Most Wanted

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The Popular Culture of Illegality

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Table of Contents

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1. Introduction: Criminal Authority and the Politics of Aesthetics

Martijn Oosterbaan and Rivke Jaffe

In many parts of the globe, democratization and neoliberal economic policies have unexpectedly been accompanied by pervasive violence and insecurity, resulting in a paradoxical phenomenon sometimes described as "violent democracies" (Arias & Goldstein 2010). Moreover, many formally democratic societies have "differentiated citizenship regimes" characterized by the unequal distribution of rights and privileges (Holston 2008). While legally speaking, all citizens might enjoy the same rights, in many societies certain groups of citizens experience structural neglect when they turn to the state for protection from violence, or indeed when they seek any form of government support.

In such social contexts of insecurity and inequality, marginalized citizens in search of protection and support may look to criminal organizations rather than to state agencies. In a broad range of countries, criminal groups have developed into powerful, state-like organizations. Criminal leaders, mafia-like organizations and gangs may take on the functions and symbols of the state, evolving into extra-legal structures of rule and belonging. Providing residents with forms of social welfare, security and dispute resolution, these governance structures can complement or even replace the formal state. Examples of such criminal governance systems are found amongst Italian, Japanese and Russian mafias, and in Jamaican inner-city neighborhoods, Brazilian favelas, Mexican barrios, Kenyan slums, and South African townships.

If we take a closer look at these criminal leaders and the people who rely on them to provide order and security, we find that criminal leaders' positions of power are not only rooted in fear and force.

These leaders are often associated with a broad range of symbols, icons and objects that communicate their extraordinary or even supernatural potential to provide services that formal government agencies cannot or do not offer to everyone. Different forms of popular culture – films, television series, street art, music, dance parties, and a range of everyday objects – help such men (these leaders are rarely women) achieve an elevated status. In Colombia, for instance, as *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal* (Caracol Televisión, 2012) aired, a television series recounting Pablo Escobar's reign in Medellín, local merchants began selling children's sticker books that allowed them to collect and display stickers featuring photos of Escobar and other key figures within the Medellín cartel.[1] The popular Medellín neighborhood commonly known as *Barrio Pablo Escobar*, constructed largely with Escobar's money and housing many low-income families, still displays his face on walls and flags, reminding residents on a daily basis who provided the homeless with a roof over their heads.[2]

What do such popular images and objects tell us about Pablo Escobar's authority? And what can the current global popularity of such television series, murals and even stickers tell us about the power of similar aesthetic practices and material objects, both now and in earlier historical periods? *Most Wanted* seeks to show how the socio-political authority of bosses, gangs and cartels is produced and reproduced with the help of popular aesthetics. The essays collected here analyze different forms of visual, material and performative culture, including dance events, popular music, film, video clips, graffiti, murals, posters and various everyday objects.

Most wanted

The popular expression "most wanted" – used by governments across the world to indicate dangerous individuals – points to a key tension surrounding criminal figures and the organizations they may lead. There are many instances of criminal leaders who are seen by the state as highly

1 www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/09/children-sticker-album-drug-colombia

2 www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-25183649

dangerous, yet who are admired or even loved by people who feel supported and protected by them. Why do criminal governance structures enjoy so much legitimacy? Why do marginalized populations champion them?

Current explanations rely primarily on two related approaches. The first focuses on criminal organizations' use of violence: by usurping the state's monopoly of the means of violence, these "irregular armed actors" (Davis 2010) successfully encroach on state sovereignty. The second, related approach explains criminal organizations' legitimacy by emphasizing their local provision of material goods and services: security, housing, employment, credit, and conflict mediation.

While recognizing these factors, this collection of essays points to a dimension of criminal governance that remains largely unexplored. A focus on coercive power and service provision is insufficient to understand the reproduction of criminal governance. We must not look only to the use of violence, or the provision of material goods and services that the state does not provide. In addition, we should pay attention to the popular culture that constitutes and legitimizes the power of criminals, to the imaginative, aesthetic underpinnings of criminal authority and to those mechanisms that persuade marginalized citizens that gang rule is acceptable or even natural.

Criminal governance is entangled with popular aesthetic practices, from popular music to street parties, from memorial murals to cinematic representations. The essays included here show, for instance, how *bailes funk* in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro celebrate drug-trafficking factions and fuse pleasure with the normalization of criminal rule, and how street art in Kingston boosts the status of criminal "dons", connecting territorial rule to visual iconization.

