Deconstructing the Grotesque in Contemporary Francophone Algerian Literature, or: How to move beyond the 'zombified' State?

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After several weeks of peaceful protest, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika finally stepped down on 3 April 2019.[1] In power for some twenty years, the president had changed the constitution in 2014 to enable him to stand for a fourth term of office, despite ill health. When he was put forward for a fifth term in 2019, Algerians took to the streets to protest what they considered to be an obscene act of intransigence on the part of the ruling factions of the Algerian State. Bouteflika, whose rise to power in 1999 was predicated on legislating the 'end' of the 1990s-civil war, had become what many regarded as a puppet of the backstage manipulators, thought to consist of a group of obscure yet powerful military generals.

If the resignation of the president indicates a shift in power dynamics within the Algerian State, it is also vital to consider how the ongoing protests are rooted in a longer history of political and cultural critique in Algeria that has used aesthetics to break free of what Achille Mbembe refers to, in 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', as the 'zombified' state of political discourse.[2] The parading of a man unable to walk, talk or engage in any form of meaningful communication, as a viable candidate for the presidency clearly constituted a 'spectacle

[1] The protests, which began on 22nd February 2019, have become known as the Algerian 'hirak' (an Arabic term for 'movement' and used to describe popular uprisings in Morocco and Algeria). For further discussion, see Ghazouane Arslane, 'What is universal about the Algerian national "Hirak"?', *Africa is a Country* (July 2019), <https://africasacountry.com/2019/07/what-is-universal-about-the-algerian-national-hirak> [last accessed 7 September 2019]; see also, Muriam Haleh Davis, Hiyem Cheurfa and Thomas Serres, 'A Hirak Glossary: Terms from Algeria and Morocco', *Jadaliyya*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38734> [last accessed 7 September 2019].

[2] Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 62.1 (1992), 3–37 (p. 4), hereafter *PN* in the body of the text. I use the 1992 version of Mbembe's essay, in line with the other contributors to this issue. For further discussion of the genealogy of Mbembe's text, see the Introduction to this thematic issue.

ubuesque',[3] but it was at the same time a deliberate act of obfuscation that sought to perpetuate a fetish of the *commandement* (*PN* 3–4) — or, more specifically in the Algerian context, the fetishization of the 'nebulous' notion of *le pouvoir.*[4] By reducing complicated structures of power to the floating signifier of the 'regime', the *actual* configuration of State power is obscured. Thus, in the way they *imagine* the operation of power in Algeria, citizens and observers have been complicit in the continued ratification of a mystifying but nonetheless repressive system.

In this article, I examine how a series of contemporary Algerian novels deploy an aesthetic of the grotesque to contest and deconstruct the operation of State power in Algeria. If, during the 1990s civil war, grotesque realism was seen as a way of contesting the excesses of State and Islamist power through literature, it was ultimately unable to effectively undo the discursive foundations of the spectacle of power in Algeria.[5] I show how three writers of the post-civil war period (Habib Ayyoub, Salim Bachi and Mustapha Benfodil) engage in distinct yet related ways with representations of the grotesque and the obscene in a renewed effort to break out of a static and ossified 'regime of unreality (*régime du simulacre*)' (*PN* 8). I argue that one of the reasons Mbembe's landmark essay is so relevant to the situation now faced by Algerian artists, writers and civil society, is because it helps us to see the *failure* of the grotesque as a contestatory aesthetic.

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[3] Thomas Serres, 'En attendant Bouteflika. Le président et la crise de sens en Algérie', *L'Année du Maghreb*, 10 (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/2027#text> [last accessed 1 March 2019].

[4] Muriam Haleh Davis and Thomas Serres, 'Political Contestation in Algeria: Between Postcolonial Legacies and the Arab Spring', *Middle East Critique*, 22.2 (2013), 101–114 (p. 105). For further analysis of the performance of Algerian power, see Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince, 'Performing Algerianness: The National and Transnational Construction of Algeria's "Culture Wars"', in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988-2015* ed. by Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 243–269.

[5] See, for instance, Mohamed El Amine Roubaï-Chorfi, 'Le personnage du terroriste dans le roman algérien: un Mythe moderne?', *Synergies Algérie*, 3 (2008), 105–112. Charles Bonn has spoken of the way in which the 'carnival' of the literary text was becoming part of the discursive toing and froing between the national narrative and its literary alternative, even back in the 1980s. See Charles Bonn, 'Littérature algérienne et conscience nationale: après l'indépendance', *Notre librairie*, 85 (1986), 29–38. On the Algerian literary field of the 1990s, see Tristan Leperlier, *Algérie: les écrivains dans la décennie noire* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018); see also Joseph Ford, *Writing the Black Decade: Conflict and Criticism in Francophone Algerian Literature* (Lanham, M.D.: Lexington Books, forthcoming 2021).

Habib Ayyoub: a Bakhtinian grotesque?

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the general attributes of the grotesque style as 'exaggeration, hyperbolism [and] excessiveness'.[6] In Rabelais, these attributes are expressed in a variety of bodily forms — monstrous bellies, abnormally large noses, and protruding genitalia (*R* 328). Though clearly comical, the grotesque is not, however, defined in simply negative terms.[7] In Rabelais's texts, the grotesque body evokes an ambivalent response in the reader, who feels simultaneous disgust at, and empathy for, the characters depicted. Nevertheless, Bakhtin understands these aesthetic representations as forms of carnival, acts or images that are transferred from the 'high' mythical level and mobilised within 'non-official' cultures to contest 'official' power (*R* 19–20). Here, the grotesque image seeks to disrupt what Jacques Rancière has called the 'distribution of the sensible' — the aesthetic 'delimitation' that we find 'at the core of politics'.[8]

