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Editorial Introduction: Art as Subversion

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In his magnum opus *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno asserts that "[w]hat is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions" (297). The nature of art, authentic and autonomous, is never overtly social, believes Adorno; it is inherently social: "Social struggles and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structure of artworks; by contrast, the political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content" (303). Art becomes social by its opposition/resistance to society, and it claims this position with its autonomy "[b]y crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it" (296). Fredric Jameson, in his *Political Unconscious*, considers the individual literary work to be a *symbolic act*, "which is grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradiction" (77). Writing, in fact the process of writing itself is immediately perceived as a part of a social process, a kind of intervention in a debate, and conflict about power and social relations. For Jameson ideology is not something "which informs or invests symbolic production"; rather "the aesthetic act itself is ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable contradictions" (77). The narrative and story-forms play a dominant role in mediating individual experience and social totality, Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious*, according to a process that he calls *transcoding* – the translating into an accepted code (which consists of certain narrative patterns and expectations) of social and historical reality to make it accessibly mediated for the individual. For Jameson "mediation is the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base" (39). It is 'dialectical' because it has to shuttle between two very different or even contradictory entities. For the Marxist Jameson, explains Adam Roberts, the 'seemingly disparate phenomena' of life "are only *seemingly* disparate: in fact they are all expressions of an underlying totality. It is the fragmentation that is illusory" (77). Jameson notes:

> were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic

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> contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. (Jameson 39)

Contemporary thinkers like Jacques Rancière and Isobel Armstrong deliberate on the political import and the inherent radicalism of literary aesthetics.

"Literature, like politics", asserts Rancière, "operates processes of subjectification by proposing new ways of isolating and articulating the world. […] Literature finds itself between democratic literarity and a metapolitical goal: the goal of a discourse and a knowledge about the community that would speak the truth, underlying or running counter to democratic literarity" (16). Although he locates dissent at the very core of politics and argues that the "essence of the political is dissensus", dissensus is not the opposition of interests and opinions. For him, it is a gap in the sensible: "the political persists as long as there is a dissensus about the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given" (Rancière and Panagia 124) Since aesthetics carries such a 'dissensus' regarding the givenness of social situations, and challenges preconceptions about who is or should be given a voice, such an aesthetics is political. Rancière's notion of the aesthetic aligns him with Isobel Armstrong, who also emphasizes the role of the aesthetic in giving shape to human experience. She acknowledges and reinstates its inherent potential to confront and oppose the social status quo; moreover, she argues that formal mediation reanimates and transforms perception and knowledge. In consonance with Gillian Rose's radical re-reading of the concept of Hegelian mediation, whereby mediation "tolerates difference and non-closure" as opposed to integrating everything within its seamless totality, Armstrong contends: "Mediation transforms categories and remakes language. This is a social, not a private act. The struggle for the sign, the negotiation of codes and signifying systems, are now familiar concepts to us. But I mean that artwork can be a space where linguistic experiment changes meaning by questioning categories, the prerequisite of knowledge" (*The Radical Aesthetic* 60). Armstrong, like Adorno, believes that the critical edge and political import of the aesthetic is inherent in its structures and not superadded to it. Like Rancière, she considers the aesthetic as a way of framing and shaping everything experienced within the social world:

> I have suggested that the artwork be embedded in the ordinary processes of being alive, and viewed as a representation of mediation, a form of thinking, a request for knowledge, rather than as a privileged kind of creativity cut off from experiences everyone goes through. ("Writing from the Broken Middle" 94).

The aesthetic is thereby related to social praxis and its combative potential is prominently reestablished.

"It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world", claims Jack Zipes, "not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more" (78). Fantasy tales lay bare the mysteries of life and "compensate for the constant violation of nature and life itself and for the everyday violation of our lives engendered through spectacle. They contest reality and also become conflated with reality" (74). Zipes invokes Adorno in his thoughts on the subversive potential for fantasy and enunciates that for Adorno, two things were of paramount importance: first, fantasy as a capacity "which enables us to *transform* existing conditions into the negation of material reality" and fantasy as the result "that is, the product of the transformative capacity of the imagination" (80). Adorno emphasizes that" fantasy is

also, and essentially so, the unrestricted availability of potential solutions that crystallize within the artwork. It is lodged not only in what strikes one both as existing and as the residue of something existing, but perhaps even more in the transformation of the existing" (173-174). Art is not illusionary, it has agency. Rancière asserts that "art and politics do not constitute two permanent, separate realities whereby the issue is to know whether or not they *ought* to be set in relation. They are two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification" (Ranciere 25–26). If aesthetics has any agency in relation to change, contends Miles, "it is probably in critical acts of re-distribution and re-identification, within but beyond the regime of the art-world" (70). Admitting the fact that art cannot transform the world since it is part of the world itself and "the conditions of its production are always present in an artwork, Miles claims that art "contributes to facing the forces and trajectories which appear to bring the world to the edge of destruction" (158).

The articles in this Special Issue explore the concept of fantasy as mode subversion from diverse perspectives. Amit Sarwal's article focuses on 'Indian doctors', oculists and hakims, the practitioners of Indian fringe medicine in Australia, who have often been left out of the purview of both migration, connections between colonies, and history of medicine studies. Ashmita Saha and Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary analyze how the mythic and magic realist elements in Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, set in the backdrop of the Sri Lankan Civil War 1980s, offer different variations of the idea of a national imaginary. The novel, they argue, is a form of resistance against the chaos and injustice perpetrated by the Civil War. In their article on Bollywood films Shrinwanti Mistri and Roudrajjal Dasgupta argue how Bollywood cinema has become a site and catalyst for social change subverting stereotypical gender norms in contemporary Indian society. Lemon Sam's article on Vajra Chandrasekera's *The Saint of Bright Doors* brings Todorov's concept of 'hesitation' to investigate the consequences of indoctrinated religiosity in restraining agency. Arnav Gogoi and Srinjoyee Dutta's essay on O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* (1969) interprets the liminal space between myth and history that the novel explores and its reconceptualization of the Eurocentric theoretical paradigms of novelistic and epic time. Mayurika Chakravorty's article on Abhishek Majumdar's *The Djinns of Eidgah* analyses the use of Persian storytelling or the *dastaan* tradition with legends and stories that add a mythopoeic dimension to the narrative. This interweaving provides a contrapuntal imagining of an unbroken past against a fractured and dislocated present. Nabanita Chakraborty interprets how Geetanjali Shree's postmodern novel *Tomb of Sand* provides a feminist lens to grasp the concept of Freud's theory of the uncanny and occupies the in-between space between the real and the fantastic. The articles in this Special Issue consider narratives in relation to history and biography; fantasy, dystopia, and politics; and contemporary capitalism. The texts interpreted and analyzed are indeed emancipatory tales, as "they bring undesirable social relations into question and force readers to question themselves" (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 188).

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