2009

Aesthetic Sensibility and Political Praxis: Foucault, Lyotard and the Darfur Crisis

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Pre-Print of:

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"Aesthetic Sensibility and Political Praxis: Foucault, Lyotard and the Darfur Crisis" (with Anne Bartlett and Marjolein Oele), in: *Radical Philosophy Review*, (Vol. 12 (1-2), 2009)

Introduction

The Darfur crisis has resulted in the largest humanitarian operation in the world today: the displacement of 4 million people, the annihilation of in excess of 400,000 people and the rape, humiliation and injury of countless others. It is a crisis of epic proportions whose effects are well known worldwide and whose dynamics are subject to intense scrutiny in the search for a diplomatic solution. Over the past six years, Darfur has become part of the landscape of international violence and ethnic conflict: a horrific reminder of brutal state excess and the apparent powerlessness of citizens to resist.

Writing about Darfur and the crisis that has enveloped the region requires a keen eye to the political history of Sudan, since it is in this history that the seeds of political transformation can be found. In many accounts of the crisis thus far, we are treated to discrete episodes in the production of dissent: episodes that in and of themselves do not provide the impetus to uprising. Darfur is written as if particular groups – *The Government, The Janjawiid, The Rebels*[i] – appear naturally from the fog of war and political organization. We are assured that in knowing something about these groups, we also know something about the dynamics of crisis. Yet even a cursory look to the role of Darfur in the larger political history of Sudan speaks volumes about

the rationale for insurgency. It demonstrates that the conflict is deeply political and is wound tightly around issues of naming, construction of difference and questions of belonging to a larger political project of nationhood.

In this situation, political space can take a number of forms. It can be expansive, oriented to a community of belonging which takes as its goal the creation of an imagined community.[ii] It can also, in the face of modernization, be oriented towards creating a type of cultural glue needed to sustain a territorial unit in the face of change.[iii] Yet for all the ideas of what nationhood might be, it need not be inclusionary at all. Political space can be deeply exclusionary where peripheral areas are not included in the trajectory of modernization or the conversation of what being a citizen might actually mean. In this case, nationhood can be a project of domination and the denial of the right to speak.

This paper presents two closely related philosophical perspectives on political spaces in which we find domination, the denial of the right to speak and exclusion. We argue that Michel Foucault's early work on power-relationships can help us to understand how shifting discourses of power in Sudan in the past few decades have led to political and cultural hegemony and oppression. Moreover, we argue that Foucault's later concept of the aesthetics of existence is extremely helpful to comprehend how insurgent subjectivities in Sudan came about and how they recreated and revised the political landscape. In addition, we claim that according to Foucault art can further the sensibility of the individual and this sensibility is exactly required in the call for action that remains often unheard in a situation such as the Darfur crisis. In a similar manner Jean-François Lyotard argues that the aesthetic realm opens up the possibility to bear witness to that which lies beyond the possibility of presentation. One of the key questions for Lyotard is what it means to be silenced, to not be able to express the injustice that one experiences. It is also

for Lyotard the aesthetic realm that provides the possibility to develop a sensibility to hear the unheard, and to bear witness to the injustice of a politics of domination.

An important issue that arises in reflecting upon a situation such as Darfur is the possibility that a Western approach of a Non-Western situation involves yet another silencing. The philosophers selected for this paper are very sensitive to such silencing: Foucault always searches for and fights situations of silencing and domination; one of Lyotard's main concerns is to bear witness to such situations. In addition, by discussing artworks from Darfur, we seek to invoke the voices of those who speak about the crisis in their own, native tongue: the Sudanese artist Khalid Kodi who in powerful visual installations and paintings displays the hidden horrors and complexities of power-struggles in Darfur and the singer Maryam Ammo who in her songs describes the deterioration of life in Darfur.

We start with an analysis of Foucault's thoughts on the importance of aesthetics in relation to sensibility and political domination. These ideas are related to art from Darfur. Foucault's ideas on sensibility are then furthered through a discussion of Lyotard's ideas on conflicts which cannot be resolved and the aesthetic experience of the sublime. These ideas will again be tied back to the situation of the Darfur crisis.

I. Foucault and Darfur: Power and Aesthetics

I.1 Foucault, Power-relationships and Darfur

Michel Foucault's analyses of (post)modern times can be said to have left us with an indefinite suspicion for modern institutions and modern thought. His works echo and perpetuate the Nietzschean distrust in modern conceptions. The disenchantment and disillusion about the end of

metaphysics which culminated in Nietzsche's diagnosis of the death of God has in Foucault's work been extended to a specific distrust in the ideals of the modern subject. Foucault thereby not only problematizes the idea of the autonomy of the modern subject and subjects that idea to various critical questions, but he also shows the inherent linkage of concepts of subjectivity to 'games of truth.'[iv] His analyses present a torn view on human subjectivity: instead of being a power-center itself, the human subject arises as a result of a certain way of speaking, thinking and acting, and thus as a result of truth and power games.

