves the tension in favor of universality.

⁸ Referring this issue, I quote Danto, "I really meant to proclaim that a certain kind of closure had occurred in the historical development of art (..)Whatever art was to be made from then on would be marked by a post-historical character." *After the End of Art*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. (p.22).

⁹ See Danto, Arthur C. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

¹⁰ I resolve the tension between universality and historicity in favor of historicity only as a first step to more successfully account for the ethical dimension of the work of art, apprehended affectively. I do not entirely defend an institutional or historicist theory of art, because it does not take my claim far enough ontologically.

he does open the way for a more successful approach to art which does not dissolve history in favor of essentialism.

His article “Two Hypotheses about the Death of Art” offers an insight to this view when he states that when we interpret a work, there is no contradiction in assuming a) That one must appreciate the whole structure of the work as a declaration of poetics, and b) that such a work can be considered fully as art only when its poetic project can be appreciated as the concrete, material, and perceptible result of its underlying project (p.176). Point (a) stresses that the work has meaning, a condition which makes it art, but point (b) emphasizes that we can consider it fully as art only when it is embodied materially. That is, the work is ontologically complete as art once it is considered in its specificity. Here, there is no strong conceptual tension between universality and historicity like there is with Danto. Eco, by rather leaving the work “open,” prioritizes the necessity of the work’s historical dimension.

These points suggest that, theoretically, Eco prioritizes neither apprehension nor recognition. In fact, the central goal of this approach is to leave the work ontologically open, which entails that the ethical dimension of the work of art can be grasped as well. In *Open Work*, Eco’s central argument is that the work can be completed, but never closed. The reasons for this are that the work is rendered open by its author, given material embodiment in a specific time and place, and completed by a viewer with subjective interpretation. To allow interpretation, which is contingent on historical changes, to be brought in philosophically, Eco has to claim that the work of art is open, or a work in movement. Instead of separating art from interpretation (and from history) like Danto does, Eco leaves art “open” to a variety of interpretations and, thus, ontologically open to the contingent factors of history. With this move, Eco disregards the universality of an essentialist definition and, in declaring the work “open,” subjects art to history, allowing for apprehension to come either prior or posterior to recognition, but not necessarily *a posteriori*, like an essentialist theory would sustain.

There are charges of relativism that any non-essentialist approach has to account for when the context-dependent, historical dimension is part of the ontology of the work of art. In this case, Eco wants to prevent art from being endlessly subjected to the contingencies of history and the relativity of its unlimited variety of interpretations, yet without leaning towards universality. In his book *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco addresses this issue with the notion of authorial intentionality.¹¹ It is the author of the work who renders it open, mounting the sequence of semiotic elements in the order she chooses, so that the piece can reject the definitive, concluded message and rather multiply the possibility of interpretations. But the fact that the semiotic elements are arranged in *some* sort of sequence prevents us from claiming that the work can mean just anything or that it has unlimited interpretations. Eco argues that “if there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere in the work, and in some way respected.”¹² Although the material aspects of the work are related to (but also separate from) the author’s intention, without authorial intentionality, we would have a conglomeration of random components ready to emerge from chaos. So interpretation, although not limited to one meaning, is also not unlimited.

With the interpretive constraint made clear, Eco successfully includes history as a part of art’s ontology. He does not specifically address ethics in his work, but my reading of his approach entails that unless history is brought in to the ontology of an artwork the work is incomplete. From this point I can claim that Eco opens the way to a more successful approach to art given that once history is better accounted for, the ethical dimension of the work, apprehended affectively, can be brought in as prior to our recognition of the work as art. And this approach can more successfully account for works such as Salcedo’s, where an affect based response has to come prior to our cognitive or perceptual experience of recognition.

As we have now seen, Butler’s ontology of life in relation to the visual field can be applied to the ontology of art, which is also revealed on a visual field. This has allowed me to claim that, in works such as Salcedo’s, our apprehension of the ethical dimension, through affect, comes prior to the recognition of the work as art. My claim consequently reveals the need for a theory that will account for artworks without separating the historical dimension of the work, and thus the ethical, from its ontological definition as art. My reading of Umberto Eco allows me to move away from this separation and claim that the historical dimension of the work of art (and thus the ethical dimension) is part of the ontology of the work as art. Although I do not have enough space to develop my argument further here, my purpose has been to show how, if the ethical dimension is to be salvaged from aesthetic theories that separate ethics from aesthetics, we need a radically new and more successful approach to art that will bridge instead of separate ethics and aesthetics.

¹¹ For more of Eco’s view on authorial intentionality, see Collini, Stefan, editor. *Umberto Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹² See Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990. (p. 34).

“The Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan: Collectivity, Minority, Reterritorialization¹”

Bulent Eken

Duke University

The constellation created by the concepts of “collective enunciation,” “becoming,” and “minority” in Deleuze’s brief section on modern political cinema, in his *The Time-Image*,² has implications that go well beyond the historical examples provided there. Deleuze’s examples include figures as diverse as Rocha from Brazil, Sembene from Senegal, Chahine from Egypt. This may be called an ethno-critical or myth-critical cinema, which also usually presupposes a colonial history and is explicitly political. The films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, a filmmaker from contemporary Turkey whose cinema is my subject today, can neither be said to be political in the sense Deleuze’s examples are nor do they have a proper colonial context (Turkey having never been a colony). I will attempt to show in the following in what ways Ceylan’s cinema can be understood as a political production of collective enunciations under conditions where the specific problem it is confronted with becomes finding a way to define itself against the movement of reterritorialization. Given that today the new conditions of the universal tendency seem to be defined by a new media despotism and its opinion societies, and the fake communities, fabricated subjectivities, and self-fashioned tribes of capitalism, yet another concept from the corpus of Deleuze and Guattari, i.e., “reterritorialization,” may prove to be a powerful tool for the comprehension of these phenomena and their logic. Before all these, however, I would like to offer a brief explication of the still indispensable conceptual constellation provided in *The Time-Image* in the context of minor or political cinema.

