

**JACQUES RANCIÈRE (2009) *AESTHETICS AND ITS DISCONTENTS*. TRANS. S. CORCORAN.  
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There has been a rapid surge of interest in the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, as of late: his growing appeal to Anglophone scholars is evident in a steady acceleration of the translation of his work with at least six new volumes published or planned since 2009. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* marks neither the crest nor the conclusion, but more a mid-point of this on-going surge, but is no less relevant for this. Indeed, this volume should be thought of as an important development in that it connects Rancière's more established concern with politics and democracy with his current work on aesthetics. This recent frenzy of translation has been marred, however, by a marginal, but persistent, complaint: an ambiguity of titling. As the author himself notes, *The Future of the Image* is distinctly lacking in any sustained concern with futurity (2009: 1), while *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2008) offers an intriguing re-conceptualisation of aesthetics and art history that is nonetheless less directly political than a scholar of Anglo cultural studies might expect of a Post-Marxist author.

Readers of *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* need not worry though, this book provides exactly what it promises on the cover: not only aesthetics, but also plenty of discontent. For while this volume sees a continuation of Rancière's re-imagining of the conditions of contemporary aesthetics, which readers may be familiar with from the aforementioned *Politics of Aesthetics*, it also contains a plethora of provocative and powerful statements of dissatisfaction, displeasure and dissensus. First there are those who are discontented with the study of aesthetics as such, most prominently Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard, whom Rancière engages in prolonged debate framing them as advocates of art as a site, not of aesthetics, but of ethical truth or community relations. This discussion, in turn, gives rise to a secondary and more powerful discontent, that of Rancière

himself, who takes critical aim at what he describes as the 'ethical turn' of contemporary thinking in matters of both politics and aesthetics, manifest in not only the aesthetic thought of Badiou and Lyotard, but also that political theory that takes its lead from the work of Giorgio Agamben. In doing so, Rancière offers a cogent new theoretical framework through which to think the political possibilities, but also perennial problems, of critical art in the Modernist project, while bringing together the previously disparate strands of his political and aesthetic thought in a new synthesis that expands upon the promise of his earlier work. If this appears as something of a return to old, or even out-dated, questions, it is because, for Rancière, those debates were never finished and the concerns and possibilities raised therein never adequately accounted for, which produces the current confusion and subsequent rejection of aesthetics.

The line which the argument of *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* develops is neither straight nor direct. As with other recent works of Rancière, this is a collection of talks, seminars and essays – five in total – delivered and published in different international venues between 1995 and 2004. While presented as a single whole, any cohesive and systematic overview is not simply provided, but instead must be inferred. Taken together, the introduction and opening section, 'Politics of Aesthetics', along with the final chapter, 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics', constitute a wide-ranging discussion of critical art, political aesthetics and the ethical turn, which acts to bookend specific dissections of Badiou and Lyotard, loosely grouped under the heading, 'The Antimonies of Modernism'. Given this wide variation in its origins, the book is surprisingly coherent as a whole, but still suffers from a degree of ellipsis, on one hand, and repetition, on the other, both internally and with respect to Rancière's other recent publications. The effect is less of a conversation interrupted mid-stream, than of a television serial whose comprehensibility depends on having viewed all the prior episodes: new viewers can still follow along with the main thrust of the action, and derive a great deal of pleasure and enlightenment in doing so, but are liable to overlook finer details which appear full of meaning to the seasoned viewer. The exposition of earlier ideas central to the current work are summarised in passing, but, despite their inclusion, the readers who did not catch the previous instalment will be at a distinct disadvantage. This caveat should not ward off new readers – who will most likely gain as much as they lose by approaching the work with fresh eyes – but simply caution them that the glossary that accompanies the earlier

*Politics of Aesthetics*, which explains Rancière's basic conceptual language, might serve as a useful companion. That said, in relation to that earlier work, with this iteration Rancière comes across a much more engaging and casual author, less prone to bombastic pronouncements couched in thickets of jargon and grandiose elocutions. This is likely not an effect of a shift in writing style in the original, but of a more modest translation (of particular note is an idiosyncratic though quite endearing use of the word, 'mate' as a synonym for friend [112]) and this volume is the better for it.