Foucault discusses the role of power-relationships through his well-known explorations of the discourses of medicine, the punitive system, and sexuality,[v] and his potent analyses have resulted in[vi] and continue to invite further applications and extensions. The political crisis in Darfur is one of those social realities whose complexities can be understood more clearly when looked at from a Foucaultian perspective. While the crisis in Darfur with its excessive violence and diplomatic stalemate is all-too well-known and frequently described, what has been omitted in many of these reports is an account of the dominant discourse and insurgent subjectivities that have given shape to the conflict and whose nuances often escape the radar of Western sensibilities. To understand the crisis, we need to go back to the very reality and history of Sudan since its independence. Since the time of Sudan's so-called "independence" in 1956, the goal for Sudan has been to imitate its former occupier and to emulate the discourse of the nation-state. This discourse of the nation-state however, was not extended to include all the voices of Sudan. Instead, Sudan's colonial master gave the right so speak this discourse and enact it to only a few elite tribal groups located in the area of the upper Nile (the political North). [vii]

Consequently, what emerged in Sudan was a certain degree of hegemony, which was facilitated by the relations between the military and the ability to invoke religion as a justificatory rationale for the maintenance of the status quo. While claiming the discourse of the nation-state, the tribal

groups in the upper Nile area universalized their own idea of what it meant to be Sudanese and thus monopolized ethnicity, culture and language. As Foucault argues, the way we speak, think and act is not an innocent and individual way, but the product of a certain cultural discourse that profits from this way. Similarly, the language of the nation-state was a product of a certain powerful group that profited from its hegemony. It language held sway over the citizens of Sudan for quite a while and kept the peace this way. With its demand for *universality* it seemed to include all its citizens, although its actual discourse was, in fact, that of the selective few who imposed their norms and values upon the voiceless majority.

In Darfur, the political life at the national level inevitably produced a certain kind of understanding of what being political meant, and necessarily suppressed other normative claims. In particular as a result of the history since independence, nationhood was tied up with a strong discourse of what it meant to be Sudanese that emanated from elite culture and authoritarian dominance. This served to create an *other* of anyone outside of the Political North and to make politics less relevant to those who were not part of the chosen few. Through the imposition of Arabic as the lingua franca, Islam as the religion of choice, Sharia as the system of control, the so-called "Sudanese" discourse was experienced as universal and all-domineering.

However, cracks were beginning to emerge in this discourse due to three factors, and it were these three factors that resulted in the Darfur-crisis as we know it. The first was the persistent marginalization of local people when compared with the center of the country around Khartoum. Declining revenue, services and life changes inevitably forced local people to look more critically at their state and to question why so little of the national resources ever came their way. Marginalization was made even worse by a second development on the ground: the *Failiq al Islamiyya* (Arab gathering) in 1987. This group – in conjunction with the Libyan and Sudanese governments – aimed to create an Arab belt across the top of the Sahel and to displace many of the

indigenous African tribes in the area. These plans however, led to a set of unintended consequences. The most important of these was an incursion sponsored by the rebel army of the South of Sudan (SPLA) into Southern Darfur. It did not succeed, but it raised the concern that the peripheral areas of Sudan might unite against the Islamist center. Fearing this situation the Sudanese government launched a new offensive on the ground leading to an exponential increase in violence and a campaign of harassment, intimidation and land disenfranchisement. Faced with escalating violence and the realization that if they did nothing they would be faced with certain death, this third issue – violence – acted as a wellspring that drove the conflict forward.

These three factors – marginalization, the Arab gathering and escalating violence – brought about cracks in the dominant Sudanese discourse, and led to a very interesting development: the creation of new insurgent subjectivities and places of political action. To explain this new development, we will again turn to Foucault, but this time to his later work. For, while the work of the "early" Foucault has served us well to explain the earlier development of cultural and political hegemony in Sudan after its independence, the work of the "later" Foucault is better suited to explore the later development of new sensibilities and insurgent subjectivities in Sudan.

I.2 Foucault, Aesthetics, and Insurgent Subjectivities

In Foucault's later work, we can observe a certain change in perspective: instead of focusing solely on the subject as passively constituted, Foucault became interested in the way the subject could constitute itself in a more active way.[viii] This shift in Foucault's work does not indicate that Foucault takes a distance to his former work, but rather shows another view on the problematic of the subject – one that approaches the subject from the level of active self-formation. In order to understand his approach to the subject in his later work, we have to recognize that, for Foucault, power and freedom are not mutually exclusive. He states: "Power is exercised only over free

subjects, and only insofar as they are free. […] Consequently there is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom which is mutually exclusive […], but a much more complicated interplay."[ix] Freedom and power appear to be mutually dependent: for power to be exercised, freedom is prerequisite. Hence, what emerges is not a subject as a mere passive subject of norms, but an active subject that forms itself through and despite these norms.

For our comprehension of the new developments in Sudan that included a rejection of the dominant political and cultural discourse and an embrace of insurgent-subjectivities, the philosophical observations of the later Foucault are of pivotal importance. The fact that something like an insurgent subjectivity could emerge is precisely due to the Foucaultian recognition that even the most authoritarian and dominating discourse presupposes freedom on the part of its subjects to exert its power. In the case of Darfur, this moment of recognition seems to have taken place precisely when the political and cultural discourse came to be experienced as completely closed, authoritarian and alien. In other words, precisely when the noose began to tighten around Darfur, people started to realize their own potential for creating a different kind of future. Related to this, in the face of a serial lack of inclusion, the space of national political dialogue ceased to become the object of people's desire for transformation. Instead it became a space of political caricature – a space of acting *as-if* in the face of an authoritarian state.[x] Instead, people turned their attention elsewhere, and created private practices and private spaces –also called *microspaces*[xi] – where real political dialogue became a possibility.

