

Strategies of distinction

Rancière's *Aisthesis* and the two regimes of art

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At the root of Jacques Rancière's work lies a gesture of dissociation: to unfasten the people, the poor and the proletariat from the Marxist discourses to which they were so firmly fixed that one might think them to be sewn from the same cloth; to reveal the will to mastery and domination inherent in the speech of those who claim knowledge; to show that the love of the people dissimulates a hatred of democracy; to underscore workers' heterogeneity with respect to the discourse bearing upon them; and to defend the capacity of the dominated and the equality of intellects.

It is a gesture born of a rupture, a rupture that happened in May 1968, whose eventual content and scope, the young Rancière thought, had been disclaimed by its own actors:

Instead of militants – new or old – trying to think their histories, what we find are students reciting the old lessons they learned in their philosophy classes. They want to make us believe that they are talking about May '68, or about leftism, when in fact all they are doing is resuming the thread of an interrupted academic discourse, dressing up as 'facts' the phantoms of their speculations.¹

It was in the experience of this slippage between grand philosophical discourse and the aspirations articulated in May '68 that his project took shape, a project devoted to crossing over to the other side of the discourse of mastery. An epistemological and political imperative thus came to light: let the others speak, give them back the speech that has been taken from them.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, since the beginning of the 1970s, Rancière has been developing a way of writing whose disciplinary classification is unclear, one that proceeds by blurring the boundaries between philosophy, ideological analysis, criticism and history, and which constitutes itself in the intervals between those discourses: a double task of archiving, publishing and restituting the workers' own problematizations of

emancipation, on the one hand, and, on the other, of criticizing the discourses that bear on the dominated, from Plato to Bourdieu. The position of enunciation that unites these two great series of texts is a precarious one, in that it can be identified with neither that of the dominated nor that of the masters. This position, maintained across forty years of Rancière's work, explains his attachment to impure objects that foil established disciplinary or political distributions.

Of course, those distributions were not established once and for all with Plato. What Plato represents is less a historical beginning than a scene of distribution [*partage*] that has been relentlessly restaged by new actors in new costumes: a scene in which inferiors are designated, delegitimized, assigned their place, tied down to a function, and inscribed into the order of the world. That is the *typical* scene. But there is also another sequence of scenes, corresponding to singular moments of emancipation, which demand that the philosopher abandon the domain of the concept and embrace things in the making, challenging distributions and reconfigurations. There is an irreducible Two whose terms are incommensurable with one another: one is one, and the other multiple; one is type, the other singularity; one is identification, the other de-identification; one is police, the assignment of each to their 'objective' identity, the other politics, the blurring of sociological categories.

Politics is thus essentially tied to an aesthetics, to an ordering of the functions and places that condition who can say what, who can want what, and who can do what. This is what Rancière calls the 'distribution [*partage*] of the sensible', 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, or speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience'. One of the empirical signs of this distribution [*partage*] lies in 'the submission of the dominated', which is explained not by their 'lack of understanding of the existing

state of things' but by their 'lack of confidence in their capacity to transform them'.