The thesis Deleuze proposed to conceptualize the difference between the classical and modern political cinema is well known: whereas in classical political cinema, whether Soviet or American, people are never absent, modern political cinema finds its condition of possibility in the painful acknowledgement that people no longer or not yet exist, that they are missing. For example, the virtual line that crosses between the old and the new – the line according to which one could talk about an evolution from the old to the new or a revolutionary leap from one to the other – disappears. Thus in a colonized society, in the violent and absurd coexisting forms of the old and the new, the author-filmmaker may be faced with a situation in which the old has nothing to offer but myths with which the people imprison themselves, whereas the new can only offer fabricated stories imported from elsewhere and imposed on the people, even if this “elsewhere” now signifies the intellectual or author himself. The people are missing because one cannot discern *their* stories anymore. The impasse that confronts the author is then obvious: if “every personal fiction, like every impersonal myth is on the side of the ‘masters,’”³ she must avoid inventing a private story, but she must also avoid becoming the ethnologist of her own people. How can the author-filmmaker produce collective enunciations in order to escape both?

Instead of inventing a story, the filmmaker now takes real characters and puts them in a condition of story-telling; it is as if she catches them in the act of making up “legends.” (The English “story-telling” is the translation of “fabuler” or “la fabulation” in Deleuze’s French.) Not that the real character tells his or her private story; rather, “it is the real character who leaves his private condition, at the same time as the author his abstract condition.”⁴ In the film, in the space of its fable, the real character brings about something that she would never be capable of otherwise, just as the filmmaker gets hold of a material to work on with the real character that she would never have had otherwise.

Storytelling or fabulation produces collective utterances, which are neither personal fictions nor impersonal myths but words in action, speech-acts. As Jacques Rancière has recently observed in relation to Deleuze, fabulation marks “the suppression of fictional privilege.” The free indirect discourse to which it is harnessed does not express the Flaubertian “absolute point of view of style” of the author, but manifests the becoming of the real character when he commits that ultimate, unforgivable crime: making up legends, which

¹ This presentation will be accompanied by brief excerpts from Ceylan’s films.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 215-224.

³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

contributes to the invention of a new people.⁵ So this is how Deleuze formulates the new access to the collective by the modern political cinema under the conditions where people are acknowledged to be missing: by making use of the real characters who become “intercessors,” the author becomes a “collective agent” whose utterances carry the seeds of a people to come.

It is obvious why we can only talk about becoming when there is a production of collective enunciations, since collective assemblage (in our case the “film” itself) is the element which causes the terms or parties to become something other than what they are. And this formula of becoming already gives us an explanation of why becoming should equally require or concern minorities to operate. Indeed, if there has been an identity prior to becoming, there would never be a process of becoming. Anything that presumes to have an identity outside the process of becoming will, therefore, make this process impossible. It is because minorities lack such normative identities by definition, for that is why they are termed minorities to begin with, that they are the necessary medium of becoming.⁶

This framework demonstrates that the production of collective enunciations presupposes a politics. This politics would not be possible if collective enunciation did not define an exteriority in relation to both the personal fiction and the impersonal-mythical collective. The powers of becoming or the seeds of a people to come harbored in the collective enunciation are a function of this exteriority. In this sense, the production of collective enunciations is the object of a desire for the outside. But what is this outside an outside of? An answer can be provided for this question that will particularly be explanatory in relation to Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s cinema, to which I will now turn.

Reterritorialization is the compensatory movement of capitalism for its equally inexorable movement of deterritorialization. Movements of reterritorialization define the political field that is the counterpart of capitalist deterritorialization. Therefore, the response to the question “what is the outside, which corresponds to the production of collective enunciations, an outside of?” is simply that it is an outside of the political controlled by the movement of reterritorialization. In its struggle for collectivity, the politics of this outside has to target the configurations of reterritorialization. In an equally necessary way, this cinematographic policy has to insist on the condition of a universalized minority or, in other words, invest minorities as a missing people. The reason for this is clear. Capitalism can never acknowledge that people are missing; on the contrary, it compensates for this by constantly inventing fake subjectivities: people who must at all costs be identified and are good enough as consumers or opinion holders. Conversely, since minority is defined by the power of becoming, minorities or missing people are an eternally deterritorialized people. This also means that the existing state of affairs manifest a people in an objective state of fragmentation into which they are abandoned by the mere fact of occupying the positions configured by reterritorialization. Thus here, in yet another aspect of the figure, “missing” designates the objective state in which people exist. In the universalization of the condition of minority, they exist as missing in the political field of capitalism. Nuri Bilge Ceylan must surely have something of these in mind when he dedicated his award for the best director in the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, for his last movie, to his “beautiful and lonely country.”