This creation of private practices and spaces echoes yet another important strand of thought of the later Foucault. In Foucault's elaboration of the active constitution of the subject, the question of the form of living –and specifically the *creative* form of living – became unmistakably the center of his thoughts. Foucault searched for a form of living that was diametrically opposed to the most widespread form of living, the assimilation to ruling norms and social conventions. In

contrast to the latter, the art of living – or in other terms: the *aesthetics of existence* – functions as a reflection upon and critique of those norms and conventions, in order to unseal an abundance of other possibilities and ways of being. Foucault sought to integrate the creativity that is associated with the field of art and aesthetics in life itself. As Bernauer writes: "Foucault's aesthetics of existence wishes to place at the center of both thought and action the imaginative creativity which has been exiled to the exclusive practice of art."[xii]

Besides pointing to artful creativity and seeking to include "aesthetic values,"[xiii] Foucault's use of the term 'aesthetics' might also point to something else. Tracing aesthetics back to its Greek root *aisthesis*, Foucault's use of this term could refer to the sensibility with which we perceive, and his quest for an aesthetics of existence could also be a quest for a sharpened sensibility, an increased perception of that what happens to us ordinarily. If we take aesthetics in this sense, it can then figure as a new form of thinking and acting, as it represents a continuous sensibility over and against the prevailing evidences of perception. In its sensibility, it is capable to reject the conventional norms of perception.

When we apply Foucault's thoughts about the aesthetics of existence to Darfur, the first thing that we can establish is that the creation of insurgent subjectivity seems to be a direct response and counterweight to the prevailing discourse of the nation-state as appropriated by the elite. In addition, the insurgent groups that came about manifested the *aesthesis* deemed so important by Foucault: they perceived with heightened sensibility that the ossified evidences of perception presented by the nation-state model were corrupt and falling apart. Like true artists, the insurgent subjectivities that arose created a new architecture for politics, creating new ways of being political that differ from the way that traditional politics has been carried out. Politics moved from the open into the private domain threading its way in a capillary manner through the social

fabric of the countryside, growing strongly in the informal sphere and only occasionally bursting into the conventional political scene in the form of violent protest.

The new forms of powerful subjectivities came about far from the so-called center of power: they arose in the natural remoteness of the Jabal Marra mountains where armed movements could organize in their camp. In addition, these forms of insurgence arose in the schools, meeting places and mosques of the region. While the prevailing discourse had first provided them with exclusion, now the barrier provided by their own tribal languages not understood by elites allowed locals to plan, discuss and create alternative political strategies to bring about change. Notably, these small networked spaces of political possibility were not only created in real time but also created in the virtual sphere. Through the use of satellite phone technology, it was possible to literally jump the barriers of the nation-state – crushing distance and time if necessary – to permit engagement to occur between people separated by the crisis. It was, then, these spheres that operated outside the confines of the national and allowed voice, where voice previously could not be heard. Moreover, these voices were the voices of newly created subjectivities – subjectivities that shaped their own, new political worlds. Interestingly, many of the voices that came to be heard were also artistic voices in the traditional sense and the next section of this paper will turn to discuss a few examples of the artistic voices from Darfur.

I.3 Foucault, Sensibility, and Art from Darfur

The aesthetics of existence for which Foucault pleads in his later work points to a quest for a sharpened sensibility, an increased perception of that what happens to us ordinarily. If we take aesthetics in this sense, it figures as a new form of thinking and acting, as it represents a continuous sensibility over and against the prevailing evidences of perception. This implies that perception and sensibility are not static but flexible and fluid. Foucault speaks about this fluidity

when addressing the effects that his own works have had: "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and *perceive differently* than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all…[W]hat is philosophy today … if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? (emphasis added)"[xiv] Moral and political *aesthesis* should never be satisfied with the status quo, but should collaborate with thinking to search for new ways of seeing and understanding things. In this regard, Foucault welcomes the fact that his work has been irritating to so many people. With respect to the reaction his own work has received from critics on both the left and right of the political spectrum, he states: "the epidermi bristle with a constancy I find encouraging."[xv]

While some critics have accused that Foucault's works have left many readers with the idea that there is "no possible room for initiative," Foucault argues that the so-called *anaesthetic effect* associated with his works does not necessarily preclude action. The effect his works have sought is precisely, as he states, "that the difficulty of doing anything comes to be felt."[xvi] This moment is, however, not a sterile or anaesthetic moment – "on the contrary," as Foucault states. It shows increased sensibility insofar as one perceives the difficulties of action, and, thus, a resistance to see reality in simple, dualistic terms. No longer can reality be viewed as a set of evidences that are either refused or accepted. This leads to a feeling of loss. Only by feeling this loss of evidences, and by resisting the pressure of new norms and ideas that force themselves upon us, can reality be transformed, according to Foucault. Thus, he seems to treasure a kind of complex sensibility that is both sensitive to reality and skeptical and resistant about immediately absorbing new evidences of perception and taking action accordingly.