Turning his focus to the archetypal African dictator novel — namely the works of Sony Labou Tansi — Mbembe argues against Bakhtin's vision of the grotesque existing solely within 'non-official' cultures, proposing instead the existence of more complex networks of complicity and 'connivance' between the supposed 'rulers' and 'ruled' (*PN* 22, 25). In Mbembe's analysis, literature that has been understood to contest the grotesque performance of power in fact reinforces the discursive realm that allows for its existence, constructing its binary counterpart in the State, or 'regime of unreality' that maintains the mythology of the State or *commandement* as supreme power (*PN* 8). This false binary takes the form of a fetish,

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[6] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1965]), p. 303, hereafter *R* in the body of the text.
[7] This is how Bakhtin describes Heinrich Schneegans' study, *Geschichte der grotesken Satire* [The History of Grotesque Satire] (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1894), with whose definition of the grotesque as a solely comical or negative mode he takes issue.
[8] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

bringing about a situation of mutual powerlessness, which Mbembe refers to as a state of 'zombification' or 'impoten[ce] (*impouvoir*)' (*PN* 4).[9]

In many ways, Habib Ayyoub's works embody a form of Bakhtinian grotesque, as they each articulate a carnivalesque opposition to imagined figures of official power, while also evoking an empathetic relation between reader and character. Ayyoub deploys a classic form of grotesque mimicry, characterising political and military leaders by their deformed bodies, engagement in sexually explicit and controlling behaviours, and corruption. At the same time, Ayyoub brings the obscene (what would otherwise occur 'off stage' and out of sight) 'on stage',[10] developing a series of characters that typify the classic dictator figure, setting them in opposition to a downtrodden population.[11] I ask whether using the obscene or the grotesque in this oppositional way ends up reinforcing the mythology of the *commandement* that the writer seeks to unveil and destroy.

Ayyoub's first novel, *Le Palestinien*,[12] was published in 2003 by one of the dynamic new publishers that emerged in the wake of the 1990s conflict, Editions Barzakh.[13] Led by Sofiane Hadjadj and Selma Hellal, Barzarkh has become distinct for its fostering of Algerian literature that is unlikely to be published in the highly competitive Francophone literary centre of Paris. Funded largely through grants from international non-governmental bodies and sales which support a very modest operation in the suburbs of Algiers, the publisher has offered a

[9] This notion of power as existing within a more diffuse discursive realm comes from Foucault, whom Mbembe refers to throughout his essay.
[10] In his essay, Mbembe uses the grotesque and the obscene interchangeably to refer to an aesthetic mobilised in 'official' and 'non-official' cultures (*PN* 3). But, the Latin root, *obscaena*, or Greek, *ob skene*, allude to an 'obscene' that does not simply relate to the exaggerated or hyperbolic aesthetics of the grotesque body, but that instead refers to the 'off stage'.
[11] As the author explains when questioned about his penname (Habib Ayyoub is a penname for Abdelaziz Benmahdjoub — Ayyoub meaning 'job'; Habib meaning 'friend'), he wants to be known as the 'ami du pauvre', a defender of the downtrodden masses. See Amina Bekkat, 'Entretien avec Habib Ayyoub', *Algérie Littérature/Action*, 57–58 (2002), <http://www.revues-plurielles.org/_uploads/pdf/4_57_12.pdf> [last accessed 1 March 2019].
[12] Habib Ayyoub, *Le Palestinien* (Algiers: Editions Barzakh, 2003).
[13] Other notable publishers are: Editions Alpha, Apic, Casbah and Chihab.

home to writers developing a more self-aware, avant-gardist, aesthetics often rooted in the political realities and challenges facing the contemporary Algerian polity.[14]

In *Le Palestinien*, Ayyoub develops a depiction of grotesque power in the figure of a corrupt 'Chef du village' who cheats his way to the top by exploiting the population. Pitting them against this classic dictator figure, the story centres around two writers, the eponymous Palestinian — a veteran of the 1948 Palestine War and 'écrivain public' (a professional writer who drafts official correspondence on behalf of the largely illiterate inhabitants of the village) — and a poet who finds himself chased from the village by the 'Chef du village' and his supporters. The grotesque emerges in this novel in a series of scenes that involve the 'Chef du village' misusing his power for personal gain. This includes the siphoning from villagers' pensions, a forced marriage to a young woman and the dismissal of the Palestinian from his role as the 'écrivain public' so that the corrupt leader's son can take the job. By drawing self-conscious attention to the writer, and especially to a writer exposed to powerful figures manipulating discourse for their own personal gain, Ayyoub's text sheds light on how the spectacle of power in contemporary Algeria continually disenfranchises a downtrodden population.

With the whole village turned against the Palestinian, the novel culminates in a mythic battle fought between the two antagonists. Chased from his home, the Palestinian flees into the desert; the 'Chef du village' follows, fresh from his wedding celebrations, but becomes disoriented as he has been drinking alcohol; he falls from his horse and is killed by his own sword in a violent beheading. A comically rhythmic and explicit description ensues: 'Sous la violence du coup, la tête tranchée net roula sur le sable puis s'arrêta d'aplomb, conservant le

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[14] On the emergence of a new group of non-metropolitan, Francophone publishers, see Patrick Crowley, 'Literatures in French Today: Markets, Centres, Peripheries, Transition', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 50.3 (2013), 410–25. On Editions Barzakh, see Corbin Treacy, 'L'Effet Barzakh', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20.1 (2016), 76–83; see also Mary Anne Lewis, 'The Maghreb's New Publishing House: les éditions barzakh and the Stakes of Localized Publishing', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20.1 (2016), 85–93.

même regard suppliant, avec la bouche qui continuait silencieusement d'invoquer un impossible pardon.[15] This ludic description triggers the ambivalent identification of the grotesque image upon which Bakhtin insists: in maintaining an expression of forgiveness, the amputated head invites the reader to feel empathy for the defeated 'Chef du village' at the same time as evoking a sense of retributive justice.