I have explained above how “real characters” contribute to the solution of the problem of collective enunciation. Ceylan almost exclusively works with non-professional actors. His second film, *Clouds of May*, casts the filmmaker’s own mother and father, and, in *Climates*, his fourth and penultimate film, the filmmaker himself and his wife are cast as a couple. An immediate question arises here: how can this obvious personal and autobiographical investment (on the part of the filmmaker) be reconciled with the thesis of the collective and political nature of his cinema? The response lies in the recognition that rather than two autonomous registers, what we find here is a situation in which the private immediately opens onto the political. This observation can be verified at least on two levels in Ceylan’s cinema. In a famous formula, Fredric Jameson suggested that in the third-world texts “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.”⁷ As I will show below, *Clouds of May* can

⁵ Jacques Rancière, “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” in *The Flesh of Words*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 158.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming is usually misunderstood. Becoming is a process in which the individual gains determination or distinction; it is not a vague transformation from one identity to another. The concept of becoming is grounded only if and when becoming decides on the fate of identity, not if it presupposes the latter. Minority may designate the member of a set but it essentially designates the becoming of that member.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986), 69.

indeed be read as a national allegory. However, the private is political at yet another level. Deleuze and Guattari suggested in their work on Kafka that enunciation gains a collective value in minor literature since the private affair is immediately political.⁸ This is another way of saying that in minor literature the author lacks a private poetics and subject matter. Ceylan's films are organized in series, an organization that can be attributed to the lack of a private subject matter or the intrinsically collective nature of the putative private material, as I will explain in more detail shortly.

In *Clouds of May* the story of the private individual destiny is indeed an allegory of the embattled public situation. The main line of thematic development is the story of a filmmaker son and his father: the son who returns to his hometown in the country desiring to make a film, in search of characters, and finally settles on the alternative of casting his parents; and the father who is entangled in a juridical battle with the state for a piece of land with a stand of oak trees that is under the threat of being marked for cutting down. This is the same site where we will see the son shooting his film later, during which the terrible fate of the grove of trees will also be revealed. Therefore, the land under the threat of appropriation is at the intersection of the personal stories of both the father and the son, and pushes them into an allegorical level since it turns into an intensive locus of politics, nature, and art by virtue of designating the same space on which the interests of the artist, the peasant, and the state are inscribed. It is in this way that the father functions as the allegory of unalienated labor or a utopian relation to nature, whereas the son allegorizes the third world artist who is in perpetual crisis, lacks a private poetics, and is guilty of complicity with the violence of the state even if only through his indifference to the peasant father's cause and his aestheticism.

It should be emphasized that the allegory takes effect only insofar as the land signifies an irretrievably lost world. By the end of the movie the trees are marked for cutting down; hence the destruction that have already taken place, a world already in the past. Nothing in the movie is a better testimony to this sense of destruction than its final scenes: the sun rising on the father, his head heavy, who is falling asleep in a world that is gone, irretrievably in the past. The poignancy of these scenes comes from the feeling that is conditioned by the coexistence of the absolute peace and beauty of nature and the knowledge of its irreversible destruction. Ceylan's movie ends with a dedication to Anton Chekhov. It is impossible not to take this as an allusion to *The Cherry Orchard*. In Chekhov's play the orchard that would soon be razed to the ground by the new money signifies the passing of a whole era, that of the landed aristocracy, and the play ends with the aged servant forgotten and locked alone inside the great mansion by the departing company.

Remaining faithful to the truth of collectivity and the missing people could only have passed through the acknowledgment that the world depicted in *Clouds of May* is already lost. This is what saves the movie from becoming either a celebration of the country life or a reterritorialization on the country people, and makes it an elegy of a world destroyed by capitalism. Put differently, the condition of possibility of this film is a situation in which the city-country distinction is no longer valid. Rather, what becomes manifest, in the now universal subsumption of capital, is the painful truth that people are missing, that the world in which they existed has been destroyed. This is certainly how the film condemns at the outset any attempts at reterritorialization.

The serial organization is quite obvious in Ceylan; his films are literally made out of each other. His first feature film, *The Small Town*, casts four of the characters that will appear in his second film, *Clouds of May*. The shooting sequence in *Clouds of May* returns to the camping scene in *The Small Town* and shows, so to speak, its site of production: both the location and the story are the same in the new movie. His third film, *Distant*, is based on two characters from *Clouds of May*, the filmmaker and the cousin from the country who helped him in his movie. But this time they are in Istanbul, in the filmmaker's apartment who in this film is a photographer, as the cousin has been anxious to leave the town and now stays with the photographer while he is looking for a job. The organization in series is conditioned by the lack of a private poetics and subject matter. Because the material is intrinsically collective in this (minor) cinema, the author does not know what can become of it until he makes the movie, and he falls back on the movies that have already been made for the next one. This is in fact what explains the predominance of the autobiographical in this cinema without contradicting the observation about the collective nature of its material. As Jameson would say, the psychological is politicized in the third world, whereas the political is re-psychologized in the West. In his penultimate movie, *Climates*, Ceylan, having passed through his father and mother in *Clouds of May*, finally casts himself and his wife. Casting oneself, putting oneself in front of the camera, then appears to be

⁸ See especially the chapter titled "What is a Minor Literature?" in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

something like the limit of the series. It marks something like the “present” of the filmmaker, a way of taking stock of his work and life.

Climates centers on a “couple” who belong to an entirely different world compared to the world embodied in *Clouds of May* around the father and the mother and their apparently single son. It is instructive to compare these two films in relation to the question of collectivity. For, given the perspective of *Climates* on the life of the couple, one can argue that, for Ceylan, the couple signifies a reterritorialization, a fake community, whereas what *Clouds of May* presented was the vision of a destroyed world which is colored by the poignant feeling left by the sense of collectivity.

