

The Illiberal Art of Performance

A proposed AALAC faculty workshop

Location: Amherst College, Center for Humanistic Inquiry

Dates: one weekend in Spring 2018

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Theme:

From the far right to the far left, many American commentators agree: we are living in illiberal times. And when describing the tactics of illiberalism, commentators of all stripes tend to reach for the same words: *It's theater. It's just spectacle. It's nothing but performance.*

This equation between the rise of spectacle and the downfall of liberal governance is as old as performance criticism itself. Plato famously saw theatre as a threat to civil society due to its dabblings in the risky business of imitation or representation. Working in Plato's shadow, thinkers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Guy Debord have also viewed theatre (along with other spectacular arts) as serious threats to our fragile communal bonds. Indeed, as Michael Warner points out, the very idea of "the public" has historically been defined against performance, with people assuming that *reading* provides the proper model for liberal subjecthood.

How do we—as liberal arts scholars of an allegedly illiberal art—challenge a national discourse that seeks to equate the downfall of democracy with a rise in "performance"? After we've fumed ("You know nothing of performance!") and whined ("That's just stale anti-theatrical sentiment!"), what can we offer a world convinced that "performance" is a sure sign of creeping illiberalism? Do theatre, and performance more broadly, have something to teach us about the limits of liberalism? Or, can performance channel and redirect illiberal energies? Can it, in fact, use mediation, representation, and spectacle to shore up liberal norms or institutions? Has it done so already in the past? How might the histories, theories, and liberal arts practices of performance—today or in the past—help us understand the forces at play in an illiberal moment like our own?

Workshop participants will discuss how college curricula in theater or performance studies might change to address contemporary concerns about spectacle, performance, and illiberal politics. Attending to pedagogy, course design, and curricular planning, we will also explore the special role our field plays at liberal arts colleges, seen by many as microcosms of liberal society itself. The practice and theory of "performance" (broadly defined) is already taught across programs and disciplines. How might existing cross-curricular channels be strengthened? How might we, from within the performative cultures of our own liberal arts institutions, spearhead broader interdisciplinary study of the "illiberal arts"?

A note on the host institution:

Beginning in the fall 2017 semester (and continuing through spring 2019), the Amherst College Center for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI) will be organized around a relevant theme:

“Speech/Image/Spectacle.” This two-year theme invites “inquiry into the politics, aesthetics, technologies, genealogies, and epistemologies of contemporary public discourse,” and encourages a special focus on *performance*. As a matter of fact, among the five research fellows hired for two-year residencies at CHI are (a) a scholar of performance studies, (b) several performance-inflected scholars of art history and communications, and (c) a linguistic anthropologist whose research focuses on the illiberal politics of contemporary Russia. The CHI director (Martha Umphrey) and advisory board have enthusiastically agreed to host this AALAC workshop if it is funded, and they will help build further programming around it.

Format:

We envision a weekend symposium that brings AALAC scholars together with two distinguished guests. The two guests will give public lectures and will participate in closed sessions with AALAC attendees. Each AALAC attendee will be given one session to run, with topics coordinated by the workshop co-organizers. During that session, they will raise a question (related to the workshop theme) that they have encountered in their research or their teaching. This can take the form of a talk, a performance, a structured discussion, or an interactive workshop. We aim for these sessions to cover a range of topics, but hope to arrange them under the headings noted parenthetically below. (NOTE: The schedule below assumes fifteen participants, but the format could be adapted up or down as interest dictates.)

Day One:

9:00-9:30am	Welcome/breakfast
9:30-10:15am	Session #1 (Defining the “illiberal arts”)
10:15-10:30am	Coffee break
10:30am-12pm	Sessions #2 and #3 (Exploring contemporary discourses of “performance” in world politics)
12pm-1:00pm	Lunch
1:00-2:30pm	Sessions #4 and #5 (Historicizing discourses of “performance” in world politics)
2:30-3:00pm	Coffee break
3:00-4:30pm	Sessions #6 and #7 (Exploring particular examples of “illiberal” performance practices)
5:00-6:30pm	Keynote #1
7:00pm-end	Dinner for participants

Day Two:

9:00-10:30am	Sessions #8 and #9 (Incorporating the study of “illiberal arts” in theater and performance studies curricula)
10:30-10:45am	Coffee break
10:45-12:15pm	Sessions #10 and #11 (Cross-disciplinary approaches to the “illiberal arts”)
12:15-1:00pm	Lunch Break
1:00-2:30pm	Session #12 and #13 (Exploring institutional initiatives)
2:30-4:00pm	Sessions #14 and #15 (Reassessing the “illiberal arts”)
5:00-6:30pm	Keynote #2
6:30pm-end	Concluding discussion; Dinner for participants

Goals & Intended Impact:

Our primary goal is to foster work- or thinking-in-progress. As teachers, we have been adapting our courses and curriculum on the fly; we’d like a moment to step back and reflect on what’s working. As scholars and theatermakers, we’ve been galvanized in our work, or else we’ve pined for more “relevant” projects; either way, we’d like a space to consider what work *of* and *for* this moment ought to look like.

Concrete outcomes might include:

- An online syllabus/assignment exchange where participants can share the curricular upshot of these conversations
- Proposed panels or sessions on performance and illiberalism, democracy, social justice, or protest at the following year’s meetings of Performance Studies International, the American Society for Theatre Research, The Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and other performance-minded organizations
- A co-authored article on illiberalism and the performing arts curriculum for *Theatre Topics*, the journal of pedagogy published by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education
- A co-authored op-ed on “performance and/in the illiberal arts” for submission to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Within a year of the workshop’s completion, a report evaluating the workshop itself and assessing its outcomes.