

**Reading Rancière: The Possibility of Politics, the Viability of
Aesthetics**

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Abstract

The domain of art has largely been considered as an exclusive domain, distinct from the socio-political arena. In spite of persistent efforts by artists and writers to engage with larger political issues, the social and political forces have made continuous efforts to remind and restrict them within the periphery of their art. The idea of aesthetics itself is based upon the aporia of establishing an exclusive domain and accord a certain universal utility to art. The French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere has tried to engage with this aporia in his oeuvre, trying to demonstrate that “art and politics are contingent notions” which are, in fact, used to define their other. To understand this phenomenon, he renders the idea of *police* which is described as an organizational system of coordinates that work according to, what he terms as “the distribution of the sensible”, the laws that define the conditions of visibility and invisibility, sayability and unsayability within a particular social system. This paper would try to explore the consequences these Rancierian ideas on the segregation of the disciplines of aesthetics and politics and in the process, question the nature of the political and the aesthetic, even the very idea of a discipline itself. The views originating from this discussion would also lead to interesting observations about the nature of the *democratic* itself, marking a strong difference between the ideas of democracy as a distinct political formulation and the democratic substance of a society, the consequences of which can be seen in the European art and culture in the aftermath of the French revolution, for instance, the bourgeoisification of the novel.

Reading Rancière: The Possibility of Politics, the Viability¹ of Aesthetics

The contemporary French philosopher, Jacques Rancière (born 1940) was a student of Althusser but broke with him in the aftermath of 1968 revolution as he disapproved of Althusser's disallowance of spontaneous popular revolt in his theoretical edifice and support of a politics of order. As opposed to this he began to think about a kind of politics based on, what Sean Sayers describes as, "an egalitarian politics of democratic emancipation" (Sayers). Rancière describes the existing social order as the "police order" which is an anti-democratic, anti-political system that maintains the status quo via its rules and conventions. To describe the workings of this police order, he introduces the concept of "the distribution of the sensible". According to Eli Bornowsky, "This distribution is composed of the *a priori* laws which condition what is possible to see and hear, to say and think, to do and make. It is important to stress this point: the distribution of the sensible is literally the conditions of possibility for perception, thought, and activity, what it is possible to apprehend by the senses. The sensible is partitioned into various regimes and therefore delimits forms of inclusion and exclusion in a community" (Bornowsky).

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

The distribution of the sensible is the basis for Rancière's discussion of politics. Politics is generally understood in terms of particular representations of the political – "images of state law enforcement, activists, gritty typography, or public interventions and institutional critique, etc" (Bornowsky). But Rancière's philosophy shifts from thinking about particular terrain of politics towards a reconceptualization of the idea of the political itself. Thus, the distribution of the sensible, in pointing to the politics of what makes things visible and invisible, iterable and uniterable, works in a Kantian critical framework where it tries to determine the conditions of possibility of a thing. According to Sean Sayers, "He [Rancière] rejects the Habermasian and liberal idea that politics consists of a rational debate between diverse interests. He also rejects the view that politics involves struggles between pre-established interest groups or classes. Political struggle occurs when the excluded seek to establish their identity, by speaking for themselves and striving to get their voices recognised

¹ Two senses-life (vivacity) and practicability.

as legitimate and heard. Politics is thus a struggle between the established social order and its excluded 'part which has no part' (Sayers).

For Rancière, the sense of 'cutting' and 'redistribution' co-exist within the framework of the 'distribution of the sensible' symbolising the simultaneous existence of a "symbolic violence" and an "emancipatory potentiality", something that he builds upon the writings of Foucault and Deleuze (Birrell 2). The 'distribution of the sensible' is not just based on a democratic impulse but rather on the very concept of demos, "the undifferentiated collection of the 'unaccounted for' (anarithmoi)" (*Dissensus* 32). In his book, *Dissensus*, he observes that "Democracy is not a political regime. As a rupture in the logic of the arkhe, that is, of the anticipation of ruling in its disposition, it is the very regime of politics itself as a form of relationship that defines a specific subject" (31). The term, 'democracy' signifies a special meaning for Rancière, "a certain sharing of the perceptible, a certain redistribution of its sites" (*The Flesh* 104; quoted in Birrell 2); what he elsewhere calls a "redistribution of knowledge and truth" (*The Nights* 104; quoted in Birrell 2). Thus, it is the emancipatory dimension existing within the 'distribution of sensible'.