The well-known film theorist Robin Wood, who wrote an evaluative article on the entire work of Nuri Bilge Ceylan in *Artforum*, offers a good starting point. Wood suggests with great admiration that we should read *Climates* as a study of “the marital problems arising out of radical feminism and its consequences.” He contrasts it with the “domestic setup” in *Clouds of May* which, he suggests, is operative because the father and the mother accept the traditional roles of husband and wife, and with *Distant*, which is mainly a study of a non-sexual relationship between two males.⁹

I think that Wood’s reading is revealingly mistaken, particularly when he explains that the (supposedly) “domestic setup” of the father and mother in *Clouds of May* works because of the unquestioned traditional family roles. The problem is that one cannot transfer the categories that apply to the couple in *Climates* to the world of the father and the mother in *Clouds of May*. As I argued above, the world of *Clouds of May* is essentially a past world, a past that has never been present if you like, which enables Ceylan to provide a figure of collectivity without falling back on a pastoral vision. It is precisely because of this temporality that the world of *Clouds of May* does not admit of any transfer from the present. It is not even appropriate to speak of family there, let alone of couples and domesticity, insofar as the family is essentially open to the social field, co-extensive with the village, and not sealed off as a private domain as the modern family is. This is marked in a scene of *Clouds of May*: the filmmaker and his assistant, in search of location, enter one house in the village in which a baby is asleep, seemingly without anyone in the house and the door unlocked.

On the other hand, if the couple simply does not have any chance in Ceylan, as it is evident in *Climates*, this is less because of the lessons of feminism than for the fact that the couple can only be a reterritorialization, a hopeless community. The couple in *Climates* is typically a slave of the signifier. Nothing is ever done with, everything keeps returning. One says things whose memory of having been said is more poisonous than the words themselves are. No real conversation takes place between the couple because what one does when one speaks is to try to rid oneself of the poison. Thus, in the scene at the beach, the “monologue” of the man, who is rehearsing his speech to announce to the woman that they should split, is edited in such a manner that it turns into a “dialogue” in the space of a couple of shots. Everything that can be said already carries the memory of things that have been said. Thus, the woman cannot get over an affair he had had, and the man says ridiculous things like “I feel a great potential for change this time.” Wood’s reading misses the logic of the serial organization of the films. He retroactively imposes on the series the logic of the limit case (*Climates*), which he equates with Ceylan’s outlook. However, not only such a transposition is a paralogism, Ceylan’s outlook, if one really has to name one, is embodied in *Clouds of May* and not in *Climates*.

⁹ Robin Wood, “Climates and Other Disasters,” in *Artforum* 45: 3 (November 2006). He is so impressed with the accomplishment of *Climates* that it is worth quoting him: “I can’t believe that they [Ceylan and his wife] could make a film so poised, so totally lacking in any aura of sensationalism or public self-flagellation, in which the problems of male/female relations in our contemporary cultural situation are so inwardly analyzed, without having experienced them, to some extent, themselves, and been able to pass beyond that to self awareness. I can’t think of any other film as intelligent, as subtle, or as devastating in its sensitivity to the problems of heterosexual relationships in the postfeminist era.”

“An Exploration of the Concept of ‘Multitude’ as the Ground for Political Art”

Kim Charnley

University of Plymouth

ABSTRACT

This exploration uses the concept ‘multitude’ developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2006) as the basis of enquiry into current possibility of political art. The claims of Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) are explored in relation to the concept ‘multitude’ in order to highlight certain problems involved in proposing ‘political’ art at this point. The argument insists upon the relevance of ‘optimism’ in critical theory , as represented in the concept ‘multitude’, whilst acknowledging the indeterminacy of meaning that is found around key terms: such as ‘art’, ‘politics’ and ‘creativity’. The paper concludes by asserting the importance of activist art that makes use of the rhizomatic potential of developments in communication technologies whilst retaining an activist ‘tradition’ in the promotion of Cultural Democracy (Lippard 1984).

At this point it is obvious to even a casual observer that notions of ‘collectivity’ have a hold over the social imagination. This collectivity, as it now appears, is no longer tied to concepts of class or nation. It has become a more elusive power – given weight by the communication technologies that act as a kind of metaphor embedded in daily life: a demonstration of the potential for heterogeneous, globalised and spontaneous connectivity between human beings. But what is an effective way to think this moment in relation to politicised art? After all the idea of global connectivity seems to appeal as much to marketing executives as it does to radicals. How should its optimism be approached by work that attempts to critique capitalism? This second question – simplistic though it is – remains central to the practice of visual art to the extent that it claims to be political and of the present.

This paper will concern itself principally with a comparison between two formulations of the potential for the collective at this time: firstly, the concept of ‘multitude’ which is drawn from the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – the radical neo- Marxist bestsellers *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2006) and *Commonwealth* (2009); and secondly the notion relational aesthetics (RA) formulated by Nicholas Bourriaud – which has been a significant influence on artistic production in recent years. These two ideas are invoked in a particular relation: the first ‘multitude’ will be used to critique the second ‘relational aesthetics’. The grounds of critique and comparison will be quite simple: namely, the proper balance of optimism and pessimism that is required by the development of a politicised art that invokes ‘collectivity’. A background to this discussion will be provided by the thought of that arch-pessimist and self-confessed moralist, Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s work has certainly informed Antonio Negri’s characterisation of post-Fordist capitalism (although Negri’s world-view is fundamentally optimistic about the potential for radical political change) but this is not the reason for its inclusion here. Rather, it is used because it offers an exemplary reflexive attention to the claims of theory itself: theory’s tendency to operate as a discourse of power. It is here, with regards the potential hypocrisy of any theory that analyses power whilst simultaneously enacting it, that Baudrillard’s pessimism, even his paranoia, is entirely appropriate and rational. The paper will conclude with some comments on the best way to conceive of an art relevant to the concept multitude, in the light of the preceding discussion.