Other markers of the grotesque can be seen when jackals attack a local woman. Variably described by the narrator as 'chacals', 'silhouettes fantomatiques' and 'hommes',[16] the jackals constitute unstable and ambiguous representations of power. Indeed, the figure of the jackal can be seen in other textual renditions of Algerian history. In Tahar Djaout's *L'Invention du désert*, it is the jackals who 'tranch[ent] la gorge',[17] while in Nesroulah Yous' testimony of the Bentalha massacre of 1994, the howls of jackals were said to be audible in the days before the killings.[18] Frantz Fanon also invokes the jackal in *Les Damnés de la terre*, as he describes the rich as 'des bêtes carnassières, des chacals et des corbeaux qui se vautrent dans le sang du peuple.'[19] Identifying a stable historical referent in the novel is, of course, neither desirable nor entirely necessary. What is interesting about these various figures, however, is that they all in some way pit the Palestinian and the poet in a righteous opposition to grotesque expressions of power and violence — be that the power of money, fundamentalist violence or sexual exploitation. By framing these figures of power through an oppositional lens, readers are encouraged to consider how such representations might capture the actions and downfall of an obscure Algerian ruling class.

[15] Ayyoub, *Le Palestinien,* pp. 251–52.
[16] Ayyoub, *Le Palestinien*, pp. 66–70.
[17] Tahar Djaout, *L'Invention du désert* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 167.
[18] Nesroulah Yous, *Qui a tué à Bentalha?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000), p. 152. Similar images are present in Sony Labou Tansi's *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (Paris: Seuil, 1985) and Pie Tshibanda's *Un Fou noir au pays des Blancs* (Bruxelles: Bernard Gilson, 1999), as rocks in the sea, birds and dogs all 'cry out' in response to despotic violence. For discussion of these texts, see Sarah Arens, 'Narrating the (Post)Nation? Aspects of the Local and the Global in Francophone Congolese Writing', *Research in African Literatures,* 49.1 (2018), 22–41.
[19] Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1968 [1961]), p. 128.

In its ambivalent, empathetic and hubristic mode, theorised by Bakhtin, the grotesque forces the reader to identify in a compassionate way with the otherwise stereotyped vision of the monstrous and excessive leader. In other words, Ayyoub writes for more than comic effect and, instead, seeks to unveil the universally corrupting nature of excessive power by moving towards Mbembe's vision of the grotesque as 'intrinsic to all systems of domination' (*PN* 3). In figuring the downfall of leaders in an empathetic (rather than merely pathetic) register, Ayyoub's novel functions as a forewarning to all those who would consider abusing their positions of power.

However, in advancing an understanding of grotesque power affixed to one 'side' of a more global binary opposition between ruler and ruled, Ayyoub's oppositional aesthetic does not address how the writer or reader is a participant in the construction and actualisation of a theatre of grotesque power and thereby complicit in fetishizing the *commandement*, State or *le pouvoir* as an unimpeachable and untouchable elite. Thus, despite its fiercely oppositional surface, this is an aesthetic that risks further ratifying the system (*PN* 26), enabling the ruling class to maintain the dominant 'fantasy' or 'mythology' of power that keeps the masses in check.

Salim Bachi: empathy, complicity and the grotesque

If Ayyoub's deployment of the Bakhtinian grotesque can be seen to be complicit in the continued ratification of the postcolonial Algerian regime, Salim Bachi's self-conscious focus on complicity at the level of media and political discourse forces the reader to assess their own role in perpetuating the spectacle of violence as it relates to contemporary narratives of terrorism. Opposition, and more precisely the threat posed by the widespread use of binary oppositions, is a central focus of Bachi's *Tuez-les tous*, a novel that imagines the moments in

the run-up to the events of 11 September 2001.[20] Here and in his other less controversial texts,[21] Bachi engages in a process of remythologizing narratives of the past as a means of escaping the inevitable cycle and repetition of binary narratives that can be seen to result in the production of a state of 'zombification' (*PN* 4). At certain points in his essay, Mbembe appears to argue that the obscene and the grotesque are particular to an *African* 'stylistique du pouvoir' or *commandement* (*PN* 14), but I propose we understand the *commandement* in broader terms: in remythologizing social, political and media narratives of the terrorist, Bachi understands these accounts as a part of the 'official […] apparatus of domination' that requires serious demystification (*PN* 11).

In *Tuez-les tous*, the grotesque is present in the characterisation of the protagonist — one of the hijacker-pilots involved in the attack on the World Trade Centre buildings in New York — but, as with the other texts I examine here, the obscene as 'off stage' is also evident as Bachi brings into view the previously obscured perspective of the perpetrator. Levels of complicity between reader and protagonist are established both through the narrative perspective adopted and via the imagining of a grotesque particular to the excessive consumption of the capitalist West. The story is told in a third-person voice that slips frequently into free indirect speech:

> Il riait intérieurement. Que connaissent-ils de leur histoire? Rien. Ils avaient pourtant bâti un empire, planté les germes du développement de leurs ennemis. Et c'était au nom de cette grande histoire, pour que personne ne l'oublie, qu'ils accompliraient leur mission. / Une nouvelle flute de champagne. Ça rassurait les Chrétiens, un Arabe qui boit. Il se mit à rire à nouveau. (*T* 18)

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[20] Salim Bachi, *Tuez-les tous* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), hereafter *T* in the text.
[21] These include, most notably, the novels of the Cyrtha trilogy: *Le chien d'Ulysse* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001); *La Kahéna* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); *Les douze contes de minuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

While the acts themselves, and those responsible for them, can be described as grotesque, the novel draws lines of complicity between different actors and explores the power of the media narrative to define the figure of the terrorist. In other words, Bachi's novel forces us to examine more closely where the grotesque lies: does the grotesque simply emerge from a power seized by the terrorist, or is it the result of a powerful binary narrative imagined by civil society in the West to mitigate its own complicity in establishing the historical conditions that produced this moment of extreme violence?