But what does the symbolic violence and emancipatory potentiality mean in real terms? To understand this closely, I want to revert to his book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. In the book, Rancière delineates the views of the nineteenth century exiled French educationist, Joseph Jacotot, to point to the repressive and impositional side of the normative pedagogic practices based on "explication" of facts to ignorant students by knowledgeable teachers. Rancière observes: "It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes the incapable as such. To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself" (6). According to this view, such a practice is an act of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak's phrase) that denies the very subjectivity of the subject.

THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS

As opposed to the stultifying edifice of normative knowledge transmission, the artistic demesne offers an egalitarian model of knowledge realization. Here, he gives the example of the seventeenth century French dramatist, Jean Racine, whose work, he says, is based on the

principle of intellectual equality, which is to say, that it does not presuppose an ontological hierarchy between the artist and audience based on the idea of artist's epistemological sovereignty.

His [Racine's] genius lies in having worked by the principle of the equality of intelligence, in having not believed himself superior to those he was speaking to, in having even worked for those who predicted that he would fade like a season. It is left to us to verify that equality, to conquer that power through our own work. This does not mean making tragedies equal to Racine's; it means, rather, employing as much attention, as much artistic research as he, to recounting how we feel and to making others feel it, despite the arbitrariness of language or the resistance of all matter to the work of our hands. (Rancière, *The Ignorant* 70; quoted in Birrell, 3.)

Racine's democratic drama is a synecdoche for the aesthetic enterprise. Rather than a subtle inversion of the hierarchy, as in the post-structuralist views of the "Death of the Author" (Barthes) and the reduction of the author into a mere "function" or classifying principle (Foucault), Rancière emphasizes the equitable impulse of the aesthetic engagement. Instead of being an overbearing pulpiter, the artist is an activist fighting against an unequal distribution of the sensible, "the incommensurability of wrong". The corresponding legal principles for aesthetic engagement would be *sui juris* (i.e. of one's own right) as opposed to the totalitarian pedagogy which operates on the principle of *alieni juris* (under the control of another, as lunatic or infant).

The artist's emancipatory lesson, opposed on every count to the professor's stultifying lesson, is this: each one of us is an artist to the extent that he carries out a double process; he is not content to be a mere journeyman but wants to make all work a means of expression, and he is not content to feel something but tries to impart it to others. The artist needs equality as the explicator needs inequality... We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists. (Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 71., quoted in Birrell, 3.)

POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

The understanding of the connection between distribution and domination accounts, at least partially, for Rancière's description of the 'regimes' of art. The idea of a 'regime' itself situates aesthetics itself within a historio-political architectonike. Here, it would refer to the hegemony of a set of rules and edicts that grant certain set of practices to be acknowledged as art. "Rancière defines the politics of art as the endless recasting of what is perceptible, understandable and therefore artistically conceivable during a certain "aesthetic regime," defined as the politically determined configuration of knowledge and societal activities associated with a certain historical and political contingency" (Mecchia). Scrutinizing a regime of art means to simultaneously probe the role accredited to art by the distribution of the sensible as well as discern how art ratifies or refutes that distribution.

What unites these notions, however, is the attempt to subject conditions of possibility to historical analysis. When Foucault speaks of the archaeological level and Rancière the regime, each is attempting to isolate the system of historical positivities which structures the field of possible experience and expression. (Tanke)

He classifies the history of aesthetics into a typology of three artistic regimes. The "ethical regime of images" is based on Plato's critique of imitation and "is primarily concerned with the origin and *telos* of imagery in relation to the *ethos* of a community" (Rockhill 4). Art (poetry) seen as *poiesis* (bringing forth) is considered to be potentially subversive to the established laws and order of the polis. This phrenitic capability of any narrative- poetic or pictorial- is checked by privileging "true arts" that preserve the essence of a community teaching its inhabitants to "fit-in with the distribution" of do-able and know-able activities. This communitarian emphasis on art denies any ipseity (individuality) to art.