How then, can the concept ‘multitude’ be used to critique the claims of relational aesthetics? It will first be necessary to identify points of comparison between these two concepts, or conceptual approaches, and to observe that there is no self-conscious relation between them: neither Hardt and Negri, nor Bourriaud make reference to the each others’ ideas as far as the author is aware. This is largely because their ideas are confined to different fields. Hardt and Negri’s work is an analysis of globalised post-Fordist capitalism that attempts to lay out the theoretical ground for radical change; as such it does not concern itself with the role of art beyond the use of situationist-type interventions by protest movements (Hardt and Negri 2006). Bourriaud’s work, by contrast, is a theoretical justification of a key tendency of artists in the 1990’s who sought to establish environments in which meaning could be elaborated *collectively* (Bourriaud 2002:15). As such, Bourriaud’s work is a discourse that makes its political claims from within the disciplinary boundaries of contemporary art. Nonetheless, it is also the case that both works make extended reference to a similar inheritance of continental theory (Althusser / Foucault / Debord etc) and, crucially, both in different ways

respond to the optimistic potential or collectivity in this cultural moment. In so doing, both *Empire* and *Relational aesthetics* absorb the fundamentally pessimistic critiques of contemporary capitalism that have been developed by Marxist-inspired theorising of the sixty years; they attempt in different ways to find grounds for optimism despite the apparent ubiquity of the ‘society of spectacle’, the immanence of ‘biopower’, the elusiveness of ‘post-Fordist capitalism’.

As the introduction indicates, it is the argument of this paper that the balance of optimism and pessimism is most successfully achieved in the work of Hardt and Negri for reasons that will be indicated shortly. It must be acknowledged, however, that a positive assessment of *Empire* and Hardt /Negri’s subsequent works has not been universally arrived at by left-wing commentators. Their work has been widely criticised for its lack of detailed attention to historical detail; for its proposal of vague concepts like ‘multitude’; for its ‘arrogant’ attempt to go beyond classical Marxism among many other objections (Pinguin 2003). It cannot be denied that *Empire* is a broad brush account of the global situation. The fundamental premise of the work is that capitalism has entered a new stage beyond imperialism that the authors term ‘Empire’. This stage requires a new analysis – a fundamental updating of the Marxist problematic. Now the state is no longer the paradigmatic form of sovereignty; the state forms only one node in a power which is supra-national, and includes in its network other bodies such as the UN, the IMF, the World Bank as well as multi-national corporations.

The logic of this new order remains capitalistic in that it is based on exploitation of labour. The networks of ‘Empire’ work to maintain an equilibrium in which dissent is neutralised and creativity is channelled in the interests of globalised capital. ‘Empire’ is the condition of post-Fordist capitalism where, crucially, the key tendency is towards the development of technological and informational networks in support of the flow of capital and immaterial production. Immaterial production can be defined as post-industrial, an economy based on the creation of signs, experiences and affects²². Repression is effected through the structuring of subjectivity by work, leisure and also information: an ‘informational colonisation of being’ where the dominant power ‘creates situations in which, before coercively neutralising difference, [it] seems to absorb it in an insignificant play of self-generating and self-regulating equilibria’ (Hardt and Negri 2000:34). The operation of this power also extends to the formation of subjectivity and the structuring of creative flows.

So far, the tenor of these ideas is clearly pessimistic. However, Hardt and Negri follow an immanent critique of capital, where ‘Empire’ contains within its contradictions the possibility of its demise. This hope is located in the figure of ‘the multitude’ – a ‘powerful multiplicity unfettered by the state or by any kind of representation’ (Lotringer 2007: 19). This multitude is made possible both by the diminishing importance of national or regional identifications, and by the unstable subjectivities produced by ‘Empire’. Having said this, multitude remains an elusive idea throughout Hardt and Negri’s work – it is a term that points towards nothing less than a type of global unity in diversity that cannot quite be articulated within the constraints of a current conceptual language. Rather, it is a term that can only be developed through an ‘experiment or series of experiments advanced through the genius of collective practice ... to take that next concrete step and create a new social body beyond Empire’ (Hardt and Negri 2000:206) The possibility of these experiments is underscored by the location of desire and creativity in ‘the multitude’: for Hardt and Negri all of the developments of modernity have been prompted by this ‘desire’ expressed in terms of protest, disobedience and, most importantly, in concerted attempts to found a different way of living.²³ Accordingly, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2006) and *Commonwealth* (2009) are best understood as attempts to provide a theoretical focus to these powers of dissent in a period when the classic discourse of Marxism seems to have lost its relevance:

The first question of political philosophy today is not if or even why there will be resistance and rebellion, but rather how to determine the enemy against which to rebel. Indeed, often the inability to identify the enemy is what leads the will to resistance around in such paradoxical circles (Hardt and Negri 2000: 211)

It bears repeating at this point that this paper focuses on the proper relation of pessimism and optimism in discourses of collectivity in political art; it has nothing to say about the accuracy of Hardt and Negri’s analysis. In fact, *Empire*’s relation to the ‘real’ does not seem to be observed in its claims about the nature of post-Fordist capitalism so much as in its *rhetorical position*: that is, its attempt to unify various critical discourses beneath an internationalist banner that affirms the power of collective action. After all, why not? Given the

²² Hardt and Negri do not claim that the economy has entirely moved over to this form of production. Rather that this is the key tendency in the development of capital

²³ Negri was a key theorist of the Italian autonomia movement that has been characterised by attempts to found squatted alternative spaces since its inception in the 1970’s.

strange, uprooted status of meaning at this point such a call is surely as plausible as any other. It is this that is meant by a relationship between optimism and pessimism – between call for action and critique – and this that represents an important point of comparison with *Relational Aesthetics*.