An example of an artist who seeks to sensitize her audience to the deterioration of life in Darfur is Maryam Ammo, singer from the Fur tribe. Through her lyrics, she gives political

expression to the desperation felt by the people of Darfur. Turning to the loss of the young men as they desperately try to find solutions outside the region, she sings the following:

When you hear the dying cries

that are from the village of merchants,

Women assured of slaughter,

Look at how our wealth is destroyed!

You poor grandmothers; you poor grandfathers,

Erase those tears of blood from your eyes,

For there is no protection;

You are alone.

The youth have left our homeland

and they have headed for the Nile.

(Translated from Fur. Sang after the burning of Amaras and Shōba in 2002)

Yet another example of an artist who seeks to sensitize his audience to the complexities of the violence in Darfur is Boston-based Sudanese artist Khalid Kodi.[xvii] His work, which intricately interweaves the personal and the political,[xviii] seeks to tell a story of "those who do not have a voice."[xix] For instance, his installation *Dirty Laundry* literally exhibits dirty laundry hanging on a clothesline outside. Through this installation, Kodi narrates what happens to the regular clothes people may wear in a place like Darfur – where innocent citizens are physically attacked and made victims of a violent regime. By calling his work *Dirty Laundry*, Kodi forces us to acknowledge that people fail to answer the plight of those innocent victims. Most of the time, witnessing and testifying to this violence is a "taboo," something to be kept silent, to be kept

indoors. Thus, the work *Dirty Laundry*, as Kodi himself says, confronts us with "denial, [with] hiding things."[xx] By literally exposing the dirty laundry of the Darfurian plight, Kodi seeks to irritate, to stimulate our senses, to provoke and challenge us.

As Kodi himself writes, art has a special role in challenging people and getting them to think. He states: "people sometimes get tired of politicians and direct words. The fine arts asks questions, they don't provide lots of answers, and I feel this is what I do—I challenge the mainstream thinking for many Africans and Sudanese. I challenge their absolute through visual images—through recreating these visual images and rearranging the creation of the visual images. Often that opens venues for dialogue and conversations. I have both good experiences and bad experiences, because often I have people who became very mad at me for work I do, and they do not like it."[xxi]

The art that Kodi makes irritates, stimulates, and sensitizes his audience in ways that other discourses cannot, and, thus, responds to the appeal for aestheticism for which Foucault pleads. The directness of the visual image and its creative force spark us to rethink and adjust our usual sensitivities. Simultaneously, his art asks questions, and does not answer them for us. The situation he finds his people in forces Kodi, in his own words "to ask the big questions and perhaps other people can answer them – if not now, then in the future."[xxii]

II. Lyotard on the Sublime and the Political

II.1 Genocide and Grand Narratives

In the previous section we have seen how Foucault pleads for a sharpened sense of sensibility, which entails a call for resistance. In this part of the paper we will tie this idea to the Darfur crisis through Lyotard's notion of aesthetic sensibility. Lyotard discusses in particular the holocaust as a failure of universal communicability.[xxiii] The ideal of such a universality of communication that can resolve all conflicts is horribly mistaken since it does not recognize that certain discourses are incommensurable. Even more, for certain groups of people, such as the victims of genocide, the very possibility to speak is made impossible. Lyotard, in this regard, argues that aesthetic sensibility provides the possibility to bear witness to incommensurable discourses that wrong certain groups of people.

Lyotard describes the holocaust within the context of the modern mode of thinking, which he characterizes as a mode of grand narratives. The modern western world is not interested in little stories, but wants a universal history. Through an absolute trust in reason, the grand narrative of the west tells the story of a history that makes continuous progress. Even while history does experience set-backs, the ultimate result is always positive and moving towards the better.

The holocaust, for postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard, constitutes an absolute negativity for this history of progress. It is an event that cannot be reconciled. The history of the west is here confronted with a horror that disrupts progress and shows that reason does not only lead to advancement, but also to destruction. In order to fight the modern trust in reason, postmodernism declares war on the grand narratives.

If the holocaust disrupts and destructs the possibility of modern thinking, how do contemporary holocausts, such as Darfur, relate to the narrative of the West? Whereas the holocaust occurred in the epicenter of western civilization, the holocausts of our time happen in (or outside) the margins of our (Western) world. Darfur is a region where most people live in villages as peasants with a lifestyle that has been left behind during the industrial revolution and

is not a part of the grand narrative of the west. As such, the victims of these contemporary holocausts have been silenced.