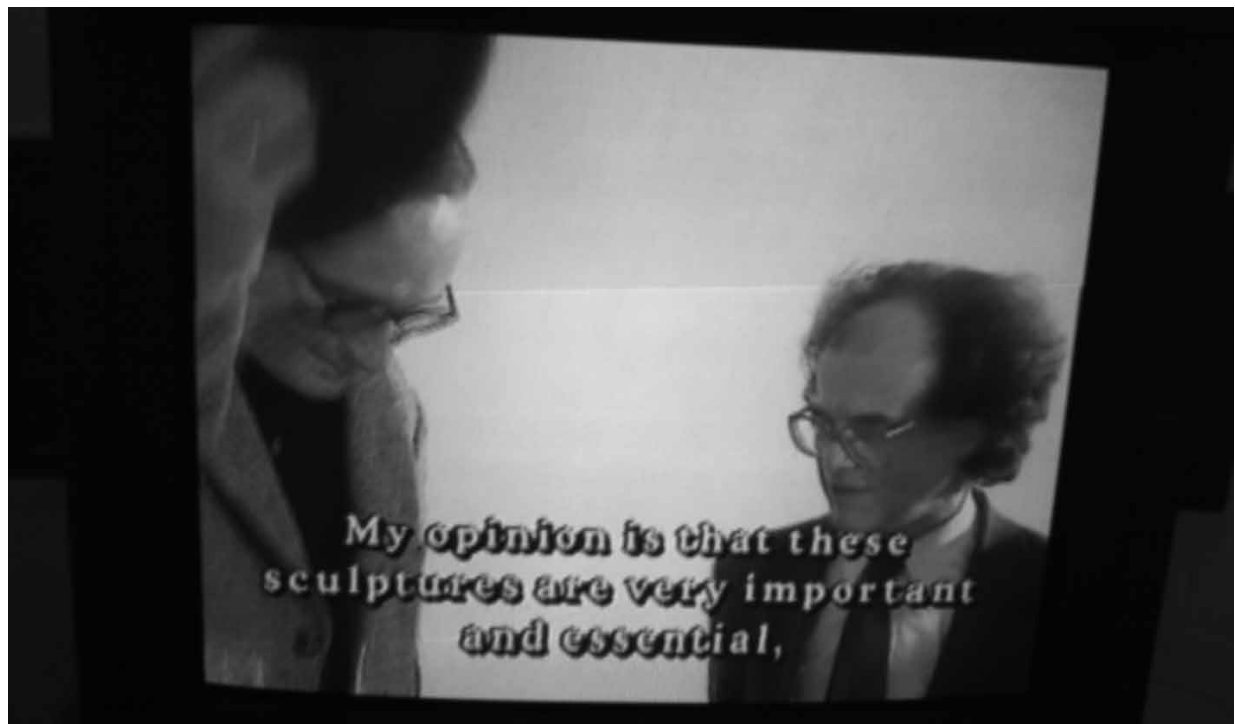
Onto *this* aesthetics is superimposed another, articulated in a third series of texts that Rancière has been working on since the mid-1990s. This concerns what Rancière calls the 'aesthetic regime of art', a historical inquiry into the operation and identification of art qua art, the beginning of which dates from the second half of the eighteenth century. What we call 'art' has not always existed. What previously existed were *arts*, divided into mechanical (those ruled by the hand) and liberal (those directed by the mind) arts, with the latter – which Rancière calls the 'representational regime' – possessing more 'dignity' than the former.

An experience machine

*Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art** seeks to refine and deepen this historical interpretation, through a selection of fourteen scenes, ordered chronologically from 1764 to 1941. In its title and organization (each chapter opens with the analysis of a lengthy quotation), the work mimics Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. But this is more or less where the resemblance ends. Whereas Auerbach's book had the monstrous ambition to understand how the entirety of Western literature, from Homer to Virginia Woolf, had interpreted reality, Rancière's takes on a discontinuous and fragmentary character and 'is concerned not with covering the entire field of the arts over the course of two centuries, but only with grasping the occurrence of

a few displacements in what art means'. Whereas Auerbach's book reconstructed an entire epoch's relation to reality on the basis of each text it studied, Rancière's seeks to underscore the aleatory and precarious aspects of his approach: all the book traces are the possible itineraries in the history of art's aesthetic regime, the moments where its logic is 'condensed' and revealed. This difference in orientation is also a historical difference. Auerbach, like his colleague Ernst Robert Curtius in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), and like the historians of the Warburg Institute exiled in London, sought to think ruptures in the history of representation, but ruptures grounded in stylistic continuity, circulation and transmission. He sought to raise a monument to define, affirm and save something of the historical identity of a Europe destroyed by Nazism, and thereby achieve, as Edward Said strikingly put it, 'an act of cultural, even civilizational, survival of the highest importance'. There is no trace, in *Aisthesis*, of the tragic sense of history that governs *Mimesis*. Only the formal structure remains, placed in the service of a quite different project.