As the title clearly suggests, the first section addressing the 'Politics of Aesthetics' is a return to the subject matter of Rancière's earlier work of the same name: a rewriting of art history, with an eye to the manner in which understandings of art relate to political, epistemological and social modes of being, what Rancière refers to as the 'distribution of the sensible' (25). More than a simple reprise, the first half of the book recalibrates and elaborates upon this theoretical construct in direct opposition to those who would denigrate the discourse of aesthetics, whether as an ideological illusion or an interruption between the spectator and the sensual power of pure art. And though Rancière suggests that the contemporary rejection of aesthetics has gone beyond the *Distinction* model of mystification (Bourdieu: 1984), anointing Badiou as Bourdieu's successor in anti-aestheticism if not in method or in temperament, those in cultural studies might question the assertion that the moment of Bourdieu's model has passed. If anything, we are more tightly wedded to that model, still, than to any interpretation arising out of the work of Badiou, where aesthetics is that which comes between the subject and the glorious encounter with art. Against both Badiou and Bourdieu, though, Rancière suggests that the possibility that the discourse of aesthetics, and the apparent confusion therein is not an invention of speculative philosophers, but rather a response to a wider mutation in the cultural perception and function of art. This mutation is understood in terms of a shift from a 'Representative' to an 'Aesthetic' regime of art, which creates new profane conditions of art divorced from any apparent natural order. For those not familiar with his previous work on the succession of the regimes of art, Rancière builds his argument within a précis of that model, wherein he defines the movement from representative to aesthetic as a shift from an art caught up in socially mandated hierarchies of subject and genre to a detached art of disorder, which seeks its justification in poetic models of human potential and affect. Rancière is at pains to make it clear that his intention here is not to defend such a regime, or the political claims

it might make, but rather to clarify and make sense of the manner in which aesthetics has been thought to carry the promise of a politics within itself. As Rancière himself admits, this argument is somewhat complicated by the double-duty of the term 'aesthetics', which here works as both 'a general regime of the visibility and intelligibility of art and a mode of interpretive discourse that itself belongs to this regime' (11): in the face of this ambiguity the reader is left to distinguish between these two usages; a task that is not perhaps as straightforward as the author suggests.

Thus, while it is the second definition that informs Rancière's declaration of a shift from a representative to an aesthetic regime, it is the first that informs his notion of the "distribution of the sensible," the set of self-evident facts of a community as to what or who may be seen, heard and known. Previously considered in chiefly aesthetic terms, this fundamental notion of the "sensible" is here expanded upon to encompass its political sense, which in previous works has been only hinted at rather than fully developed. Here, then, is the expression of Rancière's wider and on-going project: an articulation between the aesthetic concerns of *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2008) on one hand, and the political apparatus of his earlier works, such as *Disagreement* (1999) or the more recent *Hatred of Democracy* (2006), on the other. In this formulation, politics is thought to constitute a process of rendering visible and audible of those previously understood to be outside the community or to lack the capacity for political speech, such that their demands disrupt situations of consensus and demand a space for those groups within the community. Both politics and aesthetics are thus taken up as moments of the distribution of the sensible: interventions into the sensory coordinates of the status quo which effect a redistribution and reapportioning of identities, subjects, spaces and times, which is to say 'different ways of relating the constitution of a material form and that of a symbolic space' (25).

The politics of aesthetics are thus tied to the potential of art to disrupt stable forms of sensory community experience, a potential that Rancière theorises in terms of two distinct and opposing forces within the artistic practices of Modernity: the absolute separation of art from the everyday and the promise of art to rebuild the community. Both these forces are argued to be anchored in the purported autonomy of Modernist art, which Rancière conceptualises through the somewhat unorthodox evocation of Friedrich von Schiller and his notion of art and aesthetics as a self-contained site of 'free appearance' and 'free play' (27). Schiller's

freedom of art is presented as an exemplary articulation of the aesthetic regime, wherein art promises an alternative to the ordinary everyday sensorium of unfree work and domination. The aesthetic thereby promises the possibility of a sensory revolution, couched in unfashionably Utopian and even Idealist terms, as more profound than any revolution at the level of the state: an aesthetic revolution which 'appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life' (32). It is by dint of its separation that art under the aesthetic regime produces its particular politics, or 'metapolitics', as Rancière corrects himself (in the Rancièrian lexicon, metapolitics refers to a political philosophy which perceives a greater political truth beneath or beyond the false conflicts of democratic politics, of which he cites Marxism as an example). There is thus no contradiction between the purity of art for art's sake and the politicisation of art, but rather a deeper paradox which arises in the mode of aesthetic art itself, between the separation of autonomous art and its promise to transform the world: 'The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfillment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality' (36).