While the global community has promised to never let another holocaust take place, recent history has shown otherwise. Moreover, governments who have started a global war on terror and overthrew another government, did so on the basis of questionable evidence, whereas these same powers are very hesitant to do anything about Darfur, and are questioning every piece of evidence as well as our abilities to do anything about it.[xxiv]

This "hesitation" about Darfur is not limited to governments. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, argues that Darfur is not a holocaust with perpetrators and innocent victims.[xxv] Instead, he claims that Darfur is a civil war initiated by rebels. Yet, as has been argued elsewhere, Mamdani fails to recognize that the rebels organized against the genocidal intent of the Sudanese government.[xxvi] As we have seen in the first part of this paper on the Darfur crisis, their rebellion was a reaction to their victimization. As they faced a situation of hopelessness and violence they were forced to react with violence. Ironically, the fight for their own lives and those of their families has had the opposite effect in which self-defense has turned into self-destruction. This unintended self-destruction lies in the interpretation of the nature of the crisis: if Darfur is a civil war and not a holocaust, the responsibilities of the international community radically change. To support those who would be victims under the name "holocaust" would be mandatory, yet to support those who are rebels under the name "civil war," is needless to say, a whole different story.

II.2 Deliberative Politics or the Sublime

The kind of conflict that arises in this "power of naming" is what Lyotard calls a "differend," the situation in which one party loses its ability to bear witness to the injustice done to them. The

differend is not a conflict in the sense of a litigation, but it is "a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments."[xxvii] It is "the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim."[xxviii] His most famous example of a differend is the situation of the Jews under German national socialistic laws. By systematically changing the laws, the Nazi regime created a situation in which the Jews lost their ability to defend themselves.

The situation of those who live in villages in Darfur outside of the Political North is very similar to the situation of the Jews under Nazi law. They have also legally lost the means to defend themselves. Even more, when they do attempt to protect themselves they are accused of starting a civil war. The holocaust has become a symbol for the silencing – in the most extreme meaning of the word – of a group of people. Even this symbol is denied to the people in Darfur by classifying their situation as a self-inflicted civil war. This is the situation of the differend, in which a group is silenced and loses its right to a humane existence.

One way in which we can bear witness to the differend is, surprisingly, through the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Lyotard has explained this as a contradictory experience of pleasure and pain, an analysis based on the Kantian sublime. In Kant's sublime we find a conflict between the faculty of reason (the faculty that can think the ideas of infinity and totality) and the faculty of imagination. The conflict between these faculties arises because an idea of reason cannot be represented by the imagination. An example of this is the idea of infinity which can be thought but cannot be visualized or represented. The experience ends in a contradictory feeling; a conflict of the faculties of imagination and reason – a feeling of pleasure and pain: pleasure because of the evoked idea, and pain because the representation fails.

We can relate in this regard again to Kodi, whose artwork does not necessarily give answers, but asks questions. Moreover, Kodi wants to speak for those who have lost their voice. His

artwork attempts to represent a loss that cannot be presented. In his own words he ties the Darfur crisis to Nazi Germany: "By not looking, we abandon the child, the man, the woman and indeed, the nation. It's like the Nazis in the 30s and 40s; people knew what was going on but they didn't speak out. By being quiet, they're contributing to genocide."[xxix] It is exactly this bearing witness that is essential to the sublime, as discussed in the following.

In the essay *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?* Lyotard relates the sublime to postmodern politics, which he juxtaposes with deliberative politics and realistic art. Deliberative politics as well as realism answers to the "call to order, a desire for unity, security and popularity".[xxx] Yet, realistic artwork is based on the familiar and within its aesthetics of representation nothing outside of the familiar can really touch us. In fact, nothing outside the familiar can be presented. On the other hand, art that breaks with the familiar – such as the avant-garde – may make us experience the sublime and contribute to the receptivity of the human being. The avant-garde investigates and breaks with the existing rules of art, and as such attempts to represent that which lies outside the laws of representation. Deliberative politics is compared to realistic art, as its ideal of reaching consensus only takes into account the familiar, and silences any party that does not fit in its model. Deliberative politics, based upon a realistic model of representation, is incapable of bearing witness to the silencing of a group.

While deliberative politics is a politics that forgets or silences as is happening in the Darfur crisis, Lyotard argues that we need art that provides a sign of this forgotten. As Kodi wants to force us to not look away, Lyotard calls for experiencing a conflict in the sublime, in which we feel the absoluteness of the evoked idea, because of the impossibility to represent it. The experience of the sublime is evoked by a sensible impression in which the framework of thinking disappears and language fails. Within deliberative politics such an event could not have meaning, as it cannot be taken up in its narrative. In Darfur we see exactly such a failure. Darfur does not

simply represent a problem in which deliberative politics failed to work. Instead, it represents the failure of deliberative politics itself in which we can all look the other way. What is needed, according to both Kodi and Lyotard, is art that does not merely restate what we already know, but instead confronts us with pain and horror. Within deliberative politics the sublime could not have a meaning as it represents something outside of universal communicability. Yet for Lyotard, the non-phrased, timeless, and thus non-understood experience does have a meaning for us. What is experienced is that-which-cannot-be-represented.[xxxi]

Lyotard's criticism of deliberative politics pertains to the idea of consensus: the idea that we can decide after long deliberation, what is just. The idea to create a model for a just society may be noble, but according to Lyotard, justice cannot be established through deliberation only, and the need for consensus can lead to terror as some party will be silenced. Whereas Habermas and others base their theory on the idea that everything can be represented and said, Lyotard argues that such an idea leads to terror. This terror is experienced in the radical singularity of the sublime. We find here a presentation that does not present: we are confronted with something that cannot be put into words. As such it is a contradictory and dubious presentation.