Most Wanted highlights what we call the "popular culture of illegality", the aesthetic foundations of criminal authority. Through the essays collected here, *Most Wanted* addresses the following questions: Through which aesthetic practices are people mobilized to accept and support criminals? How is the popular culture of illegality central to forms of governmentality? How do material, visual, and sonic culture work to constitute and

legitimize criminal authority? In grappling with these questions, we present essays by scholars and curators whose work focuses on the intersection of crime, governance and aesthetics. In addition, the images and artifacts featured throughout this collection illustrate the material culture and visual traditions that legitimize illegal practices, reconfiguring the reputations of criminalized actors as caring, cool or honorable, rather than cruel and corrupt.

The politics of aesthetics

In order to understand how popular culture can contribute to the construction and maintenance of a socio-political order, we focus on the concept of "the politics of aesthetics". We start from the premise that political strategies that persuade people to support specific criminals depend as much on sensory experiences as on logic and rationality. To understand how aesthetics relate to criminal rule, we take as a point of departure the politics of Kant's *sensus communis*, the aesthetically shaped "common sense". The political character of popular culture lies in how it inscribes a sense of community: it delineates how people perceive and understand what they have in common and what their role is within these communities. This approach builds directly on the work of Jacques Rancière (2006), who uses the concept of the "distribution of the sensible" to indicate the ways in which art organizes what is visible, audible, conceivable, speakable. The "sensible" here can be understood both as "what makes sense" and "what can be sensed". Popular culture can make specific forms of governance seem normal and natural, while making it difficult to see, hear, or talk about alternative modes of rule.

As *Most Wanted* highlights, the material and aesthetic environments in which people grow up and live have the tendency to recede to the perceptual background, even as these surroundings have an extraordinary capacity to make people literally *feel* safe and "at home". The built environment and the expressive culture that saturates it work to produce a sense of natural order. Such implicit understandings of home and of normality do depend on highly specific aesthetic traditions. Comparing neighborhoods in Kingston, Port-au-Prince and Rio de Janeiro, for example, shows

us that beyond their similarities, residents produce and cherish different aesthetic practices that represent and constitute their urban community and their local leaders. In all neighborhoods, we find murals – many of them representing local "heroes" – yet this art includes particular, locally meaningful symbols and often displays nationally specific artistic styles of painting. Similar specificities can be identified in the music that reverberates through these distinct neighborhoods, and similar ones from Chicago to Palermo. While music and public festivities may tie residents and criminals together in sensual encounters in all these neighborhoods, such encounters rely on the popularity and local meaningfulness of distinct music genres.

Going beyond instrumental readings of popular culture, which tend to argue that local criminal leaders strategically use and *abuse* popular art (often without asking how this exactly works), our interest is in highlighting more generally that the legitimacy of political claims relies significantly on the aesthetic, sensorial modes through which such claims are expressed. As the examples set out in this collection demonstrate, criminal organizations, and the people who support or rely on their governance role often share a love of *particular* genres and styles. They share understandings of what is "cool" and what it means to be "keeping it real", understandings that rely not just on words but on sounds, images, and *feelings*. A critical aesthetic approach requires an analysis of the "poetics of politics" that goes beyond text alone, not only examining narratives but attending to the effects of other sensory experiences – vision, sound, touch, taste and smell – as well (Panagia 2006).

This type of critical aesthetic theory has tended to examine the politics of aesthetics in the context of democratic political orders, and to focus on Europe and North America. *Most Wanted* extends the politics of aesthetics beyond democratic politics to criminal authority. It also includes a focus on "non-Western" societies, to demonstrate how popular culture forms an integral part of power struggles across the globe. This book critically engages with the assumptions that democracy and criminal authority are mutually exclusive, and that political aesthetics functions

predominantly in the context of formal state institutions. As *Most Wanted* shows, in both the "global South" and the "global North", popular culture is a domain where formal and informal powers meet and where highly political artifacts, icons and symbols are banned, incorporated, modified and reinvented.

This entanglement of the legal and the illegal, and the cultural processes through which formal and informal governance actors negotiate their position, is clearly visible, for instance, in Sterre Gilsing's essay in this volume. She demonstrates how Brazilian police forces aim to incorporate and modify the aesthetics of popular dance parties in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, changing the colors of the venue and the lyrics of the songs in the hope of redirecting the energy and feelings of fun to support the formal state authorities rather than drug traffickers. In their essay on mafia-state *intreccio*, Peter and Jane Schneider show how convivial occasions – elaborate banquets and bacchanalian parties – helped create and reinforce the entanglement between Sicilian mafiosi and local political, economic and even religious elites. Consuming food and alcohol together, having fun and even transgressive good times, helps forge affective bonds of trust and shared ideas of what is normal.