On the surface of Bachi's text, the grotesque appears to be deployed in a classic Bakhtinian mode. The early lines of the novel describe the excesses of the protagonist, Seyf el Islam, as he takes a bath in his Portland hotel room, while sipping a glass of champagne delivered by room service, paid for with his MasterCard, before launching into a violent, at times anti-Semitic, diatribe against Israel and the West. As he continues to sip champagne, the protagonist learns of yet another 'attentat [qui] avait secoué sa ville' on the television news (*T* 16). Since he left his hometown of Cyrtha (Bachi's mythologised composite of the modern Annaba, Algiers and Constantine), the protagonist's life in the West is described as a pursuit of the material objects and experiences of credit cards, champagne, nightclubbing and women (*T* 29–30). The figure of a scantily clad woman attempting to hail a taxi in the street is described as a symbol for the US; the protagonist expresses the desire to '[tuer] l'Amerique à travers elle' (*T* 34) — we are given a violent and grotesque account of how the protagonist would cut her up into pieces and rape her. Yet, despite its more classic appearance, the grotesque is not deployed here to offer a comical or playful opposition to State power, but in a mode that — coupled with the effect of the free indirect speech — creates a certain degree of discomfort in the reader. If the narrative voice and contextualisation of the protagonist's troubled past trigger empathy in the reader — an instinct to see the world through the eyes of the perpetrator —

these scenes also situate the grotesque at the level of an excessive consumption that characterises the capitalist West.

This feeling of complicity is further brought to the fore in the final scene of the novel, which treads an uncomfortable line between the protagonist's troubled childhood and the event of the plane hitting one of the towers. The narrator describes a memory of the protagonist as a young child, forced to hide in a dark cupboard — 'un placard sombre et noir, derrière une porte close, sous laquelle filtrait parfois un rai de lumière' (*T* 87); it is here that the child invents the 'histoire absurde d'oiseaux', functioning later as a metaphor for the planes flying into the Twin Towers. In the final scenes before the event itself, the protagonist recalls the images of child victims of the bombing at Hiroshima he had been shown at a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. With Hiroshima fresh in the reader's mind, the narrator then likens Seyf to a 'foetus de six ans qui l'appelait Papa Papa, sauve-moi' (*T* 110). Arguably, the use of Hiroshima by the narrator constitutes a weaponization of the grotesque image (albeit one that emerges from actual documentary footage) for the purposes of radicalizing the protagonist, but reference to the cupboard and to the childhood tale of the birds evokes further empathy in the reader, who begins to construct their own story of Seyf's troubled background. Thus, despite the cold and matter-of-fact account of the protagonist boarding the plane and making the final call to his handlers, we are nevertheless drawn into questioning how the young child ended up on such a violent path.

In the final paragraph of the novel, the doors of the dark cupboard from the protagonist's childhood are morphed into the door of the plane's cockpit. Just before the plane hits the building, there is an inversion of the self-other binary: the protagonist sees the multiple reflections of his own image in the kaleidoscope of mirrored glass of the tower. This moment is suddenly lost as the plane hits the glass, taking the protagonist into 'la nuit noire et aveugle' (*T* 153). This is the darkness and blindness of death, a blindness in the face of extreme violence

committed against a perceived other, but it is also a sudden vision — a realisation. In the kaleidoscope, the pilot is presented with an infinite number of mirror images of himself — '[il] pénétra dans la salle du trône où il vit des milliers de miroirs qui l'entourent et reflétaient à l'infini ses multiples et effrayants visages' (*T* 153) — where the singular (reference to a single god, a single text, a single self) is hopelessly, and tragically, pluralised, liquefied, universalised and preserved in the image of the face of horror — in the endless faces of the *self-as-other*.[22] The novel ends here, but the reader knows the iconic images that follow. The tower falls, the kaleidoscope of mirrors — once symbolic of Western arrogance, vanity, imperialism, and which for a single moment offered an image of a human being quite literally caught between the binary — collapses, forming pile upon pile of wreckage.[23] This image both obliterates the different 'sides' of the binary and returns us to an understanding of complicity as a 'folding together […] of subject positions, histories, and memories'.[24]

The final image stays with the reader, who perhaps sees themselves in the mirror reflection, as they recognise their 'entanglement' in the production of the catastrophe.[25] The reference to Seyf as the apathetic 'last man' brings into focus a secular image of life after God, a collapsing of the binary division between ruler and ruled, or the 'end of history', but it also makes an ironic statement on the individual and society's inability to truly see and understand

[22] This final scene recalls Judith Butler's discussion of Emmanuel Levinas and his inscribing of 'the face as the extreme precariousness of the other.' Butler cites Levinas: 'the face of the other in its precariousness and defencelessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the "You shall not kill"'. The face, for Butler, is the site of an ethical 'struggle' whereby our recognition of the precariousness of the other — and the ability to relate peacefully to the other on this basis — is dependent on the recognition that the other can be eliminated. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 134–35.

[23] This image recalls Walter Benjamin's observation of Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus' in the ninth of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940]. And, indeed, thereafter the US might be seen to be 'propelled into the future to which its back is turned' (quotation adapted). See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64 (pp. 257–58).

[24] Debarati Sanyal stresses the Latin root of complicity, *complicare*, meaning 'to fold together'. See her book, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 1.

