In *Space, Politics and Aesthetics*, Mustafa Dikeç offers a compelling take on shared and diverging accounts of space and aesthetics in the political theoretical work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière. Highlighting how each theorist formulates an approach to politics in dialogue with Immanuel Kant’s writing on aesthetics, the book works through and across these thinkers in order to open up an aesthetic angle from which we can understand politics as being “about forms of perceiving the world and modes of relating to it” that are based on sense and judgment—as opposed to knowledge and truth claims (p.1). Space is central here as it is what “gives form and order to objects of perception” and allows for the possibility of relation (p.14). Rather than the rich dialogue between empirics and theory that characterizes Dikeç’s first book, *Badlands of the Republic* (2007), this book offers close readings of key theorists and stages a productive conversation between their distinct conceptualizations of space. The result is a rigorous conceptual engagement that is wonderfully suggestive for both political theoretical work on space and critical geographic research on politics.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first introduces Dikeç’s central concerns with space and politics and explains some key issues that will run throughout the book. In the second chapter, Dikeç focuses on Kant’s aesthetics and examines how each of the theorists discussed in the book differently extend and rework this inheritance. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with the specific relations of space and politics in Arendt, Nancy and Rancière, respectively. Then, in the final chapter, Dikeç brings the three thinkers together in an attempt to outline the “sublime” element of politics. In what follows, I outline Dikeç’s engagements with each of the three
theorists before turning my attention to the idea of the sublime and the emphasis on disruption that marks the book.

In Dikeç’s reading, Hannah Arendt’s work is a generative resource for an aesthetic approach to politics insofar as it draws our attention to how politics opens up spaces of appearance that take actors outside of themselves and into engagement with a plurality of others. Here, Arendt draws on Kant’s writing on aesthetic judgment, which shows how such judgments proceed without any foundational rule or standard except their communicability to others who are capable of making their own judgments. Politics, thought in those terms, depends on both the presence of irreducibly plural others and the possibility of some kind of relation across that plurality. Action is the name that Arendt gives to the kind of engagement that creates and gives space to those relations. This spatialization—Arendt’s “space of appearance”—is precisely what allows plural others to relate to each other through a partially shared “common sense” and around shared objects of concern. For Arendt, this possibility of appearance in a shared world is not a given, but rather something that must be constructed and preserved in the face of all that might engulf or overwhelm it. However, it is precisely at this point where, for Dikeç, a problematic contradiction emerges within Arendt’s thinking of space. By marking off and defending a particular sphere of politics from its others, Arendt introduces a territorial understanding of space and politics that coexists uneasily with the more dynamic and relational conceptualizations of space in her work on action and appearance.

Engaging with Jean-Luc Nancy, Dikeç finds critically important conceptual resources for thinking through the mutually constitutive relation between sense and world. Engaging with Kant’s aesthetics, Nancy works with the concept of “presentation” as that which allows our aesthetic intuitions to take conceptual form. This mediation between sensibility and understanding is ultimately a matter of politics, for Nancy, insofar as it is not determined in
advance by any rule or standard. In comparison to both Arendt and Rancière, Nancy’s approach is an ontological one, based on an understanding of being as necessarily being-in-common. This emphasizes that existence is always co-existence, and it is precisely this ontology that allows Nancy to develop a political approach to community. Here readers are invited to approach intersubjectivity as a kind of spacing—beyond a given identity or naturalized essence. In other words (and connecting with Dikeç’s engagement with Rancière), this is a spacing that distributes the “common” of a community. Unfortunately, to Dikeç’s thinking, Nancy’s later insertion of a distinction between the “spacing of politics” and the “spacing of being” tends to distract from both the politicizing potential of his ontology and the ontological character of his politics.

While Dikeç’s readings of Arendt and Nancy are, in their own terms, productive and generous, there is an important sense in which it is Rancière’s particular way of engaging with aesthetics and the relations between space and politics that becomes the model for Dikeç’s approach. In Rancière, the radically egalitarian implications of Kant’s aesthetics are brought to the foreground—particularly the unqualified capacity of anyone to make aesthetic judgments. Rancière further reworks the a priori forms that in Kant’s First Critique emerge from the structure of the mind and relocates them in empirically existing and contextually specific distributions of the sensible. These are the spatial orderings that give shape to our perceptions and relations. From Rancière’s perspective, there is no longer a question of some spaces being political and others not, but rather the opening of the possibility that all spaces can be politicized, as and when existing spatial orderings are called into question.

The close engagements with each theorist build toward a discussion, in the final chapter, of the sublime as a way of thinking the centrality of disruption to politics. The sublime, coming out of Kant, is meant to direct our attention to “phenomena that cannot initially find a register within our given coordinates and habitual ways of making sense of things” (p.107). Dikeç is
careful here to explain that his use of the sublime does not amount to “a categorical resistance to all possible representation”, but is instead “an openness to unrepresentability insofar as it implies that there are no given, ‘natural’ political subjects” (p.116-117). He is further quite careful throughout the book to remind readers that there is nothing inherently valuable about disruption in and of itself, and goes to some lengths to “de-dramatize” disruption—emphasizing that the disruption he describes as essential to politics does not necessarily lead to the “undoing of an existing order”, but can instead simply refer to the unpredictable and even momentary appearance of something new (p.48).

Whether or not politics must be disruptive in order to be politics (cf. Davidson and Martin 2014; Leitner and Strunk 2014; Mitchell et al. 2015, Ruez 2016), Dikeç’s work here is itself productively disruptive in precisely the manner in which it forces a reader, following Arendt, to stop and think. In its focus on disruption and the sublime, the book illuminates an important angle on politics, and, along the way, Dikeç also opens up avenues to other kinds of aesthetic engagements with politics. Early in the book, he suggests that politics is about how worlds are “constructed, disclosed and disrupted” (p.1). While the construction of worlds is not thematized in as sustained a way as their disruption, Dikeç’s close readings of Arendt, Nancy and Rancière nevertheless provide useful theoretical resources for understanding how spaces and identities are fashioned and sustained in political terms.

Dikeç’s work offers exciting conceptual tools to critical geographers engaging with politics in an aesthetic mode, and it productively highlights the political theoretic importance of space across a range of important thinkers—some of whom, as Nicholas Crane (2015) has already pointed out, have been less widely engaged by geographers. The attention to the shared Kantian legacy of these thinkers is itself an important contribution, and, more generally, the book’s clear explication of a range of difficult ideas is exemplary. Readers should know that some of the

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material in the book has been previously published in article format, but, at least for this reader, the book’s presentation adds significantly to what has been previously published. *Space, Politics and Aesthetics* invites scholars to critically engage with the politics of perceiving and relating across our unevenly shared worlds, and the careful theoretical work achieved in the book makes an important contribution to that project.

**References**


Derek Ruez

Department of Geography

University of Kentucky
derek.ruez@uky.edu