We already know that *Aisthesis* cannot be a book in the philosophy of art, since for Rancière aesthetics is not to be confused with the theoretical discourse about art (in the strict sense) of the last two and a half centuries. Nor, despite appearances, does this book belong to art history. With the notable exceptions of Chaplin and Stendhal (another strategic reminder of Auerbach, as we will see), the artists we would expect to appear do



* Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2011. 328 pp., €27.40 pb., 978 27186 0 852 5. Numbers in the text refer to pages of this edition.

so only in the margins, mentioned in passing or cited only with respect to their more obscure works. Neither Manet nor Wagner makes an appearance, and painting and music are scarcely evoked at all. The accent is placed instead on artistic forms such as theatre, dance, pantomime, the decorative arts, and even journalism. The apparatus as a whole recalls the ingenious use of paraphrase in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where Rancière mixed his speech together with Jacotot's: he cites, he describes, but above all he slips into the pronouncements of his 'objects', as if his own analyses, extrapolations and generalizations were simply continuous with theirs. The *index des personnages du livre*, which invites us to tie even more links between them, reinforces this sense of immersion and, together with an introduction that he baptises a *prélude*, is a sign that we are dealing with a work of historical fiction.

What is at work in these pages is a basic aspiration to stick to the things themselves: to reduce the historical distance so as to grasp the moments of art's 'emergence'. Detached from an order of demonstration, the artistic character of the works explodes like a flash in the night. Rancière says that he designed each scene as a 'little optical machine', but since the apparatus aims at the reader's immersion, to the point of her near suffocation, it would be truer to speak of an experience machine: a machine for making us experience this form of experience called art. In its best chapters, the book stirs the astonishment that sudden metamorphoses provoke, such as when a fragment becomes totality itself, sculpture an art of time, dance and cinema forms of writing, matter a symbol, an image a thing, furniture a temple, and a living thing a machine. As a whole, *Aisthesis* seeks to probe this great metamorphosis, this becoming-life of art, which constitutes, unifies, dehierarchizes and autonomizes itself, whilst all the while identifying itself with everyday practices, as both part and expression of collective life. A remarkable chapter devoted to handicraft shows that there is no antinomy here, and that it is precisely in striving for an (applied) art that 'inhabits and expresses' life that the idea of a pure art, with its spiritual demands, is prepared (181–3). This is art's aesthetic regime: the metamorphoses and reconfigurations of distributions and divisions [*partages*], but also the fragmentation, mixing and confusion of the arts, the abolition of artistic hierarchies, and thus the rupture with the representational regime [*régime représentatif*].

The definition of these two 'regimes', and the relations between them, nevertheless poses a problem. No one can deny that there once existed a classification of the arts (mechanical and liberal) and a hierarchy

(epic was superior to eclogue, historical painting to still life), nor that, within this framework, artistic production was subordinated to a model that was taken to be natural, but in fact corresponded to a social and political hierarchy (one does not represent a king or a saint the way one represents a villager or a peasant). In 1746, for example, in a treatise that would see numerous republications, Charles Batteux based the unity of the fine arts on 'the imitation of *la belle nature*' and justified the hierarchy of poetic genres by the quality of their respective subjects: 'one must never rise above one's station: *that is the maxim that must be taught to children, to the people, to kings, and to all of mankind.*' Rancière is right to assert that, at a moment which he locates with Winckelmann, generally considered as the founder of art history, a dissociation between beauty and expression occurred. Thereafter a work could be beautiful without expressing the quality or the dignity of its subject. The beautiful thus became 'what pleases without concept', to recall Kant's celebrated formula.



The notion of the 'representational regime' is at fault, however, for collapsing together distinctions that were less rigid or normative than is often believed (the separation between mechanical and liberal arts) and which underwent important variations across Europe (for obvious sociological reasons, the scale of value in seventeenth-century Dutch painting was not the same as the one found in Venetian painting of the same era). But this is not the essential point: the classification of mobile and complex phenomena into two great 'regimes' betokens an excess of theoretical will over historical analysis and contradicts the aspiration to immanence. The assertion, for example, that the appearance of the concept of History puts an end to 'the social separation between liberal and mechanical arts' and is, therefore, constitutive of the aesthetic regime, is completely baseless. But it allows

for Rancière's crafty association between, on the one hand, art and beauty freed from expressivity (from a knowledge or science of anatomy or the passions, for instance), and, on the other, 'History', which, it will come as no surprise to learn, is detached from stories of exemplary lives – as if that is all there was to it in the eighteenth century! – so as to designate, instead, the 'collective life' as such. Two movements of dehierarchization take effect simultaneously, as if by magic: one aesthetic, the other political. History thus turns out to be as well ordered as a philosophical argument, and Rancière implicitly resumes and collectivizes the story that liberal philosophers have told about the concomitant emergence of the democratic subject and aesthetic experience, such as we find in Luc Ferry's *Homo Aestheticus*.