[25] Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, p. 38.

the binary vision it projects of itself.[26] In *Tuez-les tous*, Bachi triggers an uncomfortable empathy between reader and protagonist, as the tension between disgust and empathy in the grotesque is revealed to us. Alongside Bachi's unique style, staging the 'off stage' through use of free indirect speech, exhibiting the figure of the traumatised child and deploying a grotesque linked to late capitalism, is the affect that results in a feeling of complicity between the reader and the perpetrator of unspeakable acts of terror. Thus, in Bachi's work, we see the *extension* of the Bakhtinian grotesque, redoubled in an obscene aesthetic that brings into view what we would not expect to see and that triggers the affective response of complicity. In the days running up to his taking of the plane, a seizure of power through an extreme act, the protagonist in *Tuez-les tous* reveals a more or less obvious set of grotesque traits. But, by implicating the reader in this otherwise hidden story — by figuring the perpetrator beyond the binary — Bachi gets to the heart of Mbembe's observation at the start of his chapter: the grotesque and the obscene 'are intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed' (*PN* 3). For Mbembe, both 'sides' are complicit in reproducing the grotesque and the obscene; indeed, Bachi permits us to see how the grotesque emerges from this binary thinking.

In rendering the reader aware of, and complicit in, the production of the binary, Bachi's work can be said to widen the definition of the *commandement*. The implication is not just that readers reinforce the binary vision by understanding themselves as 'ruled', but rather that we are *all*, to varying degrees, *part of* the violent *commandement* we pretend to 'oppose'. The binary is a narrative, a myth, that we construct to unburden ourselves of the responsibility of acknowledging our complicity in complex layers of power and violence; the binary is precisely

[26] Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) is arguably one example of the inability to properly recognize society as projecting a binary vision of itself. See also, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and no One*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

that myth that helps us to cover over the possibility that the grotesque lurks within all attempts to seize power or control.

Mustapha Benfodil and the failure of the grotesque as a contestatory aesthetic

On the surface, Benfodil's *Archéologie du chaos [amoureux]* appears to confirm the existence of a carnivalesque grotesque — the experimental text both 'outgrows its own self' and resembles a kind of 'body in the act of becoming' (*R* 317).[27] Yet, the self-conscious elements of *Archéologie* also reflect Mbembe's scepticism when it comes to the contestatory potential of the grotesque and the obscene. By deconstructing the form of the novel, and by drawing self-conscious attention to the increasingly ossified trope of the grotesque, Benfodil goes further than Ayyoub and Bachi by using both textual and extra-textual form to capture the lived experience of Algerians as they attempt to understand and challenge the 'zombified' state of discourse in contemporary Algeria.

For those looking at the country from the outside, Bouteflika might be taken as an exemplary embodiment of the 'zombification' of power in Algeria. Clearly a puppet of an obscure entourage pulling the strings from the 'backstage', the former president's image was at regular intervals aired on national television. In one broadcast, post-production editing was required to give the appearance of the president constructing a coherent sentence, with the poorly executed cuts clearly visible to viewers.[28] While appearing to outsiders as encapsulating the zombified State, Algerians had become increasingly accustomed to this hastily cobbled together staging of the president and thereby increasingly aware that this 'zombification' extended beyond the figure of the president and his immediate entourage. Here, *le pouvoir* is

[27] Mustapha Benfodil, *Archéologie du chaos [amoureux]* (Algiers: Editions Barzakh, 2007; Marseille: Al Dante 2012). The article refers to the later Al Dante edition of the text.

[28] See Corbin Treacy, 'Writing in the Aftermath of Two Wars: Algerian Modernism and the *Génération '88*', in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988-2015*, ed. by Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 123–39 (pp. 123–24).

understood as a broad group of politicians, military figures and technocrats (including those involved in running State television).[29] Until the massive popular protests that took hold in Algeria during the first months of 2019, this highly obscure and imprecise vision of the 'regime' was where many Algerians' understanding of the zombified State ended (whether that was by conscious choice or unconscious coercion). Since Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019 — and the arrest of many of the businessmen associated with his inner circle — the literal unravelling of the regime has allowed citizens to begin to dig beneath the surface of its obscure representation. At the same time, it is important that we understand the downfall of the president and his entourage as rooted in a longer history of artistic and literary production that has deployed aesthetics to deconstruct what Mbembe refers to as the *mutually* zombified state of discourse in Algeria — that is, as a result of a 'connivance' between ruler and ruled (*PN* 22).

While economic growth improved considerably between 2009 and 2016, levels of indignity have for many Algerians worsened over recent years.[30] To use economic data to explain the lack of large scale protests in Algeria during the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring, would, as Muriam Haleh Davis and Thomas Serres note, mean 'ignor[ing] the multiple signs of profound discontent and frustration, perhaps most poignantly expressed in the pervasive sentiment of *hogra*.'[31] Algerians regularly use the dialectal Arabic term 'hogra' to lament the corruption, injustice and humiliation they are forced to endure on a daily basis. Since 2011, there was an increasing sense that Algerian citizens — especially the youth — had become more aware, and less tolerant, of a status quo that perpetually resulted in political stagnation.[32] Benfodil's novel, in both its textual form and extra-textual performances, begins to broach the

[29] Davis and Serres, 'Political Contestation', p. 106.
[30] See, 'Algeria Real GDP Growth', *CEIC*, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/algeria/real-gdp-growth> [last accessed 26 June 2020].
[31] Davis and Serres, 'Political Contestation', p. 102.
[32] For an analysis of contemporary Algerian youth movements, see Britta Hecking, 'Algerian Youth on the Move. Capoeira, Street Dance and Parkour: between Integration and Contestation', in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988-2015*, ed. by Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 184–202.

possibility of a new discourse, whose material outcome now remains uncertain. If the State sought to co-opt its subjects in the ratification of its own obscurity, that instability at the same time 'enable[d] the postcolonized subject to mobilize fluctuating and mobile subject-positions.'[33] In moving beyond representation *per se*, and by deconstructing the grotesque *as representation*, Benfodil's novel both registers an increasing political awareness among citizens and draws our attention towards the failure of the grotesque as a contestatory aesthetic.[34]