The "poetic – or representative – regime of arts" is based on Aristotelian notions of art where art is ascribed a specific purpose in the polis which is essentially a mimetic one, that is to say, art is supposed to 'represent' the actions of men rather than 'imitate' them to produce an exact resemblance. Thus, this regime privileges substance over essence. Instead of being considered as simulacra of other human activities, art is seen in a new light as an autonomous social occupation. This exclusivity from community's distributions "renders the arts visible".

"Aristotle's conception of *mimesis* responds directly to Plato's suspicion regarding *technai* [ways of doing] freed from the bonds of an *arkhe*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle attempts to define a form of fiction that would grant art some autonomy from the

community's distributions, while making concessions to the ethical concerns voiced by Plato. Aristotle affirms that *under certain conditions* the representation of action is different from the creation of simulacra. While art is to some degree individuated, Aristotle restricts the practice of imitation, limiting it to serious actions performed by subjects worthy of consideration". (Tanke 79, italics mine)

The "aesthetic regime of the arts" is characterised, primarily by the negation of the normativity of the representative regime. The distinction between *poiesis* (the manner of making) and *aisthesis* (the effects produced) is no longer based on the principles of mimesis where a particular subject is considered as corresponding to a specific means of presentation (Tanke 81). The tenets of aesthetic regime are based on the rupture of determinate linkages between artistic objectives and spectatorial effects. The aesthetic regime is characterised by a blurring of the boundary that segregated art from life. The artists take quotidian incidents from diverse situations like walking in the arcade, interiors of bourgeois homes etc and infuse them with a novel meaning creating a "sensorium" where anything put on the canvas can become a raw material for art (Tanke 82). This break in the monolith of representation is something that Rancière views as emancipatory in nature.

According to Rancière, "The word aesthetics... refers to... the mode of being of the objects of art" (22). The aesthetic regime emerged from a rupture in the representative regime of art catalysed by the French revolution and later strengthened during the course of German Romanticism and modernist avant-garde practices. The idea of Aesthetics as an exclusive field of enquiry initiated during German Romanticism by Baumgarten. The ontological basis for aesthetics (the word is derived from Greek *aisthētikos*, which means, perceptible by the senses) is the recognition of it as something in excess of the rational economy of concepts. Yet, for Baumgarten, the truth of aesthetics is only realizable by the philosopher, not the artist. The segregation of cognate experience of truth from the affective idea of pleasure has been the fundamental project of philosophical aesthetics, as seen in Kant. Thus, the aporia of the desire to create an autonomous domain of aesthetics and at the same time, a proclivity to accord a certain universal efficacy to art is innate to the ideal of aesthetics, what Rancière calls "the two-fold politics inherent in the logic of representation" (17). But, the aesthetic regime is based on a paradox that "strictly identifies art in the singular" and simultaneously frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres" (23).

Thus, there is no objective criterion which relates aesthetics to politics. So, Rancière observes, “It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around” (65). For Tanke, this entails a radical potential in arts; “In this sense, what is most exciting about these analyses is the indication they provide that the arts, even those thought far-removed from the political concerns of the day, can play a role in transforming the world” (76).

INDISCIPLINARITY

The distribution of the sensible is what inexorably links politics to aesthetics. Since the socio-political edifice is based upon the distribution of the sensible, it is an aesthetic order in a broad sense of the term. Aesthetics is inextricably bound with politics “because the battle [political struggle] takes place over the image of society -- what it is permissible to say or to show” (Davis).

I intend to show in both cases that *art* and *politics* are contingent notions. The fact that there are always forms of power does not mean that there is always such a thing as politics, and the fact that there is music and sculpture does in a society does not mean that art is constituted as an independent category. (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.51)

What is being questioned here is the idea of art or politics as an “independent category”, and, in a larger sense, the very idea of a discipline determined by its finitude. In an interview, Rancière categorizes his oeuvre as “indisciplinary”.

It is not only a matter of going besides the disciplines but of breaking them. My problem has always been to escape the division between disciplines, because what interests me is the question of the distribution of territories, which is always a way of deciding who is qualified to speak about what. The apportionment of disciplines refers to the more fundamental apportionment that separates those regarded as qualified to think from those regarded as unqualified; those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects. (*Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinary: An Interview*, quoted in Birrell 4.)

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