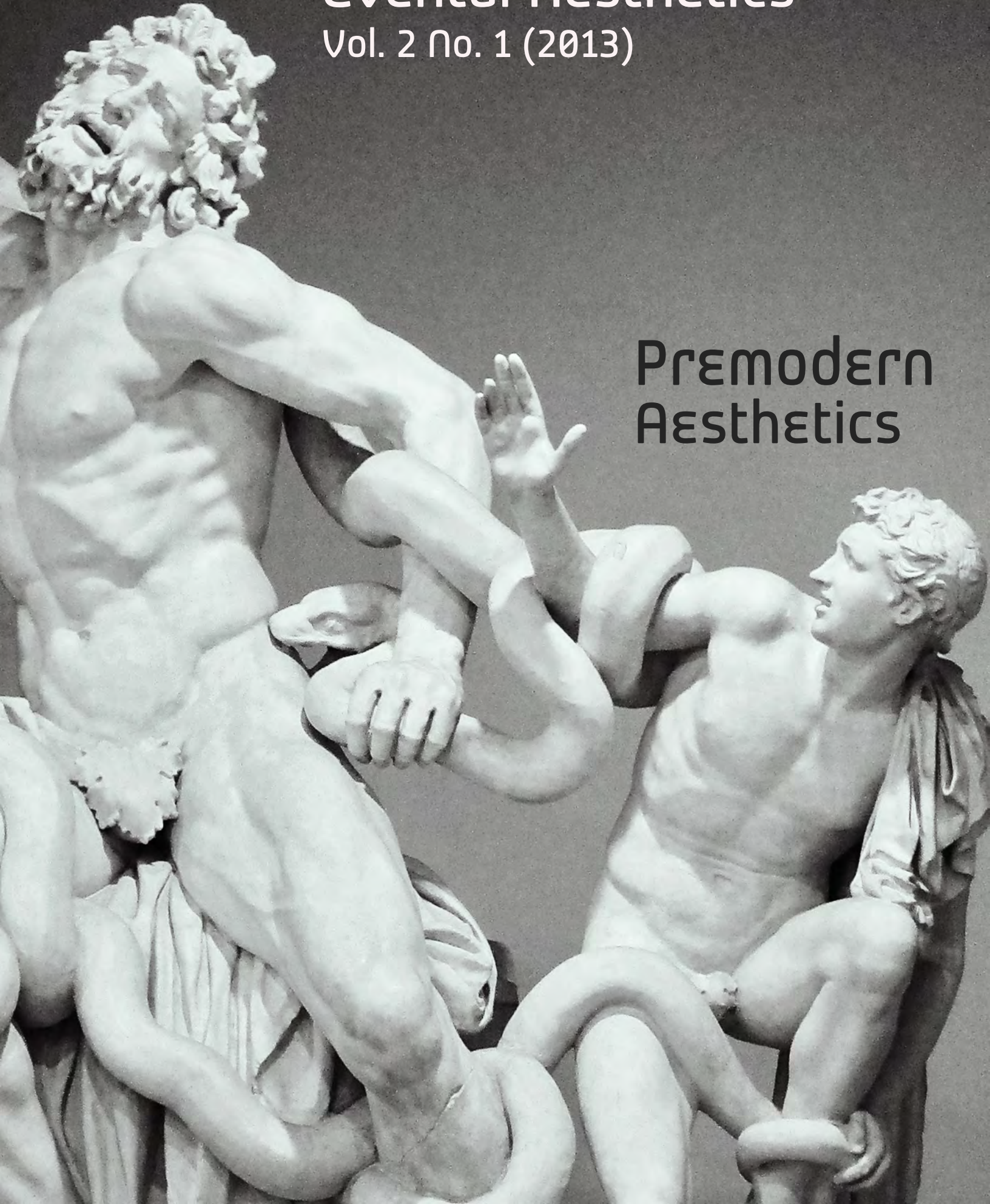


# Evental Aesthetics

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Premodern  
Aesthetics



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# Premodern Aesthetics

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# Introduction

Joanna Demers

On 4 February 2013, the media announced that the remains of Richard III had been unearthed beneath a parking lot in Leicester. DNA tests linking the bones to two living descendants of the king were conclusive. The find also confirmed certain rumors while leaving many others in doubt. Richard III died of a blow to the head suffered in battle, after having been stabbed multiple times. He had pronounced scoliosis, a condition that probably gave rise to the Shakespearean image of an ugly hunchback.

