

MANCEPT Workshops in Political Theory
Monday 10 September to Wednesday 12 September 2018, Manchester, UK

“Democracy and Aesthetics: Performance, Perception and Representation”

Convenor: Dr Michael Räber (University of Zurich)

The aim of the workshop is to develop knowledge of the role of aesthetics, broadly conceived as sensation or perception, as a vehicle for exploring the nature of democratic action and reflection.

A prevalent contention in contemporary democratic theory is that appearances are detrimental to normative political ideals. All forms of aesthetic objects and appearance are reducible to mere consumption, so it seems, and thus democratic theory and practice needs to be skeptical about these things and should be overcome by critical thinking; all surfaces must be plumbed so as to get at the truth of the matter. If we do not do that, it seems, democratic theory ends up with a bad endorsement of political seduction and moral shallowness.

However, perhaps aesthetics cannot so easily be placed in dichotomy with democracy, both as an existing practice as well as a normative ideal. Perhaps aesthetics is an integral component of—rather than an obstacle to—democratic politics, as democratic politics inevitably involves aesthetic moments (involving appearances and perceptions, actors and audiences). Instead of eschewing them in our democratic theories as generally undesirable and ideally inexistent, we should try to understand their meaning. Rather than condemning democracy for its aesthetic elements or simply eschewing aesthetics as part of democracy, those interested in promoting democracy should carefully examine the conceivable relations of democracy and aesthetics.

What matters is the fashion and modality of how democratic politics gets aestheticized, viz. how political actors present themselves and political issues, how and where they talk and perform, how people relate to what they perceive as political, etc.

While aesthetics and democratic politics have only sparsely been considered theoretically, conceiving a link between aesthetics and politics has been a recurring idea in the history of political thought. In recent years, philosophers and political theorists have started to pay more attention to the topic. This workshop aims to carry on the discussion and take another step toward the development of an aesthetic account of *democracy*.

This workshop seeks papers in political philosophy/political theory, which can contribute to a theoretical discussion of these issues:

- What does it mean to turn to aesthetics to make sense of democratic politics? In what sense is democratic politics aesthetic?
- Faced with current political crises, both cognitive and all-too-concrete, what would the advantages and disadvantages be of an ‘aesthetic turn’ for democratic theory?
- What does or should it mean to appear as a political actor in a democracy? What is the democratic function of political actors – elected politicians, protesters on the street, etc. – to appear and perform in front of an audience?
- What are the relations between political events/pseudo-events/spectacles in democracies and democratic ideals like equality, liberty and autonomy?
- How should spectators be conceptualized as a democratic people that are empowered and engaged citizens, and not just as mere passive and detached spectators?
- How should aesthetic representation of the people (symbolical or political) be conceptualized?

Submissions:

Please submit a 500-word abstract for your proposed paper by the end of the day on 28th of May. I will aim to respond to these within a week.

All abstracts and enquiries about the workshop and should be sent to: democracyandaesthetics@gmail.com

Please be aware that to participate you will also need to register for the MANCEPT workshops. This year’s fees are £230.00 for academics and £135.00 for graduate students and retirees. You may be eligible for a bursary to cover registration costs. The details for these will be available on the MANCEPT website: www.mancept.com/mancept-workshops-2018/