Relational aesthetics has been used since the late 1990's as a kind of exegesis of the work of contemporary artists such as Vanessa Beecroft, Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija among many others. As has already been observed Bourriaud's work (first published as *Esthetique Relationelle* 1998) demonstrates a similar intellectual heritage of continental aesthetic and political theory to that of *Empire*. Furthermore, Bourriaud proposes that the meaning of the artworks discussed in *RA* is derived from their production of inter-subjectivity²⁴, a term that is also central to Hardt and Negri's analysis of the potential for multitude. According to *Relational Aesthetics* the artwork that developed in the 1990's marked a significant departure from an understanding of the artwork as principally an artefact whose meanings are addressed to 'private' experience. Rather these artists create 'open-ended' works whose address is principally public. Bourriaud sees this work as political – its emphasis on creating the potential for inter-subjective encounter or 'models of sociability'²⁵ as a resistance against the reification of social experience, and the absorption of sociality and subjectivity into modes of consumption.

This conception of repressive social forces in Bourriaud's work exhibits striking similarities to that advanced by Hardt and Negri (2000: 206). However, the project of relational aesthetics is in fact substantially different, because of the way that it carefully regulates its definition of the political. With *RA* the actual or potential intersubjective encounters are seen as enough to constitute resistance, through the institution of 'micro-utopias' of limited duration, in place of 'social utopias and revolutionary hopes' (Bourriaud 2002:31). Whereas *Empire* is clearly an attempt to revitalise a utopian political narrative, Bourriaud implicitly seeks refuge within the domain circumscribed by the term 'art', as though this space can be protected from the prevailing social conditions rather than being constituted by them. This ambivalence towards the political is framed as a response to contemporary culture where direct criticality is based on 'a marginality that is nowadays impossible' where '... traditional critical philosophy...now only fuels art in the form of archaic folklore...'. (Bourriaud 2002: 31).

Bourriaud's disenchantment sets the tone of his definition of the political. The mention of 'marginality' refers to the widespread sense that there is no longer a margin, or an 'outside', from which a political critique of contemporary culture can be made. Hardt and Negri also concede this point; indeed, their characterisation of 'Empire' is based around its shifting formulation where centre and margins seem to interchange – there is no stable configuration (Hardt and Negri 2000). This claim is perhaps the weakest point of their theoretical armature. If it is the case that there is no outside to capital then it is hard to see how such critique as 'Empire' is itself possible. It is Baudrillard who has worked furthest through the logic of such a claim as Lotringer observes (2004). At the very least, we can suggest that neither Hardt /Negri nor Bourriaud exhibit quite enough pessimism, or paranoia, with regards the role that the dissemination of their own theory plays in the structures of capital that they identify as the context of their theory.

Although it does not attempt to be a programmatic theory, *RA* does make the implicit claim that the artworks it considers represent formal and theoretical innovation. Without this claim Bourriaud's would have no basis for claiming any distinctiveness – as innovation remains a criterion central to the disciplinary coherence of contemporary art. As Julian Stallabrass has observed it is important to remember that Bourriaud's work is not merely a discussion but a promotion of the work of certain artists (Stallabrass 2004:177). *RA* forms its argument around a microscopic utopian demand – the possibility of an intersubjective generation of meaning around open-ended artworks. This is taken by Bourriaud as a 'formal' innovation, based on a response to new developments in culture. The developments in question are largely to do with communication: Bourriaud asserts the importance of the urban experience and also of course, the internet, which in the 1990's was already exerting a powerful influence on the social imagination. In place of the ideal of collectivity implicit within Marxist thought there is reference to the possibilities suggested by the growth of a 'culture of interactivity' and '...the emergence of new technologies, like the Internet and multimedia systems

²⁴ They also share an assumption that 'the mass' is basically productive rather than passive. Bishop identifies this feature of Relational Aesthetics as the heritage of Althusser. For Hardt and Negri the similar claim that it is the challenge of the workers that always instigates the development of capitalism is derived from both Italian Operismo and Deleuzian thinking.

²⁵ Which seems a slightly weaker version of the 'forms of life' that appear in Hardt /Negri and Virno in relation to 'the multitude'.

[which] points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard the cultural object...’ (Bourriaud 2002: 26).²⁶

As a framework for developing political art, it becomes obvious that *RA* has severe deficiencies. The fluidity of form presented by the works of many artists incorporated under the rubric of ‘relational aesthetics’, rather than challenging commodification, tends to identify the work with the artists themselves, fostering a particular auratic quality which is at odds with the claim to collectivity (Kayak cited in Bishop 57). One is tempted to say that the wonder of Bourriaud’s work is that it manages to make such a microscopic political demand, by a talent for hybridising theoretical references, into something that sounds plausible. *RA* is a kind of disappearing knot where strands of 20th century radical thought come together and immediately lose their problematic - a rhetorical style well suited to the demand for fluid subjectivity that is presented by contemporary culture.