It is not inconceivable that the historical simplifications fulfil a strategic function, reinforcing the link that Rancière wants to establish between aesthetics and politics. Do they not, moreover, permit him surreptitiously to subsume the distinction between the representational and aesthetic regimes under the distinction between police and politics? Even if the author asserts that one regime succeeds the other, there is a passage from the book that seems to confirm the hypothesis of their coexistence. At the end of the last chapter, devoted to James Agee – who was able to speak 'the cruel radiance of what is', because he had made 'words, in their movement ... mimic the truth that does not speak their language' – Clement Greenberg enters the scene with an '*explosive* article'. Before him, Steinbeck and a few other 'writers, photographers, and film-makers *representative* of the culture of the New Deal had put the misery and the greatness of the disinherited into striking formulas, while James Agee worked on the *impossible* Whitman–Proustian and Whitman–Flaubertian poem which, alone, could inscribe its own *impossibility* in its tribute'. But the real problem, Rancière tells us, concerns a rupture 'with this engaged Whitmanian culture, which pushed painters, photographers and writers to mine the poor quarters of the metropolises or the profound country roads to exalt the work of men, to collect testimonies of social misery, or photograph the picturesque calendars that decorate the farmhouses' (303–4, my emphasis). On one side, we find non-knowledge placed in the service of the humble: conscious of the impossibility of its task and succeeding for this very reason, it suspends the relation between activity and passivity, the 'will' to say or show. On the other, we hear the din of the 'Marxist avant-garde', wanting to subjugate this life's 'truth' to its own. The distinction between

the aesthetic and representational regimes is hereby re-established, in a form that is no longer one of historical succession, but of the *political* opposition between two contemporaneous artistic alternatives. In the aesthetic era, the representational regime is no longer founded on a natural hierarchy; it rests on a definition of the proletariat's identity and its historical mission. In a supplementary torsion, Rancière finds the ideal occasion to identify Marxism with pure aesthetics: Greenberg defends the latter against popular and commercial art precisely because he is a Marxist and wants to 'put an end to this complacency with the lifestyle [*l'art de vivre*] of the poor' (305).

Slight return

The paradox of identifying social aesthetics with pure aesthetics indicates that Rancière's aesthetics exhibits exactly the same structure as his political theory. On both terrains, he positions himself as an alternative to what he wishes to show is a false opposition: liberalism is not opposed to Marxism; social or Marxist aesthetics are not contrary to pure aesthetics. Since the initial alternative is in each case reduced to an identity, his position may appear neither as a third term nor 'dialectical' synthesis, and, since his thought rests on a rhetoric of the Two or of incommensurability (police/politics, representational regime/aesthetic regime), one cannot characterize his own position as simply opposed to the one he criticizes.

What we can read through James Agee and the Whitmanian tradition is precisely what, in several other texts, Rancière reads in Schiller: the "free aesthetic play", the 'suspension of power, the neither/nor proper to the aesthetic state', 'the neutralization of the very forms in which powers are exercised'. But if Agee and his consorts are associated with Schiller, the latter in turn shows up in the guise of Winckelmann, in the first chapter of the book. Indeed, the 'aesthetic distance' that Winckelmann discovers with the Belvedere Torso now becomes the suspension of the opposition between activity and passivity, a simple 'indifference' that takes place in a rupture of the ties that would otherwise bind the sensible form to an expression of meaning and a sensible presence to a determinate public. Indifference is a relation in separation, and what this fragment exemplifies is art qua art, because this mutilated statue, separated from signification, from its function and place of origin, or from the life that it was initially destined to express, can now offer itself to the disinterested gaze of any museum visitor at all, situated in another space–time (shades of Malraux!) (37–9). We thus see how a series of slippages allows

Rancière, through the omnipresent suspension of the relation between activity and passivity, to identify Winckelmann with Schiller.