The politics of art under an aesthetic regime may thus be conceptualised through two conflicting interpretations: those of the 'resistant form' and those of the 'becoming-life of art' (44). It is in terms of this conflict that Rancière seeks to explain and account for the political possibilities of a contemporary critical art: one which seeks to produce critical knowledge of the structures of domination in its spectator. However, with the end of the avant-garde and the emergence of what Rancière refers to as the 'post-Utopian aesthetics' of contemporary art, he suggests that these contradictory forces have become prised apart into an aesthetics of the sublime, on one hand, and 'relational aesthetics' on the other. The latter seeks to use art to actively and directly rebuild sundered community bonds, while the former perceives art as a site of 'dazzling, heterogeneous singularity ... that commands a sense of community' beyond political emancipation (21). Both share in common, though, a desire to construct a new community, or world space, through art. These are no longer critical arts per se, then, but rather transformations of art from dialectic provocations to heterogeneous compositions, which Rancière classifies in terms of four major 'figures': the play, the inventory, the encounter and the mystery (53). The compounding paradox here is that these new forms of art and artist are increasingly called upon to perform political functions, a task to which Rancière expresses considerable doubt as to their adequacy. Certainly, the

framework that he furnishes for thinking through the political role of such art would seem to suggest a pessimistic interpretation of art's place in any democratic politics that could potentially be construed by members of the art community, where Rancière has apparently enjoyed considerable popularity (Davis, 2006), as a betrayal tantamount to that of Jean Baudrillard's 1996 essay 'The Conspiracy of Art' (2005).

Rather than follow up this question of political art in any great detail, however, Rancière turns to a more in-depth consideration of the titular discontents, Badiou and Lyotard. While certainly present in the earlier stage of Rancière's discussion, these two theorists here take centre stage as the subjects of extended critiques of their particular (in)aesthetic models. For those not concerned with the vagaries or specificities of continental philosophical debates, these middle sections will most likely prove the least compelling or useful, in particular the oddly pedantic denunciation of Badiou's inaesthetic model, published in English as *The Handbook of Inaesthetics* (2004), which requires that the reader have some prior acquaintance with that text. Rancière's critique of Badiou is largely premised upon a restatement of Rancière's own model of artistic transition between ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes in opposition to Badiou's own schema, yet in the absence of a wider theoretical context this denunciation reads as more of a contradiction than an argument, another episode in an on-going feud between two former students of Althusser. In contrast, Rancière's treatment of Lyotard, which focuses upon *The Inhuman* (1991), is much more immediately accessible and compelling in its range and reach. The critique of Lyotard's theory of sublime aesthetics is rooted in a reminder, reinterpretation and reinterpretation of that model's Kantian foundations: indeed Lyotard's sublime is presented as a complete inversion of its Kantian counterpart. Rancière is careful to characterise this as an intentional, rather than accidental, divergence, motivated by a desire to retain art as a category radically and sensibly distinct from everyday objects of consumption. This separation, Rancière suggests, allows a conception of art as a site of ultimate separation and ultimate strangeness that is irreconcilably alienated from the experience of reason, and that thereby functions as the site of the ethical commitment to the Other. Rather than a promise of resistance, art then becomes an obligation to remember, which Rancière defines as 'ethics, [which] accomplishes a joint suppression of both aesthetics and politics' (105).

