



Sensible Interventions. Cultural Resistance Post-9/11

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***SENSIBLE INTERVENTIONS:
CULTURAL RESISTANCE POST-9/11***

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Sensible Interventions is anchored in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in America and their cultural legacies, most prominently in the forms of cultural resistance. It conjoins 9/11 and oppositional practices by probing the politics of the attacks and their repercussions, and simultaneously, by investigating 9/11-inspired artistic resistance and its agents, targets, modes, and motivations.

Like so many other fields such as politics, global finance, and the military, the domain of culture has sustained wide-ranging effects from the attacks, but it has also been, in a strange way, galvanized as well. Scanning through the myriad of American cultural objects with any kind of 9/11 connection, one can quickly see that, whether they merely contain brief 9/11 references or actually portray the catastrophe as their primary theme, these cultural responses (including films, television dramas, documentaries, political cartoons, music, and video games), generally adhere to several conventional themes and functions: first, to eulogize the firefighters, other emergency workers, and the victims through the prisms of heroism and patriotism; second, to create immediacy with both imagined and real descriptions of panic and fears inside the towers and the hijacked planes; third, to enable acts of mourning while providing healing and catharsis through personal accounts by survivors and victims' families; fourth, to explain and inform by detailing the inner workings of globalized terrorism, al-Qaeda, and anti-terrorism efforts; and finally, to critique the Bush administration, post-9/11 paranoia, and threats to civil liberties.

Nestled among these cultural responses are also works that deviate from these main classifications. These objects might share some of the antagonistic vehemence with those works in the last category of critique, but they also exhibit something more. Four such objects serve as the fount of curiosity for this study: the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the hip hop album *Sonic Jihad*, the Canadian television situation comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, and the collection of studio photographs entitled *Taliban*. Because of their diverging genre, medium, themes, and circulation, thus located far off from each other on any schematic of 9/11 objects, their visibility is diminished, operating somewhat inconspicuously as isolated points in a constellation with more illustrious and better-known objects. But taken together, their potential as critical artistic interventions becomes prominent. This dissertation distills their oppositionality, exploring them at the confluence of aesthetic forms, political ardor, and commercial circulation.

Foregrounding artistic endeavors – literature, music, television program, and photography – and fastening them to politics also forces this inquiry to step into the quagmire that is the tumultuous relationship between politics and the arts. Are the arts only a supplementary element in oppositional movements, or as Boris Groys asks: “Does art hold any power of its own . . . ?” To consider this knotted relationship between politics and the arts, the 9/11 and resistance nexus is further extended by a third component, that of the theoretical works by Jacques Rancière. His thoughts have great relevance here because, although his works traverse different topics and disciplines, they do converge and return time and time again to that exact relationship between politics and aesthetics. The qualifier “sensible” in my title signals Rancière’s presence in this study, as the word is echoic of his particular way of theorizing politics through his best-known concept, the distribution of the sensible. This notion of the sensible is deployed through the two definitions of the word “sense,” as Rancière himself explains: first, sense as in the realm of sensations and what is apprehended and perceived by the senses, and second, sense as in meaning and the process of making sense and establishing the coherence of something. “Sensible interventions” signify my four objects’ oppositional undertakings at the level of sensory presentations and at the level of meaning and signification, as well as the interplay between the two senses when an object breaches the coherent and determinate connection between the pair. In all, *Sensible Interventions* points to a convergence of 9/11, cultural resistance and Rancière, where artistic practices counter 9/11’s cultural legacy through the multiple dimensions and definitions of the sensible.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one establishes the theoretical foundation of the dissertation by considering Rancière’s works on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, beginning with his discussion on the political community and ending with his conceptualization of aesthetic dissensus. In order to avoid the danger of reductionism, Rancière’s thoughts are surveyed in great detail because his important concepts, such as dissensus, are often embedded in a long line of argument and should not be merely extracted without specifying their original context. Rancière realm of the sensible and the perceptible is also connected to the specific events of 9/11 and elaborated from a different angle through Judith Butler’s term “sphere of appearance.” The chapter concludes by clarifying Rancière’s influence on the dissertation, marking both its impact and limits.