All this confirms the troubling impression that the fourteen ‘scenes’ of *Aisthesis* present only an appearance of heterogeneity, and that they all aim to reiterate or exemplify the properties attributed to the Schiller–Winckelmann point of origin. The book as a whole seems like a compilation of Rancière’s *greatest hits*, remixed with a focus on the thingly rather than the thetic. These scenes where the various discourses are supposed to abolish themselves (philosophy, criticism, art history), that aim to suppress every separation and every mediation between ‘the thing’ and us so as to offer us a direct grasp of artistic emergences, paradoxically become the support and pretext for a philosophical position staked out in advance. Their primary purpose is to sustain the designation of an enemy and the repetition of an inaugural Two: aesthetic regime versus representational regime, *or* politics versus police. In the scission internal to a discourse that wishes to be continuous, the experience machine – the immersive and enumerative machine – suddenly breaks down and casts us away from the things themselves and back onto what grounds them: the originary aesthetico-political binary.

Two profoundly antagonistic tendencies are therefore at work. On the one hand, a ‘siding with the things’, and an attention – rare for a philosopher, but often present in Rancière’s critical work – to the texture, the nuances and the details of the works being studied. On the other, a reading of the history of aesthetics so overdetermined by the author’s desire that we cannot help directing back at Rancière the criticism he addressed to Alain Badiou: of ‘miraculously discovering’ his ideas in the texts and works before him and making them all say ‘the exact same thing’ (art emancipates itself, art emancipates, art expresses the ‘collective power’; this omnipresent word, ‘power’, will never be explained: we should understand that this too is part of the magic). Throughout *Aisthesis*, as in his earlier works on the subject, it is this *ritornello* that returns, and with it the same oppositions that the language of ‘suspension’ dissimulates. If we try to step back, or raise ourselves above the profusion of details that ceaselessly threaten to engulf us, we see that Rancière is telling us a story that we already know, and which has nothing new to it other than its articulation in the expression ‘aesthetic regime of art’. We were not ignorant of the fact that since the nineteenth century art has emphasized surfaces and signs, chosen insignificant or ignoble subjects, mixed



its media and blurred the boundary that separated it from industry. This is what ordinary people call ‘modern art’. For a century now, historians have agreed that the concepts of art and aesthetics appeared in the eighteenth century. The notion of the aesthetic regime constitutes nothing but a clever narrative device that allows Rancière to tie all his scattered threads together into the magical unity of a grand historico-theoretical thesis. What Bourdieu would see here is a strategy of distinction. But, then, he was a sociologist.

Those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s are grateful to Rancière for having, with a few others, held firmly to his principles, and for implacably criticizing the self-proclaimed friends of democracy. But even if his aesthetics has maintained a consubstantial link with politics, it is nevertheless built on an obsessive rejection of a caricature of Marxism, of which his critique of critical art is one of the most obvious examples. And this is no doubt one of his principal limits. For even if his principles are impure in their content (art is mixture, and democracy indistinction), they must remain pure in their form and absolutely cut off from anything that might tie them to a logic of socially constituted places, even something like a system called capitalism. From this arises a defence of inconsequential, if not absurd, positions, whose obscenity his noble principles prevent him from perceiving.

Consider the reading of *Le Rouge et le noir* that *Aisthesis* proposes. In his line of fire stand Auerbach and all those who, like him (Lukács, Pierre Barbéris), have seen in Stendhal’s novel a representation of ‘man ... as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving’. Rancière, cleverer by far, explains to us that in attempting to kill Madame de Rênal, Julien Sorel commits an act that nothing can justify and that annihilates the calculations on which he had grounded his hopes of social ascent. Thus are annulled the ‘web of intrigues’ and ‘every strategy of ends and means, every fictional

