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Political Aesthetics

I'm happy to forward along some (scattered) observations on the seminars I oversaw in 2016, which, I thought, went well, which is to say, I enjoyed them. My organizational ideas are, I suspect, entirely unoriginal: an initial letter recalling the aims of the seminar and laying out the schedule, short abstracts and a initial bibliographical intuitions due in early December, completed seminar papers in early February, and then individual written responses between paired participants (early March). Although the deadlines for these tasks are laid out in the opening letter, in each case I reminded people about a week in advance, just because it's easy to get swallowed up in the labors of the semester.

Because the topic—"political aesthetics"—was relatively capacious, and because that seemed a virtue, it seemed important in the opening letter to spell out its terms a bit even while indicating just how theoretically and historically rangy responses to it could be (the idea being that participants could come at the topic from very different angles, and still intersect in interesting ways). The abstracts were important, as I was using those initial descriptions to sort participants into two seminars. (Because interest in the topic was high, we divided into two seminars. Although students in each seminar could have access to material produced in the other, it was important to insist on the discreteness of the two groups--a work-load issue, but also a matter of preserving the intimacy and intensity one wants in a small seminar.)

I paired participants to write comments on each other's writing, and I used these pairings to structure the seminar itself. But I did not have participants simply read their comments during the seminar—I wanted something more fluid and responsive to the discussion as it evolved. I had the assigned reader recall the gist of the argument, say briefly what they found compelling, and then pretty quickly open things up to the group. (Everyone had read all the papers.) The challenge in the seminar is obvious: you want to make sure everyone's work has been considered, but you also want to build in time to draw the discussion out to larger commonalities, to pick up resonances across the group as you proceed. That means you've really got to press ahead, particularly if you have a full group. (I had a scheme for the order in which I'd move through the pairs, but I didn't announce it, as I wanted to preserve the option of reshuffling the sequence, depending on what came up in the discussion.) Inevitably, one feels one hasn't done justice to individual papers (there were a lot of strong ones)—that's the painful part. Still, you will have opened the conversation, and perhaps provided the means for it to continue.

Here's my opening letter and a follow up:

Dear,

I'm delighted that you will be participating in the "Political Aesthetics" seminar at this year's Shakespeare Association meeting—it looks to be a particularly exciting group.

Because the interval between applying for sessions and being notified about assignments is longish, I thought I'd append to the end of this letter the original description of the aims of the seminar just to bring it back to mind. My main point, though, is to emphasize the elasticity of the topic: political aesthetics is interesting in part, I think, because it lets us move between textured engagements with literary and visual material and large scale political/historical claims; between selves and social worlds, etc. Which is also to say that there are diverse ways of angling into the question of the stakes of aesthetic form, and part of the pleasure will be discovering promising points of intersection between our varied preoccupations.

Interest in the topic was, as it turns out, very high, so we've been asked to run it as a double session, that is, as two discrete seminars. The discreteness is important: no one will be expected to engage papers other than those from their own group of fifteen or so participants. That doesn't mean you won't be free to read papers from the other group, or that you can't attend the other seminar as a visitor: in fact, that would be great. But it's not expected. This is a workload issue, but also a way of preserving the intimacy and intensity one would want from a shared, work in progress seminar. I'll use your initial brief account of your areas of interest to divide participants into two more or less coherent groups (although the distinctions won't be all that pure, I suspect). I'll attach the full list of participants.

Among other things, the seminar will be a chance to exchange individual work. Toward that end, at a certain point I'll pair you up so you can receive brief written responses to your writing. Then again, the seminar itself won't be a single-file march through those comments; I imagine instead some recapping, but in the context of a relatively fluid weaving between the papers—a format that should leave room for larger speculative reflection, including reflection on the direction of the field, if we're that way inclined. I'll also have you share your bibliographies with the group, perhaps signaling texts that seem most promising for the collective undertaking.

So here's a proposed schedule. (Please observe these deadlines: shared research means the sensation we're in the same boat at every stage. Or at sea, but at sea *together*. I'll send you sporadic hectoring prompts.)

**Right away:** Please confirm that you have received this letter, that you are still intending to participate in the seminar, and that your contact information is correct. If that contact information will be changing between now and the spring, let me know about that.

**December 11:** Please send the title and a short abstract—about 200-300 words-- of your proposed paper. These can be tentative, of course, but should give a sense of your general direction, approach, and primary texts. I'll use the abstracts to sort out membership in the two seminars, and then distribute them collectively. (Here and throughout, I'll distribute work to each group separately, but then also find a way to give everyone access to everything, on the chance anyone wants to delve about—again, though, you will only be responsible for reading the work in your own seminar. If you'd rather not have your work made available across groups, just let me know that.) If you could also include the names of a few articles or books you find, or intend to find, promising, I will share those as well.

**February 12:** Please send your seminar essay to me and the other participants in your seminar. **In the eyes of the SAA this is a meaningful deadline; to have your name in the program you must have submitted a paper by the 15<sup>th</sup>.** Please keep your final essay to no longer than 3000 words. Essays can be fully rounded things or they can involve a stretch from something longer or still in the works; in any case, the important thing is to think in terms of what will make for an interesting discussion. Within a couple weeks of receiving the writing, I will assign you an essay to which you should write a brief response.

**March 4:** Please send your response—about 600 words--to me and to the author of your assigned paper. At this point I'll also ask you for an abstract (about 300 words) of your own paper, unless you're still content with your initial abstract. In part, the idea is to have something to distribute to auditors.

**March 23-26:** New Orleans. I'm open to any ideas you might have for making the seminar itself as compelling and helpful as possible.

Thanks again for being part of this. I very much look forward to the seminar and to working with you.

Chris

*The relation between early modern studies and aesthetics is notable for the stark turns of its historical fate, ranging as it has from Burckhardt's conception of the Renaissance as itself something like an aesthetic formation to those versions of cultural materialism and new historicism that staked themselves in some measure at least against aesthetic preoccupations. This seminar is prompted by the conviction that the time is right for rethinking the relation between aesthetics and the social entailments of the early modern work of art. Engagement with the aesthetic is timely because of recent explorations of its bearing on an expanded view of the material sensorium, and thus with an expanded understanding of political subjectivities. It is apt as well because of the aesthetic's compelling relation to the evolving concerns of affect theory. As a formal matter, the aesthetic is pertinent to a renewed consideration of early modernity's concern with the problem of autonomy: to what extent is the problem of the grounds of the artwork as it is engaged by Shakespeare, for instance, bound up with the problem of foundations generally, including political and social foundations? The seminar encourages papers approaching aesthetics from every possible direction: discussions of Renaissance theories of art or of the aesthetic thought of our own*

*moment; papers that approach aestheticization via ideology critique or ones that consider the libratory possibilities of aesthetic experience; on the relation between aesthetics and community, subject formation, and law; on the aesthetic's relation to political theology; papers on Shakespeare or other instances of early modern literary or visual culture; papers on the work or on the world.*

Dear Political Aesthetics I Seminar—

I'm including here as an attachment your SAA papers— an unusually strong set of papers, full of promising intersections. I'll also include a revised collation of abstracts—a few of you decided to go in a different direction. In a separate, follow-up email I'll send along the papers from the other group, on the off-chance you'll want to look at some of them—but again, you'll only be responsible for reading those in your group.

The next step in the process will be your exchange of individual comments – I'll list the pairings below. These should be about 600 words—thoughts, musings, advice, that sort of thing, but all of course with the aim of being helpful. Please email your comments to your recipient and to me by **March 4**.

Thanks for some wonderful papers—I look forward to getting together in New Orleans.

Chris