First published by Editions Barzakh in 2007, *Archéologie* offers an almost total caricature of everything it depicts within its pages. By turning the structure of the novel inside out, laying out the mechanics of writing for his readers to see, *Archéologie* visualizes what would otherwise be hidden behind the rhetorical surface of the novel, working on a structural and formal level to bring the 'off stage' into view. Made up of a set of numbered vignettes, the text is split into three narrative levels. On its first level, it presents the young, ambitious (but also grotesque and vulgar) writer cum political activist Yacine Nabolci, who lives in Algeria during the civil conflict of the 1990s. If Nabolci's juvenile sexual fantasies about sleeping with his young stepmother align with a more classic Bakhtinian grotesque, his failed dreams of revolution resemble more closely Mbembe's conception of the grotesque as ineffective at bringing about structural change. On one level, the novel is a piecing together of the chaotic years of the Algerian civil conflict of the 1990s and, on another, it is a caricature of a contestatory body of literature produced within and immediately after that period. Thus,

[33] Cecile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), p. 84.

[34] In its move from representation to deconstruction, Benfodil's literary and performative practice mirrors the critical practice of Mbembe and his wish to advance a 'different writing' of Africa. For further discussion of Mbembe and deconstruction, see Michael Syrotinski, 'Violence and Writing in the African Postcolony: Achille Mbembe and Sony Labou Tansi', in *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 98–116.

Benfodil develops a deconstruction of the 'oppositional' and an illustration of how oppositional aesthetics has consistently failed to bring about political change in Algeria.

Rather than deploying a classic aesthetic of the grotesque, and thereby attempting a well-trodden subversion of State discourse, Benfodil turns his attention to his own art and activism. This self-conscious reflection finds its expression in Nabolci's membership of A.G.I.R. (the 'Avant-Garde Intellectuelle Révolutionnaire'), whose action is inspired by, among others, the experiential practice of OuLiPo in France and the American writer William Burroughs.[35] Nabolci writes of the 'burlesque' of the group's action, but admits how it is at the same time 'fatalement utopiste'.[36] Members include the playfully named Jamel Derrida, V'Laïd Navokov, Omar Rimbaud, Adlène Luis Borgès, and the group has several iterations. Transmuted into the 'Commando d'Insémination des Filles du Système', the principal mission of the group is to seduce and impregnate the daughters of the notoriously powerful elite of Algerian generals. This humorous and vulgar image resembles a carnivalesque grotesque, but in reversing the common trope of the grotesque leader who passes his time 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls' (Sony Labou Tansi, cited in *PN* 9), Benfodil draws self-conscious attention to the use of the grotesque image as a form of satire. We can also see here how, by reappropriating the grotesque for the other 'side' (it is the actions of the members of the *revolutionary* group, rather than the 'rulers', that are depicted here as grotesque), Benfodil is keen not to fall within more standard representations of grotesque power, but rather is interested to explore different articulations of the grotesque from across the political spectrum.

Reference to the use of seduction, and to the sexual appropriation of women's bodies, is later juxtaposed with an image of the limp and disfigured penis: the 'pénis mou et fatigué'

[35] Burroughs is of course another writer known for deploying a grotesque aesthetic in his work — and his novel, *The Naked Lunch* (London: Harper, 2008 [1959]) appears as inspiration for Nabolci throughout.
[36] Benfodil, *Archéologie*, p. 108.

is given visual form in a printed sketch on page 125 of the novel (Figure 1). Described as a 'parfait autoportrait' of the author of Nabolci's story, Marwan K., this inability of the penis to make itself erect represents both the writer's block, from which Marwan is suffering, and a failure of the grotesque image to constitute itself in any meaningful opposition to the 'regime'. Another reason for the failure of Nabolci's revolutionary group, and of the grotesque tactics they deploy, can be seen in their inability to clearly define their opposition. Identifying the elaborate apparatus of the State in very broad terms, using the metonym 'système' (and thus imagining the 'opposition' in very nebulous terms), means ratifying the postcolonial State as fetish.[37] By staging the failure of this and other iterations of this revolutionary group, Benfodil's text allows readers to identify their own complicity in imagining the binary framework used to conceive the relation between an all-powerful State and a downtrodden revolutionary avant-garde.[38] Readers are thus encouraged to examine the more complicated configurations of State power in contemporary Algeria — to delve beneath the surface spectacle of the zombified State.

[37] See Davis and Serres, 'Political Contestation', p. 105.

[38] The police inspector, who appears in the final part of the text, offers yet another figure through which Benfodil's novel collapses the overly simplistic binary framework that pits State against citizen. Apparently named after an "ifrit" — a malevolent jinn from Islamic mythology — inspector Kamel El-Afrite is both part of the apparatus of power and yet not entirely *of it*. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this fact to me.

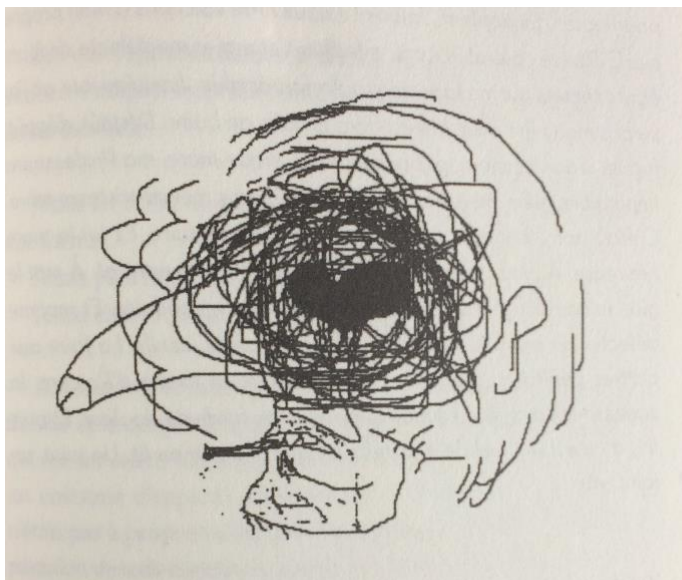

Figure 1: ‘Un dessin de cyanure’, p. 125.[39]