Chapters two and three identify the key sites of post-9/11 resistance by exploring disruptions relating to national identity, patriotism, and the war on terror. Both chapters also

orient post-9/11 politics toward the aesthetic by considering the issue of audibility, or what can be heard. In chapter two, I examine how Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenges the divide of "us versus them," the dominant refrain of the post-9/11 era, by focusing on the figure of the foreigner and its precarious position in America post-9/11. Highlighting issues of national identity, cultural affiliations, and enemification, Hamid's novel features a transplanted and excluded Pakistani protagonist, Changez, whose alternative encounter with the terrorist attacks denies the naturalization and normalization of patriotism and mourning. In the post-9/11 moment, when the enemy and the terrorist are often envisaged as absolutely external and other, Changez is an ambivalent character who is more American than Americans themselves but also a possible enemy of the state. This and other identity disorientations, as a result of the catastrophe, generate spaces for resistance against prevalent post-9/11 identity categorizations, spatial demarcations, narrative constraints, and a dominant and conventional memory of the disaster. The novel also provides a pathway into the post-catastrophe sensible order that privileges certain victimized or heroic bodies and their narratives. Utilizing the unconventional form of a dramatic monologue for his novel, Hamid highlights the struggle over audibility and inaudibility by allowing Changez to be the sole speaker of the novel, while relegating another character to inaudibility.

Building on this, chapter three continues to explore the aesthetic borders that delimit the sphere of appearance by considering the post-9/11 hip hop album *Sonic Jihad* by the American political rapper Paris. Transitioning from the voice and audibility of a character in a novel, this case study considers the literal and ferocious voice of resistance through Paris's sonic attack against Bush's war on terror, and 9/11's military and cultural legacies. Themes from the previous chapter such as national identity, cultural affiliations, and enemification are expanded through an African-American artist who contrasts his national identity with other forms of subjectivity and identification, demonstrating an internal alterity that hampers any facile attempts to distinguish between post-9/11 friends and foes, citizens and aliens, the included and the excluded, terrorists and patriots. Unlike Changez who is more American than Americans themselves, Paris is an American who refuses to be an American and aligns symbolically, instead, with the terrorists. Dissociating himself from the post-9/11 patriotic fervor, Paris restages Bush's war on terror and nationhood and offers an alternative sonic experience of America through the history of black oppression and through his own global and diasporic affinities.

Moving beyond the realm of audibility, chapters four and five address the issue of visibility by investigating the multiple catastrophe-induced ways of seeing. To do so, these two

chapters concentrate on two iconic and controversial figures in the war on terror: Muslims and Taliban soldiers. The previous questions concerning oppositional identity, both national and cultural, are now complicated with the added dimension of Islam. The object of inquiry in chapter four is the Canadian situation comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a series that showcases the everyday, mundane experiences of a Muslim community by translating those experiences into the beloved and easily recognizable television format. This premise offers resistant possibilities as the show contests hitherto hostile terrorism-related televisual representations and inserts a more banal mode of seeing Muslims and Islam. I situate Muslim figures within a wider Rancièrian regime of visibility and detail a new visibility and visuality anchored in what I will call “oppositional banality.” I also question later in the chapter, however, whether this oppositional process of visual normalization also enfolds Muslim identities and Islam too conveniently and uncritically within the bounds of national loyalty.

Disrupting the post-9/11 visual realm by inserting alternative ways of seeing is also central in the final case study which reflects on counter visualizations of the enemy in the war on terror: the Taliban. Chapter five investigates a collection of studio photographs of Taliban followers taken in 2001 by Afghan photographers in studios in Kandahar. Representing the faces of the enemy, these snapshots and portraits are produced away from the battle scene but it is very much against a broader context of war that they circulate and gain their oppositional significance, as they challenge mainstream media visualizations of the Taliban as the terrorist-enemy. Besides troubling the Taliban’s expected militant identity and masculinity, these images also problematize the post-9/11 “us versus them” divide by inviting a more compassionate, and thus countering, form of viewing that no longer sees them as the enemy. This sympathetic visuality, however, is also scrutinized by returning to Rancièrè’s notion of aesthetic dissensus, for the final time, in order to assess how a dissensual way of viewing the Taliban may countervail the controlling of the perceptible and the sensible.

In the conclusion, I cast a final glance on all four case studies, pinpointing their moments of convergence and divergence, as well as my main arguments. These concluding pages also enlarge the scope of this dissertation by treading into the broader discussion on the role of the spectator in artistic manifestations of resistance. This invites a brief consideration of Rancièrè’s notion of the “emancipated” spectator and my own critical assessment of his thoughts.