Public reception of the news was enthusiastic. For as many as two whole days, at least in the US, Richard III overshadowed Syrian civil war, gun control, and Washington gridlock. Readers of the *New York Times* front page article who chose to leave comments were unanimous in their passion for the king, even if they argued vehemently over the merits of various biographies of the Leicester monarch. On one issue, at least, all seemed to agree: Shakespeare's play was terrific theater, but poor history, written to flatter the Tudor family that wrested the crown from this last Plantagenet. The historically accurate Richard III, we are told, might have

been a tyrant by today's standards, but by the standards of his day was positively progressive, having instituted a few reforms that benefitted the poor. Alas, the true Richard III remains a lacuna, something about which competing factions can argue, but none can claim to know objectively.

And so it is with any history. We are often most drawn to those histories that reflect what we want to see, whether it is an incorrigible murderer who seduces a widow over her husband's corpse, or a statesman who was only trying to do his best within a system that was unapologetically brutal. Suetonius knew this, which is why he gave us lurid details on the Imperial Roman family, rather than incidental trivia on bookkeeping or taxation. Robert Graves knew this all the more, which is why he gave us those lurid details wrapped up into a novel called *I, Claudius*, starring the most charismatic pathological killer, Livia. What a letdown, to do a scant bit of research and read that the true Livia was an upstanding Roman matron. This bit of historicity is worth little when compared to the pitch-perfect image of a political genius trapped in a woman's body, who nonetheless manages to run an empire, poison dozens, and thwart republicanism for over fifty years.

Quentin Meillassoux writes of the fallacy of rational philosophy, that it cannot conceive of the possibility of thought prior to humanity. Thus, although modern science has been excavating and imagining both the distant past and future without humans, modern philosophy cannot do so if it is to remain faithful to Kant's crushing blow to metaphysics. There is no way for reason to think of the object-in-itself, the Kantian revolution tells us; reason can only conceive of things through itself. Time that predates or postdates reason is thus unthinkable.

Meillassoux's argument is revolutionary, but ours is more modest and self-evident. Even in history that is *human* history, as opposed to humanity's pre-history, we are hamstrung by our inability not to find most interesting the details that reflect our biases, prejudices, and fancies. Even premodern artists, who preceded Descartes and the onset of philosophical modernity, insisted on measuring their works and ideas according to those established by predecessors and institutions, even when their own works and ideas suggested more intricate relationships and far-reaching consequences.

For example: revisiting notions of tragedy in the works of Racine and his mentor Nicole, Peter Hanly illustrates that these playwrights struggled to locate an authoritative essence of tragedy in their historical

predecessors, winding up at odds with one another to the detriment of both their equally complex positions.

In another example, writes Sylwia Chrostowska, the Gothic figure of the gargoyle was caught between established notions of the grotesque and of sacred architecture. Gargoyles remain problematic even today, and from a secular point of view, because they cannot be fully apprehended through modern lenses that insist on parsing out superstition from orthodoxy and beauty from evil. Instead these creatures are most accurately viewed as cultural and aesthetic dualities, though this sticky ambiguity does nothing for gargoyles' appeal.

*Evental Aesthetics* has adopted a new organization that splits each issue into themed and non-themed sections. We welcome submissions for the latter category that have to do with any issues pertaining to philosophy and aesthetics. We offer two inaugural articles here. James Wierzbicki undertakes an attentive examination of multiple temporalities in both Jackson Pollock's painting and Elliott Carter's composition. Cornelia Tsakiridou provides a similarly nuanced application of Hegelian philosophy to the perception of cinema, a reading that acknowledges cinema's status in relation to, yet distinct from, modernist painting.