II.3 The Heterogeneity of the Sublime

In order to tie the terror of the sublime to ethics, Lyotard analyzes Kant's discussion of the French Revolution in the *Conflict of the Faculties*. Interestingly, this same text is discussed by Foucault a year after Lyotard's discussion. Both Lyotard and Foucault discuss Kant's description of the German people who observed the French revolution from a distance with a sympathy "bordering on enthusiasm."[xxxii] While we will mostly follow Lyotard's reading it is important to note here that both thinkers tie the sensibility of the individual and politics together through Kant's text, i.e. through a sign of a "universal yet disinterested sympathy" – a sign[xxxiii], an event,

or occurrence (*Begebenheit*), which proves the "moral tendency of the human race."[xxxiv] Such a sign is not to be found on the stage of history, but rather in the spectators of the heroic deeds, such as the German people who witness the French revolution from a distance, and who reinforce by their enthusiasm a sign of this moral tendency. Kant is not discussing the French Revolution itself, but the spectators who observe the revolution from a distance, and who therefore do not actually see the violence but think about the ends of the revolution. The sympathy of these spectators, their passion or enthusiasm, was without any "selfish interests" and even more, "the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger."[xxxv] The spectators were however, "without the slightest intention of actively participating in their affairs."[xxxvi] Because of the lack of selfish interests and the involved danger of the enthusiasm, this experience "cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race."[xxxvii]

Foucault's analysis of this point is very similar: "What is important in the Revolution is not the Revolution itself, but what takes place in the heads of those who do not make it or, in any case, who are not its principal actors."[xxxviii] Whereas Foucault emphasizes that the sign of history is a sign of the continuity of progress, Lyotard focuses on the moral duty that is evoked in the experience of the revolution. Yet both thinkers connect morality and progress to sensibility. We have seen in the first part that Foucault ties this particularly to aesthetic sensibility. Lyotard here makes a similar move by explaining the experience of enthusiasm in terms of the sublime. In his analysis of Kant he explains the experience of enthusiasm as directed towards the ideal, "particularly toward that which is purely moral,"[xxxix] the noumenal idea, which is evoked by the perception of the revolution. The idea is recognized as moral, pure, and that "to which the human soul also manifestly acknowledges a duty."[xl] This experience of duty, by thinking the idea, shows for Kant that we can progress towards the better and that we can cultivate (*bilden*) ourselves or

develop our culture since the idea lies beyond the current political situation and is that towards which we strive.

Lyotard argues that this description of enthusiasm as a sign of our moral disposition can be understood in terms of the sublime. In this enthusiasm something is perceived in reality – in this case the social historical reality – which awakens a noumenal idea – in this case the ideas of freedom, equality and brotherhood.[xli] Paraphrasing Kant, Lyotard writes: "[t]hat extremely painful joy that is enthusiasm is an *Affect* […] a dementia, a Wahnsinn, where the imagination is 'without bridle.'"[xlii] The "sign of history" – which shows the moral disposition of the human race – is not a sign of the sensible world, but, instead, a sign of the "tension of forces produced by Ideas."[xliii]

Lyotard emphasizes in this respect the heterogeneity between reality and the noumenon, between that which can be perceived on the one hand, and the supersensible idea on the other hand. The latter cannot be exemplified in the perceivable reality. Forgetting this distinction between these two is the occurrence of a "transcendental illusion in the political realm,"[xliv] which is a confusion of "what is presentable as an object for a cognitive phrase with what is presentable as an object for a speculative and/or ethical phrase."[xlv] In other words, this is a distinction between a descriptive sentence and a prescriptive sentence – the ethical sentence, which is absolute as a pure duty. The prescriptive sentence cannot be valid or false, but is from a totally different order. For Kant, in Lyotard's interpretation, the possibility to evoke this prescriptive sentence in the sublime judgment of enthusiasm is a sign of progress, or even proof of the morality of humanity.

200 years after the French Revolution, Lyotard does not find enthusiasm in our postmodern society. Instead he provides many examples of differends in modern history: Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czecho-slovakia 1968, May 1968, and Poland 1980.[xlvi] These failed revolutions

are all concerned with the promises made by the political parties: they promised a passage from one genre of discourse to the other, from the social historical reality to the ideal realm. The parties promised freedom and unconditioned wealth to the citizens. When the passages to these ideals do not become realized, the promised passages "end in bloody impasses."[xlvii]

Here Lyotard is perhaps more negative than Foucault. We have seen argued that Foucault finds the possibility of overcoming oppression in the aesthetic sensibility of the individual. Yet, Lyotard first of all focuses on the lack of sensibility. According to him, it is the distinction between reality and idea which is missing in the political doctrines of the 20th century, and which has caused all these horrors. Politics is based too much on the ideals of realism in which we will never encounter anything that does not quite fit into our discourse. The politics of our time cannot recognize the prescription that is silenced. In endless deliberations we can only listen to those who already have a voice, and the voiceless remain voiceless. The wage-earner can only complain "in terms of his wage-earning" which is the "language of capital"[xlviii]; in Nazi Germany a Jew can only complain as a Jew, that is as someone who is less than human; and a slave can only complain in terms of being a slave.