Most importantly, *RA*’s bonsai utopianism does not effectively address the exclusions that pre-exist any art context – as has been effectively argued by Claire Bishop (2004). In her essay *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, Bishop promotes the art of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschorn, whose work is characterised by antagonism, against the ‘feel-good’ works of Tiravinija and others:

In this model, the kernel of impossible resolution on which antagonism depends is mirrored in the tension between art and society conceived of as mutually exclusive spheres – a self-reflexive tension that the work of Sierra and Hirschorn fully acknowledges (Bishop 2004:78)

This identification of a fundamental division or exclusion that exists between art and society is certainly accurate; however, Bishop uses this observation as the grounds for the re-inscription of this divide. Rather than the classic avant-garde demand of the collapse of the distinction between art and life, Bishop advocates an affirmation of the distinction, as a way of revealing the limits of what art can achieve, the social exclusions upon which it is based. Implicit in her argument is the claim that political art can at most achieve is to point to the exclusions that constitute the various contexts of art and the social, and to de-stabilise the clear self-identifications of those who occupy these areas. Yet, if this is the case, political art simply models these exclusions to the same art audiences that Bishop correctly identifies as the consumers of *RA* – an audience of dealers, artists and social elites (Bishop 2004: 67). Such an art invites its audiences to consume an experience of their complicity, as opposed to a mirage of social harmony. Does this really represent ‘better politics’ as Bishop suggests (Bishop 2004:79) - or rather, a restatement of a particular Alexandrian pessimism art’s potential to connect? Bishop is careful to distance her critique of *RA* from an advocacy of socially engaged art (Bishop 2004: 77); from the point of view of an activist art this represents a failure of nerve. The challenge is to bring sensitivity to ‘antagonism’ and its possibilities for the development of activist art. Although, Bishop is correct to criticise the ideological grounds of *RA*’s micro-utopias – and the fact that they are purged of negativity- the problem is not that *RA* does not recognise the boundaries of art, nor that it affirms a unified subject, but that it does not do enough with the antagonistic potential of the exclusions between art and the social.

It is the contention of this paper that a position such as Bishop’s falls short of the energetic fusion of pessimism and optimism that is necessary for an activist political art, although its criticism of *RA* is acute. Although Bishop advocates work that points to the antagonism between the social and art, this can only be signalled from within the space of art, which implicitly retains its integrity; however, Bishop is right to identify that a key weakness of *RA* is its inability to understand anything other than a utopian definition of interaction or connectivity in human relations. Jean Baudrillard makes a similar observation in his 1977 work *Oublier Foucault* (‘Forget Foucault’) where Deleuze’s and Lyotard’s conception of desire are criticised alongside Foucault’s understanding of power:

²⁶ It is worth noting, however, that there exists ambivalence in *RA* towards the internet that is revealing about the purposes of the work. Elsewhere, Bourriaud identifies the internet under the rubric of the ‘communication superhighways’ as integral to the reification of experience that relational aesthetics resists through the staging of ‘real’ encounters: ‘ We feel meagre and helpless when faced with the electronic media, theme parks, user-friendly places, and the spread of compatible forms of sociability, like the laboratory rat doomed to an inexorable itinerary in its cage, littered with chunks of cheese’ (p. 8) Bourriaud’s prose moves around the vague figure of ‘resistance’ through interchangeable oppositions that work towards the aim of validating a particular form of artwork without critiquing its claims. In Jean Baudrillard’s terms, which to a great extent run parallel to Hardt and Negri’s characterisation of *Empire*, this represents a ‘simulated’ tension.

Such a coincidence is not accidental: it is simply that in Foucault power takes the place of desire. It is there in the same way as desire in Deleuze and Lyotard: always already there, purged of all negativity, a network, a rhizome, contiguity diffracted ad infinitum' (Baudrillard 1977 trans. 1987: 17).

Baudrillard's point here can be explicated in two ways: firstly, he suggests that Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard have misrecognised the reality of contemporary capitalism to the extent that their work is merely symptomatic of it. Their theories have lost any relationship to the real of capitalism such that they simply exchange amongst one another the same basic formulae, according to wider logic of disembedded signs. Secondly, he affirms that the theories that result – particularly Foucault's analysis of power – is itself a discourse of power analogous to the one it seems to discover through its genealogical study:

'...an interstitial flowing of power that seeps through the whole porous network of the social, the mental, and of bodies, infinitesimally modulating the technologies of power (where the relations of power and seduction are inextricably tangled). All of this reads *directly* in Foucault's discourse (which is *also* a discourse of power). It flows, it invests and saturates, the entire space it opens....' (Baudrillard 1977 trans. 1987: 9).

There is no space here to assess whether Baudrillard's critique of Foucault, Lyotard and Deleuze is justified. The central point is that in Baudrillard pessimism about the status of meaning under capitalism does not allow theory to sit outside its purview, in an 'outside' or protected space. Theory, even Baudrillard's own, is always potentially complicit in the processes of simulation²⁷. Here is the proper place for pessimism – in the reflexive awareness of theory (of any kind) to its own complicity in a system of exclusions as well as its tendency to descend into a state that Baudrillard calls 'indeterminacy': where even the signs of radical theory are no longer 'invested' in any real situation (Lotringer et al. 2007). This type of vigilance is the only possible response if, as Hardt, Negri and Bourriaud all claim, there is no longer an 'outside' to capital.

It might be objected that critiques of the kind presented by Baudrillard unnecessarily complicate matters; why is it necessary to advocate these kinds of paranoid positions? In response to this, it is easy to point towards the various reversals and slippages of meaning that make any kind of optimistic discourse unstable and subject to appropriation. The phenomenon is most easily seen in the way that 'creativity' is promoted in the form of entrepreneurship. In fact, notions very similar to those of 'the multitude' seem to be central to a blurring of the distinction between innovative entrepreneurial thinking and contemporary art. Writing in a recent edition of *Art Monthly*, Jennifer Thatcher, director of talks at the ICA, terms this as 'art's current fascination with grass-roots activism, amateurs and subcultures ' (Thatcher 2009:332). The context of this discussion is that an interest exists in parallel with various marketing, economic and internet buzzwords that focus on the potential of the internet and other recent communication technologies to sustain radically new forms of entrepreneurship. The convergence is such that it is possible to cite a 'slew' of shows in the US in 2009 that referenced 'Crowdsourcing' and 'The Wisdom of Crowds': terminology drawn directly from a 2004 book on innovation in marketing: 'Crowdsourcing' by James Surowiecki (Olson cited in Thatcher 2009: 332). Without an appropriate degree of pessimism it is not possible to guard any hope against its appropriation by the protean discourses of capitalism.

