



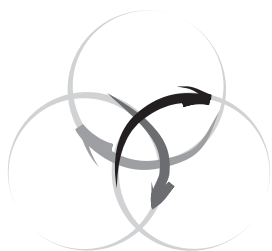
transacting aesthetics

edited by Sebastian Stankiewicz



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KATYA MANDOKI

The Aesthetization of Power: Everyday Aesthetics by Nation-states

Modernity can be characterized by three dominant models: industrialism, capitalism, and nationalism, each of which controls respectively the technological, the economic and the governmental system. For its energy supply, the industrial model digs down into the entrails of the earth to pump out oil. Capitalism gets its energy source by keeping workers unskilled to ensure an oversupply of its labor force and maintaining salaries so cheap that they hardly cover their basic survival needs. Nation-states extract their energy from emotional affiliation and patriotic fervor to legitimate the political caste's tax collection and social control.

Although the capitalist model was temporarily overthrown by socialist and communist regimes, it has certainly prevailed as the most aggressive and lucrative economic pattern for its privileged classes. In turn, the industrial model exhibits a spectacular success in controlling millions of people's daily lives by the manufacture, distribution, consumption and imposition of lifestyles. No less successful has been the nationalist model deployed in both East and West, rich and poor, theocratic and secular societies and vehemently defended by the left and right parties as an incontrovertible value. The most diverse oligarchic, fundamentalist, dictatorial, democratic, or monarchic political regimes all adjust to the nationalist model at least at an ideological level. Since the nineteenth century, nationalism proliferated epidemically across all continents silhouetting states as didactic puzzles in a geography class. This model has been utilized also to nullify other identities and invent new ones ad hoc for political purposes. Is this subdivision of the planet into pieces of land through nation states really as natural as it seems?

A nation-state, according to the Webster online, is a form of political organization under which a relatively homogeneous people inhabits a sovereign state. How do we define these "relatively homogeneous people"? Are people

really homogeneous? In which terms? How much is “relatively”? What is clear, however, is that construction of a nation state already establishes a radical difference between rulers and ruled, subjects of power and subjected by power.

It is impossible to know how long this model will prevail, but it definitely is alive and kicking and spilling blood all over the world. What is there in this model that makes it so universal? What impels so many people to recognize themselves as members of a nation-state supposedly sharing common traits? Casting a vote every four or six years, participating in national surveys, holding a national passport or ID card, and taking the streets to protest, may be ways of expressing political, class or national identities, but these practices hardly seem to be enough to create something as omnipresent as a “national identity”.

The most obvious answer to these questions is that nationalism is based on a very primal instinct that humanity shares with several animal species: territoriality. Cats and dogs, fish, birds and primates all have a strong sense of marking territorial exclusivity. However, considering its huge spatial scale, nationality can not be directly experienced except as an imaginary projection, as argued by Benedict Anderson.¹ It results from drawing an imaginary line around an area in which certain communities are included and others excluded; a line drawn either by military force or by international agreements, but once delineated it appears to acquire a natural, almost quintessential status.

The phrase “national cohesion” always turns out to be desirable and politically correct for every party and every regime anywhere in the world. It is common to urge the population to reach such “national cohesion” as if it were a simple act of will or a magical incantation. Such a requirement is usually accompanied by words such as “promote”, “build”, “preserve”, “encourage”, “develop”, “erect” and “inculcate” this national cohesion, sometimes even associated with a term as strong as “cement”. All this ironically shows the degree in which national cohesion is far from spontaneous: it must be deliberately engineered and sometimes with great effort. But how? No one seems to have the manufacturing patent for national cohesions.

Anderson defined a nation as an “imagined political community – and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.” He stated that “communities must be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (note here the term “style” to which we will return later).² This emphasis on the imaginary comes from the fact that, as mentioned earlier, that members of national communities can not really know or meet each other, but still imagine themselves as part of a community defined as “nation”.

How these imaginaries, rather than others, become generalized, reproduced and maintain plausibility is a question of hegemony. The idea behind it is that no

political action can be maintained indefinitely by brute force. It requires a degree of acquiescence by the masses. Despite the practical collapse of Marxism, Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" still remains relatively unscathed as an activity constructed by intellectuals who, while being part of the dominant political classes, become "persuaders" that develop and disseminate ideology among lower classes.³ He addressed the role of "organic intellectuals" and the relationship between politics and literary production. Louis Althusser contributed to this discussion by defining the role of the ideological state apparatus and their mechanism of "interpellation", in which each person recognizes her/himself as a *subject of* and *subject by* the dominant ideology.⁴ However, Althusser does not elucidate how each person manages to internalize or identify with such ideology in everyday life nor does Gramsci sufficiently explain how these intellectuals manage to persuade the masses.