This aesthetic ‘impotence’ (reflected both in Marwan’s ‘pénis mou’ and the avant-garde’s ineffectual ‘resistance’ to State power) took an interesting turn when Benfodil organised a series of public readings of his work in what he named ‘lectures sauvages’.[40] If the grotesque aesthetic has tended to reconstitute and re-enforce an understanding of power that pits the State against an ‘oppressed’ mass of people, then Benfodil’s performative practice — whereby he took his text to the streets — demonstrates how involving citizens in this process of fabulation allows them to realize their own ‘*fluctuating* and *mobile* subject-positions.’[41] In adopting a more unstable and performative mode, the novel morphed into something its author never thought it could be. In capturing the ossified nature of the grotesque aesthetic, the text at the same time transfigures and weaponizes the grotesque at the level of form and performance.

[39] Thank you to Les Presses du Réel for granting permission to reproduce the image here.
[40] Launched by Benfodil in 2009, the ‘lectures sauvages’ took the form of unauthorized readings of his and others’ work on the streets in and around Algiers. These public displays of dissent were met with increasing repression by the police. For a more detailed account of Benfodil’s ‘lectures sauvages’, see Alexandra Gueydan-Turek, ‘Figure of an Anartist: Keeping Local Francophone Literature Engaged with Mustapha Benfodil's Literature-action’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20.1 (2016), 48–57.
[41] Bishop, ‘Achille Mbembe’, p. 84, my emphasis.

While other literary works (such as Ayyoub's) that are just as incendiary in their content have been tolerated in Algeria, Benfodil's 'lectures sauvages' tapped into something that elements of the 'regime' could not abide. Placed under arrest for performing readings in the streets,[42] the author had diverted from an expected form of 'dialogue' — a form that no longer maintained the 'fantasy' of an impenetrable and nebulous 'regime'.[43] Benfodil writes of his experience of the 'lectures sauvages' as follows:

> Depuis [les lectures sauvages], mon regard sur ma 'fonction', sur mon 'status' d'écrivain, a été totalement chambardé. Je découvrais que des flics pouvaient m'embraquer juste parce que je déclamais de la poésie dans la rue. Oui, me faire embarquer juste parce que ma parole n'était plus confinée, emprisonnée dans un livre, dans une librairie ou une bibliothèque, mais qu'elle était incarnée, portée par un corps. Un corps qui dépassait désormais mes frontières organiques.[44]

In describing his novel as transformed into a body that transcends its natural limits, Benfodil materialises the grotesque image in his performance of the text on the streets. Fused together, body and text become one. Spilling out beyond its narrative confines, the text on the page leaks out into graphic drawings, graffiti and defies its generic classification as a novel. This transfiguration of the text echoes Bakhtin's account of the grotesque as 'a body in the act of becoming […] never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.' Here, 'the body' of the text both 'swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world' (*R* 317). It would appear, then, that Benfodil does not envision the simple success or failure of the grotesque as a contestatory aesthetic, but rather articulates a tension between, on the one hand, the grotesque as rejuvenating figure and, on the other, its

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[42] Mustapha Benfodil, 'Cherche flic pour lecture citoyenne à Tipaza...', *El Watan*, 16 August 2009, <https://www.djazairess.com/fr/elwatan/134732> [last accessed: 27 February 2019].

[43] Davis and Serres, 'Political Contestation', p. 105.

[44] Mustapha Benfodil, 'Algérie: de « Bezzzef ! » à « Barakat ! », écritures citoyennes', in *Penser la Méditerranée au XXIe siècle: rencontres d'Averroès #20*, ed. by Thierry Fabre (Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 2014), 189–99 (pp. 194–95).

continued presence as a spectacle of excessive power, embodied in the visual apparatus of the State or *commandement*.

During the first days of the anti-government protests of 2019, it became clear to some observers that those taking to the streets were using humour to bring about ‘a carnivalesque mood of dissidence’.[45] Mirroring the uprisings of October 1988, when, during riots in Algiers, protesters stole Stan Smith shoes, distributed fake air tickets to distant places and named a donkey after the then president, Chadli Bendjedid, the ‘hirak’ saw demonstrators display grotesque visual caricatures of the president and his entourage, while jokes were regularly made about Bouteflika’s state of health.[46] Much like Benfodil’s artistic and literary expression, these protesters could be said to ‘provoke’ the authorities through their use of obscenity, luring them into an explicitly theatrical space, demonstrating how they too maintain the shared performance of power.[47] To recall the words of the philosopher and sociologist of space, Henri Lefebvre, Algerians once again moved from reproducing mere ‘representations of space’ to engaging in an active ‘representational space’ which ‘involves the appropriative transformation of objects in physical space.’[48] In launching his ‘lectures sauvages’, Benfodil showed readers how to decode a previously obscured political ‘aesthetics’ and revealed this for citizens and commentators to see.

In a later English translation of Mbembe’s essay, the process of the rising of the masses, and of the demystification of the *commandement*, is described in terms of the creation of

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[45] Hiyem Cheurfa, ‘The Laughter of Dignity: Comedy and Dissent in the Algerian Popular Protests’, *Jadaliyya*, 26 March 2019, < https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38495> [last accessed 26 June 2020].

[46] On the carnival scenes of October 1988, see Malika Rahal, ‘1988-1992: Multipartism, Islamism and the Descent into Civil War’, in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988-2015* ed. by Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 81–100 (p. 83). On the ‘hirak’, see Cheurfa, ‘The Laughter of Dignity’.

[47] Jane Hiddleston, ‘“On peut apprendre de la littérature à se méfier”: Writing and Doubt in the Contemporary Algerian Novel’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20.1 (2016), 58–66 (p. 61); Benkhaled and Vince, ‘Performing Algerianness’, p. 265.