Similar to the wage earner in capitalism, the Jew in Nazi Germany and the slave under slavery the those who fall outside of the political power in Sudan have been silenced. In the period of post-colonial history of Sudan since 1956, the goal has been to construct the nation-state in relation to a number of groups privileged by Sudan's colonial masters. This right to rule has produced a dominant culture in Sudan centered on the area of the upper Nile (the Political North), and more specifically, a very small number of tribal groups. These groups have all but monopolized the right to speak the nation and have been remarkably successful in excluding those they define as other. These circumstances have allowed power to be monopolized around certain ethnic, cultural and linguistic poles, leaving others little access to claim-making around

the concept of nationhood or indeed any of the resources that inevitably go with the control of a particular territory. We have already seen above that this situation is characterized by exclusion and domination. Foucault has been helpful in explaining such a power-relationship as universal and all-domineering. Here we also see that this is exactly the situation described by Lyotard as the differend, the situation in which one even lacks the means to express the injustice one experiences. Those excluded do not have a voice at all.

While Lyotard did not live long enough to learn about the atrocities in regions such as Darfur, he is quite pessimistic about 20th-century politics. He certainly does not find an attunement of enthusiasm in the minds of the spectators at the end of the 20th century, but instead an attunement of sorrow or a "disillusioned feeling (*resentment*?)."[xlix] This negative feeling "can reach the level of the sublime and attest to the heterogeneity between Ideas and realities."[l] The feeling of sorrow or disillusion is similar to Kant's enthusiasm, which is a sublime experience. In the sublime, as discussed above, the heterogeneity between reality and ideas is experienced as a feeling of pleasure and pain. As such, it is a bearing witness to "the gap between ideas and observable political reality."[li] Sorrow shows the moral disposition of the human being in almost the same way as Kant's enthusiasm does. Lyotard emphasizes that a sign of the moral disposition is given in the experience of the differend, i.e. the gap between the genres. The very ability to experience the differend, to bear witness to it, shows the morality of humanity. In Post-modernity progress has turned into regress, a feeling that things are getting worse.

III. Conclusion

How can this feeling of regression be helpful for thinking about, or rather acting on Darfur? We certainly do not suggest that we should all go to the museum and experience the sublime in order

to solve such a problem. Yet, what is important here is the way in which Lyotard discusses our postmodern sensibility – that sensibility that allows us to experience the non-presentable. Sensibility to the non-presentable permits that which is silenced, or those whose voices are not heard, to be expressed. Instead of listening to the voices that we actually and predominantly hear, i.e. those who determine the agenda and who already have **a** voice, the sensibility of the sublime can speak for the unspeakable, and bear witness to injustice. Perhaps this makes it possible to not endlessly debate about the name we should or should not give to the Darfur crisis; rather, we need to recognize the urgency of that which is not named and that which is too cruel for representation. The sublime provides as such the simple recognition that we must act now.

What does it mean to act now? Acting is what the international community has failed to do as the Darfur crisis developed. The crisis is not simply a problem that can be solved by restoring deliberative democracy. We cannot simply blame a failed system in Sudan, but we have to acknowledge the failure of deliberative politics as such. We have shown that while genocide has been taking place the international community was fighting about what name to give to the crisis: is it a civil war, or is it genocide? The semantic debate about the crisis shows the insensibility of this politics, since it fails to sense the violence and the need to take action against that violence.

In this paper we have argued that aesthetic sensibility has to play a crucial role in an ethical politics in order to sense the injustice that occurs in places such as Darfur. Such a sensibility can be raised through songs or other forms of art. It can provide hope to those who are wronged, or it can call attention to a crisis that no one wants to see. It is easy to look the other way, or to debate about the name to be used, but art that confronts one with the terror of the sublime will confront us with the reality of the horror and urge us to take action. By confronting us with the reality of violence in new and abrasive ways, art seeks to readjust our ethical sensitivities, while

simultaneously pointing out that easy answers to tragedies such as the Darfur Crisis inevitably silence some in order to privilege the voices of others.

Resisting, Khalid Kodi

Landscape, Khalid Kodi

History and Memory, Khalid Kodi

Notes:

[i] Alex de Waal and Julie Flint's book, *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* (London: Zen Books, 2005), is an example of this kind of approach.

[ii] B. Anderson, *.Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991),

[iii] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[iv] M. Foucault. "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom. An interview with H. Becker, R. Fornet-Betancourt, and A. Gomez-Müller." In: *M. Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. by P. Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), p.281

[v] See, respectively M. Foucault. *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (New York Vintage Books), 1975; M. Foucault. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York Vintage Books, 1979); M. Foucault. *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* (Volume 2) (New York Vintage Books, 1986).

[vi] For example, see J. Butler's extension of Foucault to issues in feminism in Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Cf. J. Carrette's analyses of Foucault and religion in J. Carrette, *Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (New York Routledge, 1999).

[vii] The political North is the area around Khartoum which includes the traditional power base of the country.

[viii] M. Foucault. "The Subject and Power." In*: Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982),

p. 281; M. Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude." In: M. Foucault: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by P. Rabinow, (New York The New Press, 1997),, pp. 177-8.