As these examples show, *Most Wanted* looks beyond rhetorical, textual practices to consider other sensorial forms. We move beyond formal, canonized artistic expressions and institutional settings to study popular culture, from music and dance to food and drink. Going beyond perspectives that consider popular culture to be an ephemeral, *light* phenomenon, we stress that its ubiquitous presence in people's daily lives and its capacity to touch people profoundly – precisely through the register of fun, excitement and "cool" – makes its power much *thicker* than commonly assumed. We should not be fooled, the essays here show, by the ability of popular culture to recede into the background. This is exactly why it is such a powerful political force.

Popular culture and governmentality

In its critical approach to the political implications of aesthetics, *Most Wanted* contributes to studies of governmentality. The

term "governmentality" refers to a broadened conceptualization of governance, extending the analysis of social control from coercive forms of power to include the production of broadly shared normative ideas internalized by individuals (Foucault 1991). Our knowledge of what is normal and desirable shapes our thoughts and desires and limits what we see as possible forms of action. Drawing on Foucault's insights, various authors have investigated how power operates on and through bodies (Butler 1993) and how power is maintained through the division and control of spaces and the bodily dispositions of people within these spaces (Huxley 2008).

Power operates through top-down "techniques" of domination, with governance actors regulating behavior in a direct fashion. But social control also works more indirectly, through self-discipline and self-styling. As people regulate their own behavior and bodily dispositions according to norms and values distributed throughout society, such everyday practices effectively reproduce authority. The concept of governmentality, of self-discipline through the body, can help us understand how different forms of popular culture generate bodily sensations that align people's sense of what is normal, fun and good with the interests of criminal governance structures.

Most Wanted, then, understands popular cultural forms not just as reflections of power, but also as productive of it. Popular aesthetic practices – such as watching a South African *noir* movie or singing along with *neomelodica* music in Naples or a *narcocorrido* song in Mexico City – should be understood as bodily performances that make the authority of criminal organizations feel normal. While people may experience such practices as enjoyable entertainment, participation also requires effort. It involves learning *how* to watch, dance, sing, walk, and talk.

Moving away from strictly criminal actors to consider other forms of undemocratic power, we can recognize how citizens of democratic countries internalize the normalcy of royalty. They grow up surrounded by images of the Queen or the King on coins and postage stamps, singing *God Save the Queen* or a similarly royalist national anthem, and celebrating royal weddings or the monarch's

birthday as national holidays.

We seek to ground relatively abstract Rancièrean and Foucauldian concepts in the everyday lives of marginalized populations, and in the specific spatial contexts where popular culture sounds, images and performances work as embodied forms of persuasion. This allows us to trace the relationship between particular historical trajectories of undemocratic power and specific aesthetic formations, highlighting how mundane objects and practices from video games and stickers, to a hit song or a popular dance, persuade us to move in tune with a system of rule we might rationally find objectionable. The essays collected here seek to understand the kinds of sensory "work" through which specific texts, sounds, performances and images mobilize people to accept and support criminal authority.

From local histories to global cool

As many of these contributions show, the cultural artifacts and practices we associate with the popular culture of illegality are informed by specific, local histories. Aesthetic formations develop in specific contexts, and popular cultural forms will have a locally distinct political and emotional impact. As Jason Pine suggests in his essay, the sensory regime of a Walmart, where the products necessary for cooking meth are sold, builds on US histories of visualizing and spatializing consumption. The criminal aura of Lady Dabang, a North Indian female gangster discussed by Lucia Michelutti in her contribution, is rooted in the cinematographic charisma of Phulan Devi, the popular Bandit Queen whose life has been pictured in numerous Indian movies. The beats of baile funk music, described by Sterre Gilsing, echo the machine guns that favela inhabitants hear on a daily basis and that warn them to find a safe haven indoors.

Most Wanted recognizes these local specificities, but also points to the transnational mobilities of the popular culture of illegality. Expressive culture travels easily. US and UK-based Instagram users utilize hashtags and appropriate images to indicate translocal affinities. Jamaican dancehall music, with its celebration of internet scanners, is embraced and reconfigured in the *zongos* of Accra. Yakuza style gains global popularity through films and

video games. The Mexican figure of Santa Muerte is popularized in US television series and tattooed onto the bodies of imprisoned gang members in Guatemala. Criminal actors throughout the world learn about each other through these popular forms and refashion them as they emulate the styles of their international peers.

These different cases highlight the networked nature of aesthetics, across national borders, between global North and global South, between city streets and prison cells. Popular cultural forms are shared and recrafted creatively across different life-worlds, boosted by the rise of social media and the growth of virtual communities. Digital media have facilitated this rapid global diffusion and reappropriation. Yet what *Most Wanted* shows is that, in each specific site, it is the intimate, sensory and emplaced engagement with forms of popular culture that demands a new understanding of how politics works, both within and outside the law.

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