

Politics and Aesthetics in Critical Theory (Amsterdam, 9–10 Jun 23)

Amsterdam, Jun 9–10, 2023

Deadline: Feb 24, 2023

Steyn Bergs

Troubling Universalisms: Politics and Aesthetics in Critical Theory Symposium.

To say that universalism is a troubled, and troubling, notion would be an understatement. So prevalent are critiques of universalism that it could be argued that all of twentieth-century critical theory amounts to one drawn-out attempt to dismantle the insistence on, and centrality of, universalism in Western and humanist thought. From the emphasis placed on nonidentity in the Frankfurt school, via the deconstructive critique of presence, to the postcolonial critique of the Eurocentrism that underpins the universalising project of colonialism, and to feminist and queer challenges to normativity; many, if not most, academics in the humanities and social sciences consider a critical engagement with universalism part of their intellectual work.

At a moment when these important critiques have become so well-rehearsed that they risk becoming all too routine, it seems opportune to reevaluate where we are today with the notion of the universal. Where has the necessary debunking of universalism left us? What, if anything, comes in its place? It is becoming increasingly evident, in light of contemporary political developments around the globe, that rejecting universalism will not make the place it occupied wither away. The universal lingers and persists as “necessary but impossible,” as Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek have argued. This antinomy is exacerbated by how the putative “subjective universality” of (some) aesthetic judgments comes increasingly to reflect the real force and effects of a capitalist mode of production now near-universal in its dominance and reach, as Sianne Ngai has demonstrated. Moreover, the limitations of a simple insistence on, or valorization of, singularity and particularity construed only in opposition to the universal have become apparent. In Fred Moten’s words, the effort at thinking “the possibility of a nonexclusionary whole,” which he calls ensemble, remains as important as ever. Such a thinking, Moten contends, “must move through the Enlightenment tradition, and, importantly, through that tradition’s allegiance to the active misprision of singularity and totality.”

We venture that aesthetics is both a unique site for such thinking and an important vector and method for such moving-through. This is because aesthetics, both in the broad sense of the field of sensuous perception and experience at large, and in the more specific sense of the branch of philosophy that examines such perception and experience in relation to rational ‘Sense’ (with a capital ‘S’), occupies an ambivalent position in relation to universalism and its critique. On the one hand, aesthetics has been instrumental to universalism’s legitimation of certain dominant ways of knowing, seeing, and experiencing the world—or what Jacques Rancière would call the “distribu-

tion of the sensible.” The aesthetic does so mostly by cementing forms of perception and understanding proper to the Western liberal/bourgeois subject as common sense, as *sensus communis*, at the expense of others. On the other hand, as Kandice Chuh has written, aesthetic inquiry—which ranges from engaging with works of art and literature to thinking about and through the worldly experiences of all those somehow posited as ‘other’ to the dominant model—has been an important and effective “procedure for calling into question the structures and processes of (e)valuation that subtend the *sensus communis* and the means by which sensibilities that differ and dissent from liberal common sense are brought to bear.”

Attending to what Chuh calls the “double-voiced quality of the aesthetic,” we invite and call upon symposium participants to consider troubling universalisms in and through the political and the aesthetic. Possible topics may include, but are by no means limited to, the following:

- Universality and universalisms at the intersection of politics and aesthetics
- Aesthetic ‘objects’ (texts, artworks, performances,...) that challenge, complicate, or otherwise reflect upon the particular-universal opposition
- Questions of judgment, value, and context in relation to the fraught universal
- Universe and pluriverse (Mouffe, Escobar); commons, cosmopolitanisms, consensus-dissensus, and collectivities on differing scales
- Critique and universality; critique ‘after universality,’ and vice versa
- Attempts to salvage or recuperate (aspects of) universality, including through various forms of relationality
- ...

To submit a proposal for the symposium, please send a document including your name, institutional affiliation (if applicable), a short bio, and an abstract of max. 350 words to b.p.moore@uva.nl, m.w.farrant@uva.nl, and s.bergs@uu.nl by February 24, 2023, at the latest.

The main part of the symposium will take place on June 10. On June 9, there will be a master-class and keynote lecture by Kandice Chuh, Professor of English, American Studies, and Critical Social Psychology at CUNY, and author of *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities “After Man”* (2019).

Reference:

CFP: Politics and Aesthetics in Critical Theory (Amsterdam, 9-10 Jun 23). In: Arthist.net, Nov 16, 2022 (accessed May 21, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/37932>>.