[ix] M. Foucault. "The Subject and Power." In*: Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.221

[x] See L. Wedeen's discussion of the cult of Hafiz al-Asad in Syria as a mode of public dissimulation in which local people were forced to act *as if* they revered the leader and the state: L. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*

Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[xi] See A. Bartlett "The City and the Self: The Emergence of New Political Subjects in London" in: S. Sassen, *Deciphering the Global: its Scales, Spaces and Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[xii] J. Bernauer & D. Rasmussen. *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, USA MIT Press, 1988,) p.71

[xiii] M. Foucault. *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* (Volume 2) (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), pp. 10-11.

[xiv] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[xv] Foucault, M. "The Anaesthetic Effect" in: *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, M. Foucault, G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 82-84.

[xvi] Ibid., p. 84

[xvii] For more information on the work of Khalid Kodi, see http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/sh40/Kodi.html

[xviii] On the interwovenness of the political and the personal in Kodi's work, see the interview with Corin Hirsch in the online magazine A: http://interviews.amagazine.org/?p=29

[xix] These are the artist's own words as he is being interviewed about his installation "Dirty Laundry." See Khalid Kodi in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1n8UdDGggY

[xx] Ibid.

[xxi] Ibid.

[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] This point is made in particular in *The Differend*: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988).

[xxiv] As the holocaust has been denied, genocide in Darfur has also been systematically denied, and not only by the Sudanese government (the Sudanese foreign minister Mustafa Osman Ismail when confronted with the atrocities committed by Sudanese military simply says "Your evidence is wrong. You have no credible evidence" – The New Killing Fields). Other African leaders, and also the Western world have been very cautious when it comes to using the word genocide in conjunction with Darfur. British Foreign Office minister Chris Mullin said in 2004 "Well, genocide is not a word that I think should be bandied around lightly for fear of devaluating the term" (The New Killing Fields). Why is the British Foreign Office minister interested in semantics? The answer has nothing to do with philosophy of language but everything with politics: if evidence of genocide is found in Darfur, the international community has under the 1948 convention the moral and legal responsibility to act. The UN has gone back and forth and has systematically tried to change the language with which it names the atrocities in Darfur.

[xxv] Mahmood Mamdani, "The Politics of Naming: Genocide Civil War, Insurgency" in: *London Review of Books*, (March 8, 2007): http:www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n05/mamd01_.html

[xxvi] Anne Bartlett, "The Power to Name in Darfur" in *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, v. 20- 2 (2008).

[xxvii] *The Differend*, p. xi.

[xxviii] *The Differend*, p. 9.

[xxix] "Reflections in Exile," Bancroft and Dillon Galleries: www.ssac.org/wdnew/ReflectionsInExile.htm

[xxx] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 4

[xxxi] Lyotard criticizes the representation in which differences are defined or identified as oppositions as a 'metaphysics of identity'. Such a metaphysics can be found for example in De Saussure's description of language as a linguistic representation in which being is represented as a structure of meanings. Lyotard discusses a radical singularity of difference that does not fit into this language system, this network of oppositions between concepts or signifiers.
In *Discours, Figure* Lyotard describes the language as a system in which the figure, the unspeakable, is at work within and against discourse, disrupting the rule of representation. This is not to be understood as an opposition, not as another sort of space. Rather the figure opens discourse to a radical heterogeinity that is not rationalizable or subsumable within the rule of representation. It is radically incommensurable with discursive meaning. As such it cannot be thought in the logic of identity as opposition, nor can a discursive system apropriate this singularity.

[xxxii] Lyotard discusses Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* in the *Differend*, Foucault discusses the text in "The Art of Telling the Truth" in: Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture:*

Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984 (New York: Routledge, 1988). Foucault's text appears in 1984, a year after Lyotard's publication of the *Differend*.

[xxxiii] A "*signum remomorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*" a sign that recalls, shows and anticipates: Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

[xxxiv] *Political Writings*, p. 182.

[xxxv] *Political Writings*, p. 182/3.

[xxxvi] Ibid, p. 183.

[xxxvii] *Political Writings*, p. 182.

[xxxviii] "The Art of Telling the Truth," p. 92.

[xxxix] *Political Writings*, p. 182

[xl] Ibid, p. 184.

[xli] An important argument to interpret the enthusiasm of the spectators as a sublime experience, is that Kant discusses enthusiasm in the *Critique of Judgment* as "an extreme mode of the sublime." *The Differend*, p. 166. See *Critique of Judgment* 272 (AK)/132 (English).

[xlii] Ibid. In the *Critique of Judgment* we can find: "enthusiasm is sublime, because it is a tension of forces produced by Ideas, which give an impulse to the mind that operates far more powerfully and lastingly than the impulse arising from sensible representations." *Critique of Judgment*, p 132.

[xliii] See previous note.

[xliv] *The Differend*, p 162.

[xlv] Ibid.

[xlvi] *The Differend*, p.179.

[xlvii] Ibid, p.180.

[xlviii] Jean- François Lyotard, "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx," in: Murray Krieger (ed), *The Aims of Representation: Subject/Text/History,* (New York: Columbia University Press) 1987, p 61.

[xlix] *The Differend*, p. 180.

[l] Ibid.

[li] Ibid.