The point of my paper is to argue that the mechanism by which the nation-state model is supplied with cohesion is and has been aesthetic. By aesthetic I do not mean its restricted sense as a theory of art and beauty but all processes recruiting sensibility towards heightening and intensifying experience, in this case being part of a collective and imaginary national identity. Moreover, I must emphasize that my approach to the term "aesthetic" is purely descriptive, not evaluative, covering all phenomena associated to sensibility. The aesthetic dimension (not necessarily artistic which is a fraction of it) actually is the one responsible in achieving the realization and materialization necessary for enabling the experience of the national imaginaries that would otherwise be too arbitrary and abstract to perceive.

Communicative action or logical argument (proposed by Habermas) are not concrete enough to achieve this goal, while emotions evolve phylogenetically and ontogenetically long before reason, and are therefore more entrenched and powerful in motivating individuals. Precisely because of its abstract nature, the state constantly requires energy input in the form of emotional attachment granted by its members to maintain cohesion, legitimize tax collection for the maintenance of the onerous political caste. This commitment, however, does not arise spontaneously as gas does not flow on its own to the motor of a car. It needs to be extracted, processed and channeled. A huge amount of this tax collection, which does not end in politicians' pockets, goes to the aesthetics of the state. Hence, aesthetics are to the nation-state what oil companies are to the industry: both represent means of extracting and providing energy to their respective systems. Both also pollute.

There are many reasons why national cohesion can not be taken for granted: First we must consider the violent schismogenic tendencies (in Bateson's term⁵)

that are typical of any society, such as class struggle inherent to capitalism. Second, “the nation” based on a single dominant culture as a symbol, necessarily subordinates other cultures creating conflict. This is where the role of the aesthetic dimension becomes crucial as a vehicle to deliberately pump emotional energy toward the ideal of national unity that can conceal dissension. It appeals to, or in Althusser’s term “interpelates”, participants’ sensibilities and provides emotional bonding to this imagined community by the creation and recreation of certain practices such as rituals and festivities.

As in literature, music, dance and painting, four registers are at play in the aesthetic construction of these national experiences: verbal, acoustic, somatic and visual.⁶

The aesthetic appeal of slogans like “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”, the eloquent rhetoric at the National Assembly in Paris, *La Marseillaise* music sung through the streets Paris, the gestures and poise of prototypical characters like Mirabeau or the Marquis de Lafayette, the images and icons like Delacroix’s painting of *Liberty Leading the People of France*, all these components undoubtedly contributed to national fervour among the people towards the building of the nation state in eighteenth century France.

On the verbal we share not only a language but an idiomatic universe of common themes and expressions, including conversational genre styles and a version of the national history narrative. It is no coincidence that, as Anderson noted, the emergence of nation states concurs with nineteenth century American and European literature and novels with nationalist characters and heroes. With the expansion of the press and media, political figures have become characters in a daily national soap opera with tragic or melodramatic, farcical, comic, or the grotesque spectacle of political-and media symbiosis.

National ideology is expressed also through the acoustic register by national anthems and military bands, as well as the integration of vernacular music. Composers like Dvorak, Liszt and Chopin incorporated vernacular melodies to their musical compositions depicting nationalistic enthusiasm and patriotic fervor.

In the scopic or visual register, crucial are state’s architectural sites such as the Parliament and the Congress or government Palaces, all of which exhibit an aesthetics of monumentality and great solidity to produce this sense of power, inevitability and immutability. Flags and national emblems, symbolic sites, souvenirs, postcards, museums of national history, of vernacular arts and of fine arts must be added to this list.

Anderson brings the classic example of nationalism in the *Unknown Soldier* memorial.⁷ The cenotaph is an aesthetic construct designed to produce the emotional effect of admiration towards individuals who sacrificed for the

homeland. To achieve this effect, a cenotaph should be monumental, imposing, classicist and perfectly symmetrical, made of durable and expensive materials like marble or granite. The huge Tomb of the *Milite Ignoto* in the Altare de lla Patria in Rome is undoubtedly the paradigm of cenotaphs. This construction was built to produce an intense corporeal experience to daunt us by its massive scale and perfect, static symmetry.