logic of causes and effects.’ Having suspended the game of social positions, Julien at last touches the ‘plebeian sky’, tasting the ‘sheer happiness of feeling’, the ‘sheer happiness of existence’ (66–8). But there is one detail that Rancière seems to have forgotten: while Julien passes his peaceful days in prison while awaiting his execution, the outside world, for its part, goes on with its calculations, its strategies, its intrigues and struggles. Where our philosopher prefers to see a short-circuiting of the games of power, one can nevertheless discern a confirmation of the social stratification on which the plebeian, through his own blundering or his insufficient mastery of the game, will always end up cracking his teeth (a hypothesis that his failure to kill Madame de Rênal corroborates). The suspension, moreover, that would decouple itself from the (dialectical) logic of reversal and counter-reversal – a logic to which the calculus of places depends and class struggles pertain – is nothing but a phantasy of disconnection. A mere subjective satisfaction, nestled in the heart of a policing order that it does not affect in the least. In the same stroke, the authentic notion of politics renders its manifest object – the enlargement of the democratic sphere – impossible, because it excludes what is usually called political practice, which involves calculation, strategy and taking positions inside an order traversed by divisions, conflicts and inequalities. Art, the manifestation of the ‘unanimous life’ and the ‘promise of emancipation’, therefore becomes the figure of renunciation, retreat and the failure of politics, whose actualization – the work in and on a shared [*partagé*] reality, which presupposes patience, organization and discipline – is made impossible by its identification with a democracy of principles: a wish fulfilment, nothing but a fiction, in the vulgar sense of the term.

It is not a matter of playing the philistine, and opposing concrete struggles to abstract art and theory. We would rather recall that if art and theory indeed maintain an excess – of the democratic idea and, dare we say, utopia – with respect to the simple calculus, they are also inscribed in a space that is already divided and unequal, a space that Rancière’s apparatus prevents him from thinking. Scourge though he may be of those Marxists contemptuous of the peasants’ taste for ugly trinkets and calendars, his universe of reference is not that of Britney Spears, Roland Emmerich or J.K. Rowling, but that of a legitimate culture, a culture legitimated *a posteriori* by the critical and academic institution. This culture is inscribed in a social distribution [*partage*] to which his definition of art is necessarily blind, a definition which is decoupled

from knowledge and science only in appearance, for it is indeed tied to the knowledge of those for whom knowledge is so natural that it has become transparent. The idea of an art made by anyone at all, for anyone at all, and exhibiting the anyone-at-all of collective life, fully participates in a social logic of places that it exceeds only in the imagination of its inventor.

Starting out from a correct orientation – the critique of the desire for domination inherent in the order of knowledge – Rancière has constructed an entirely false argument that rests on a series of metonymic transferences and abusive generalizations. The study of the writings of workers in the 1830s showed him that these people thought, dreamt, philosophized, and that their preoccupations were no more reducible to labour than was the primal scene of May ’68, nor translatable into the grand Marxist narrative of worker emancipation. Perhaps he sought to unburden himself of some deeply rooted prejudices. For if he had read, or admitted to having read, good Marxist historians, beginning with E.P. Thompson, he would have been able to find the very same thing, and could perhaps have spared us the obscene idea that the plebeian sky or true emancipation lies in daydreaming.

So we see how our Julien Sorel, with his intransigent political egalitarianism, came to accept, against his beautiful principles, the world as it is. But meanwhile, outside, there are such vulgar things as warring groups and classes that do not seem to be satisfied with the suspension of causes and effects, the slogan of ‘collective power’, or the formal demand for the equality of all with all: a clamorous army of Marxist sociologists, no doubt. If one concedes that politics does not depend on any knowledge of being, one will add that it is also and above all a matter of situations and situated decisions, without which it degenerates into an empty game, internal to the order of academic discourse and forced to sublimate itself in art. At bottom, under the cover of bringing principles to their point of extreme radicality, Rancière gives only the most harmless weapons to an ‘anyone’ who lives nowhere, and a people that never did, does not and never will exist. But we must concede him this much: the self-proclaimed friends of the people are their worst enemies.

Translated by Z.L. Fraser

Notes

1. Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson* (1974), trans. Emiliana Battista, Continuum, London and New York, 2011, p. xxii.