[48] Lefebvre, cited in Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 86.

'potholes of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe'.[49] Mbembe is highly sceptical about the possibility of inflicting violence on the material base of the *commandement* (*PN* 10–11). And this may well be true of Benfodil's novel and performances. However, the image of the pothole offers the prospect of a slightly different process of moving beyond political stagnation. Potholes are continually, but often unsatisfactorily, 'patched up' or 'filled in' by the authorities; they are irritating and therefore highly visible to the general population, but small and insignificant cracks in the road to the authorities or State.[50] Even though the State clearly maintains a monopoly on violence (and this is reflected in Benfodil's text by the mysterious disappearance of the writer, Marwan), there is always the possibility of a discursive recuperation of life through literature, or of the written text through performance. This gives us hope, but it also affirms the imperative to chip away at the cracks in the road more quickly than the State can fill them in. If Benfodil's novel (and the failure of effective resistance within its pages) might initially reaffirm Mbembe's scepticism towards the obscene or grotesque aesthetic as a contestatory practice, Benfodil's performances show how literature — and aesthetic interventions more generally — at the very least *begin* to deconstruct the grotesque spectacle of power, unveiling the 'regime of unreality' and the manipulation and weaponization of the aesthetic that, as we see in the case of Algeria, is *at the core of* the political.[51]

Conclusion

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[49] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 111. The expression used in the 1992 essay is 'pockets of indiscipline' (*PN* 10), which mirrors more closely the French 'poches d'indiscipline'. See, Achille Mbembe, 'Notes provisoires sur la postcolonie', *Politique Africaine*, 60 (1995), 76–106 (p. 86). It should be noted that Mbembe assisted the translators of the 2001 English text.

[50] The reader will recall Homi Bhabha's image of the 'shreds and patches' of the nation state. And, as Davis and Serres note, the 'imagined communities and solidarities on which the nation-state was constructed' have been increasingly eroded because of the Algerian State's inability or unwillingness to constitute itself outside the obscure designation of *le pouvoir*. Davis and Serres, 'Political Contestation', p. 106; Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and he Margins of the Modern Nation', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 199–244 (p. 204).

[51] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 13. An equally compelling image of the State as 'leaky ship' is proposed by Michael Taussig in his response essay to Mbembe's 'Notes'. See Michael Taussig, 'The Magic of the State', *Public Culture*, 5.1 (1992), 63–65 (p. 65).

As Mbembe's analysis suggests, the value of the novel is that it proposes an aesthetic reading or interpretation of the political. Unlike journalistic discourse that rarely questions the discursive foundations of the political, the novel thinks the political as an aesthetic phenomenon, regarding power as rooted in aesthetics and stylistics (*PN* 9). This Foucauldian definition of power, situating it at the symbolic and discursive level, risks eliding legitimate questions around the use of physical violence by the State. Cécile Bishop raises this precise point in her reading of Mbembe's text, as she shows how he deploys a creative use of metaphor (equating bullets with the applause of a crowd) to implicitly suggest an 'equivalence between ambiguous forms of resistance [articulated in literature and performance] and the physical violence of the state'.[52] Bishop shows how Mbembe fails to explicitly address the question of how or whether the State maintains its monopoly on violence.

If Ayyoub's work mounts a passionate and urgent response to the question of the State monopoly on violence, it is equally important to understand the state of mutual powerlessness that results from an overinvestment in a binary vision of the grotesque. In a story that steps beyond the immediacy of the Algerian setting, Bachi shows how binary thinking is frequently at the root of a violence that affects us all — whether originating from within the realms of the State or from elsewhere. In demonstrating how the reader is complicit in bringing the binary into existence, *Tuez-les tous* forces us to consider our own complicity in the production of grotesque expressions of power. Whereas, in the fictional story Benfodil tells, there is a reaffirmation of the State's monopoly on violence, there is also an extra-textual examination of the importance of literature for understanding life at the level of discourse. If, at some level, the performance of the text created or contributed to a series of pre-existing 'potholes of indiscipline' that helped foment the current protests, the value of the novel lies also in its ability to reflect in self-conscious ways about the articulation of the mythologies of power and

[52] Bishop, 'Achille Mbembe', p. 86.

authority in Algerian culture and politics. Like Bachi, Benfodil stages how readers themselves have become 'entangled' in the process of fetishizing power as 'oppositional'.[53]

Even if we accept that there cannot be any real equivalence between art or literature and the actual violence of the State, to truly understand the discursive operation of power in the postcolony and beyond, we must first look within ourselves and the 'regimes' of power that we *imagine* to exist — regimes that reinforce the narrative order of the status quo. Mbembe's vision — that both 'sides' of the ruler and ruled are implicated in a grotesque reproduction of power, resulting in the 'zombification' of both — appears on the surface to understand the political and aesthetic within the frame of the distribution and *re*distribution of 'the sensible'.[54] Yet, as I have shown, Mbembe, along with Bachi and Benfodil, is sceptical of the possibility of change conceived within a purely contestatory frame. Real change must begin with an analysis of how, when we speak about the political, we are always already caught up in a binary discourse (ruler vs. ruled, perpetrator vs. victim, regime vs. popular masses). In this regard, we must remain cautious when assessing the recent protests in Algeria, understanding them in the context of a longstanding social and cultural activism that can be traced back to at least the end of the civil conflict of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, by bringing the private into the public sphere, by showing the reader what is normally hidden away behind closed doors, the aesthetics of the obscene and the grotesque allow readers to see power as a story we are told and a set of stories we repeatedly tell ourselves. At a discursive level, the *commandement* is a fetish — an idea in which we invest meaning or value beyond its actual meaning or value — and thus it is an idea we have of power, rather than power itself.

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[53] Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity*, p. 38.
[54] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 13.