In the somatic or body register, apart from the dwarfing intimidating effects of totalitarian monuments, we can mention various sensory traditions such as local cooking and spices, folk dances, body language conventions (greeting kisses, friendly slaps on the back, eye contact or lack of it) and even the regional climate are also part of a corporeal aesthetics of place, although not deliberate or conscious. Sports heroes are today's epic national symbolic figures. Pelé, Ronaldinho, Maradona, Figo and Messi are the contemporary national Garibaldis, Washingtons, Morelos and Bolívars. It is no coincidence, for example, that Mexicans converge to the Monument of Independence to celebrate the success of the national team or mourn its defeats. In the World soccer Cup people feel that their very dignity, even their manhood, and the honor of their tribe is at stake. Can anyone think of a better display of collective national identity?

To illustrate national aesthetics, London's Remembrance Day ceremony is a well calculated show designed to arouse patriotic emotions. In 2005, 20 veterans used lights to send a message from the roof of the Royal Greenwich Observatory by the River Thames to the Horse Guards Parade at the Whitehall monument: the message read: "War turns us to stone. In remembrance we shine and rise to new days". The Cenotaph (or empty tomb) of the Unknown Soldier keeps a large coffin with the inscription The Glorious Dead. Two Douglas Dakota DC3 aircraft scattered three million poppy petals over London and the Thames bridges. The London Eye lit up in red during the commemoration. Formations of soldiers and members of the clergy, military bands and religious choirs marched, prayed and sang. The Bishop of London said a prayer, Queen Elizabeth, all dressed in a black suit and hat, deposited by correct gesture and manner a wreath of red poppies at the cenotaph. The Royal British Legion and all the English Parliament carried a paper poppy to symbolize the memory of soldiers killed in battle, a symbol inspired by McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*. Everything performed in perfect harmony, rhythm and tone.

Aesthetics of patriotism has in every country its own choreographic deployment through parades, uniforms, ceremonies, its solemn, triumphant, or mournful military music, its flags, insignia, banners, hymns, marches, and slogans. Riefenstahl's works for the NASDAP is a case in point, obviously. Nationalism and its aesthetic exhibition keeps exacting enormous amounts of taxes invested

in the aesthetic of power displays already since antiquity's kings and pharaohs' monumental constructions to the present architectural and ceremonial political shows.

Such vast multisensory exhibition of power eloquently illustrates that the arts are just a fraction, perhaps the most innocent, among many other aesthetic expressions way beyond museums, galleries and concert halls.

To sum up, nation states cyclically perform aesthetic deployments (the more totalitarian the state, the more overpowering its aesthetic display) to create the effect of national cohesion with props, staging, plots and characters, costumes, set design, lighting, music, and choreography for triggering emotional reactions and implementing a sense of solemnity, unity or awe that fuel nationalistic sentiments and collective adhesion. I am concluding with the biggest most precise aesthetic display of power I've seen in recent years: It is China's 60th Anniversary Military Parade, particularly the Chinese Female Soldiers.⁸ Not only does the individual disappear here, but the human as well in this incalculable, colossal, almost cosmic machine uniformly deployed in synchrony by utter discipline and sacrifice of the personal for the collective. Seeing this display, Kant would not have hesitated in applying to it the category of the sublime: "We call that sublime which is absolutely great"; (§ 25) "notion of absolute greatness not inhibited with ideas of limitations (§ 27). The dynamically sublime is "nature considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us", and an object that can create a fearfulness "without being afraid of it" (§ 28).⁹

Notes:

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, New York: Verso, 2000.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. Gruppi Luciano, *The concept of hegemony in Gramsci*, Athens, Greece: Themelio, 1972.
4. Louis Althusser, "Ideología y aparatos ideológicos de Estado", *Posiciones*, México: Grijalbo, 1977 pp. 75–138.
5. Cf. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 126–127.
6. On the aesthetic process of construction of various identities via social matrices, see Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the play of culture and social identities*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. On the aesthetics of national identity in Mexico see Katya Mandoki, *La construcción estética del estado y de la identidad nacional*, México D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno editores, 2007.
7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 9–10.

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8. <http://youtu.be/ivA4T1wfJLE>, <http://youtu.be/pr3Hc3zFALo>.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, 1790. <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Kant%20Crit%20Judgment.txt> 12/12/2013.

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