What then are the proper grounds for optimism in the development of a politicised art and how can it operate alongside the pessimism identified here? Although the concept 'multitude' lacks clarity, it does offer a call to enact through connections a new form of community, utilising all of the technological affordances of this moment in post-Fordist capitalism. Here the core concerns of activist art – those of promoting and enacting community in a space that does not try too hard to distinguish between art, popular culture and political activism – are more relevant than ever. 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power' (1984) Lucy Lippard's inspirational account of the state of hybridity between political art, community activism and a punk DIY aesthetic in the New York of the early 1980's remains a historical blueprint of the type of political art proper to the concept 'multitude'. In an important sense, there can be no going beyond the aim of 'a massing of energies' towards 'cultural democracy' as described by Lippard. Even the politicised internet art that has been advocated by Julian Stallabrass (2004) falls short in this regard. The examples that Stallabrass highlights tend to interrupt the signifying regimes of corporate power, rather than actively engaging in attempts to enact

²⁷ This term is used here instead of power because Baudrillard explicitly denied that power exists any more – rather that it is revived by attempts to resist that call it again into being. Obviously, a thorough investigation of the implications of this claim would require more space than is available here.

‘multitude’ in practice²⁸ (Stallabrass 2004: 192). Perhaps Stallabrass remains within a paradigm which insists that relevant art must be formally innovative. By contrast, this paper would like to suggest that the potential of the internet for activist art is in its interface between the virtual and the social, not its challenge to the disciplinary conventions of contemporary art. There is no need to discriminate between reactionary and innovative forms of art – it is the potential of these forms to create connections that is important. It is characteristic of the strange reversals we find in this period, that any position that insists on formal radicalism in art practice becomes strangely conservative.

This is not a question of renewing art, or life, by overcoming the boundary between art and the social in the utopian avant-garde sense. This is not a utopian optimism but one that is founded on an acknowledgement of the energy inherent in multitude – where energy is understood as an event that by definition cannot foresee its outcome – where multitude is powerful because it is not conceptually realised, and where multitude represents the potential of an outside to art discourse. The connections that matter in this art activism are both affirmations and antagonisms, as they must be if art is to engage with its outside. Perhaps, Bishop is keen to distance herself from socially engaged practice because such work tends to conceive of itself with a clear conception of the social in mind. By contrast ‘multitude’ is a concept that eludes the categorisations of political and social philosophy. The concept ‘multitude’ is borrowed by Hardt and Negri from Spinoza – as such it represents a return to the beginning of modern political thought in the 17th century. Spinoza’s conception of the ‘mass’ as powerful, irreducible heterogeneity tended to be repressed by theories of the State – principally in the 17th century by Hobbes who saw the ‘many’ (when they were not subsumed under some form of political unity) as the supreme danger to state sovereignty (Virno 2004). For Hobbes the key figure of a coherent state is ‘the people’ – that is the many subsumed within and represented by the state – whereas ‘the multitude’ represents the dissolution of order involved in any ‘regurgitation’ of ‘state of nature’ in civil society (Virno 2004). As Virno suggests Hobbes hated the notion of multitude because he clearly saw the threat it presented to power – the multitude is ‘anti-state’. However, Hardt and Negri stress that part of their project is to make it possible to think of this concept multitude, which is neither the traditional notion of a ‘political class’, nor the mere anarchy that Hobbes feared (Hardt and Negri 2006: 350). Activist art that engages with multitude, therefore conceives itself as engaging with a category of the social that has not been clearly formulated, and has the potential to undermine the categories of art in return²⁹.

The antagonism that Bishop proposes as central to the exclusions that allow discrete social spaces to exist and the contingency of these spaces does offer a useful criticism of Hardt and Negri’s concept of multitude. This seems to be an important point about the nature of social reality and potentially points to a weakness in Hardt and Negri’s concept, which tends to affirm ‘desire’ in a way that does not acknowledge antagonism, or any other fundamental negativity. But it is important that any antagonism does not simply feed back into the codes of artistic practice – to re-enforce disciplinary boundaries or notions of the radical and progressive that are meaningful only to those inducted to the regimes of visual art.

Bishop’s analysis is useful because it does point out the restricted nature of the audience for the contemporary art that is confined to Biennial’s. This restriction is underscored by all sorts of assumptions about the radical nature of contemporary practice and the reactionary character of those who do not comprehend it. However, in the final analysis Bishop is not willing to contest the constitution of this audience: she avoids the question of socially engaged art entirely. Her account falls back of criterion of quality – or at least on the importance of maintain a disciplinary historicity that allows new works to critique and innovate within a discipline. An activist art that engages with the concept multitude would combine diverse practices aimed at the promotion of social energy with sensitivity to ‘antagonism’ – but would see this as a further opportunity for the generation of energy. Engagement with multitude does not mean the development of formally innovative artworks but a rediscovery of the de-historicised formal remnant of stylistic innovation – in other words contemporary art - as a use-value: a medium which to destabilise the social exclusions of art and an experiment with antithetical understandings of what it is to create.

²⁸ Stallabrass concentrates on internet art that involves various forms of hacking or Situationist detournment of signs within the confines of virtual space.

²⁹ Baudrillard would call this a relationship of seduction