It is to this question and concern of ethics that Rancière turns in the final chapter. Admitting that “ethics is no doubt a fashionable word,” Rancière goes on to argue that any obvious understanding of this current moment as ethical is mistaken, and that what he refers to as ‘the reign of ethics is not the reign of moral judgement over the operations of art or of political action’ (109). Rather, Rancière proffers an alternate understanding of ethics as the ‘subsumption of all forms of discourse and practice beneath the same indistinct point of view’ (110). The ethical experience of the world entails a radical interpretation of law, now understood as fact, to which all and everything must comply: a state of affairs which gives rise to an ‘unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and reparation’ (110) that is argued to inform in equal measure Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*, Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River*, the War on Terror and Agamben’s political theory of the exception and the camp. Following the ethical turn, there is a suppression of the division between law and fact in order to establish ‘consensus’, which for Rancière is equivalent to the evacuation of the political core of the community. In seeking to reduce conflict, consensus suppresses differences within a community, assigning every person a correct place within the consequent social order. Those left outside no longer constitute supplementary political subjects with rights that just have not yet been acknowledged, and whom the community is obligated to assist, but rather radical and alien others who are subject to absolute rejection from the community and the attendant rights. Under such conditions, all differences and distinctions are levelled out in their ethical confrontation with the ‘law of the Other’ (119). And though this language arises out of Lyotard, it is in Agamben’s theory of the state of exception, in books such as *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) and *State of Exception* (2005) that Rancière locates the most pertinent expression of the ethical.

Rancière argues that Agamben’s generalisation of the state of exception functions to erase all differences ‘between henchmen and victims, including even that between the extreme crime of the Nazi State and the ordinary everyday life of our democracies’ (120). Under the global law of exception, the possibility of difference, dissensus and politics evaporate before an indistinct ethical regime, wherein the only possibility of salvation arises from a messianic waiting. In Rancière’s terminology, the state of exception thus constitutes an ‘archipolitics’, the relegation of the entire community in the face of an absolute ethical edict, ‘in which all forms of domination, or of emancipation, are reduced to the global nature of an ontological catastrophe from which only a God can save us’ (43).

Nor is this ethical closure restricted to politics; Rancière locates an aesthetic analogy in the previously considered notion of the sublime, which provides him an opportunity to return one last time to his interlocutor of choice, Lyotard. The art of the sublime is an art of indirect consensus, Rancière declares, insofar as it is an art of the unrepresentable, which for Lyotard arises out of the 'endless evil and catastrophe' that arises out of the suffering of the Holocaust (123). The unrepresentable is the central term of the ethical turn of aesthetics, not simply because the notion conceals an ethical proscription, but because that proscription collapses aesthetic and moral autonomy into a singular law of alienation that arises from outside art. Art's promise of emancipation or political radicality is thus transformed into its inversion: an endless work of mourning and 'ethical witnessing of unrepresentable catastrophe' (131), not of the revolution to come, but now instead of the radical unthinkable event of the Holocaust. This 'hard ethics of infinite evil' finds its compliment in the 'soft ethics of consensus' of relational aesthetics, which Rancière finds equally culpable in the establishment of an ethical order due to such art's attempts to repair the social bond and foster consensus. Thus the previous promise of art to generate political and aesthetic change now gives way to a legitimation of a single consensual order.

What then are we to make of the possibility of a progressive political aesthetics in light of Rancière's dissection of the conditions of contemporary possibility? Left unanswered is the question of whether aesthetic operations constitute a proper politics in any sense, or whether aesthetics is simply understood as another manifestation of what Rancière elsewhere designates 'political philosophy' that distracts from a democratic political programme. We are left in little doubt, though, that an aesthetic metapolitics is always preferable to an ethical archipolitics. The practice of art under an aesthetic regime is certainly linked to the production of a democratic dissensus, but its designation as metapolitical leaves a final conclusion unforthcoming and open to interpretation, especially given Rancière's turn to Marxism as the example par excellence of metapolitics. Is Rancière here then positing aesthetics as comparable to Marxism in its political programme and scope? Could such a declaration be considered a new theory of political aesthetics or instead simply recuperated within those historical categories, such as Romanticism or Idealism, with which contemporary theory has all but dispensed? While there is a possibility that some readers may take issue with the extent of Rancière's claims for art as a political force, there are certainly no



grounds on which *Aesthetics and its Discontents* could be considered to do so naively. Rather, this volume comprises the transition of Rancière's theory of art into a well-situated and widely-informed assault on a current critical orthodoxy of ethical thought that itself exhibits a theoretical variant of 'consensus' of the sort that Rancière seeks to critique. Indeed, this is perhaps the most productive, albeit the most generous, manner in which to interpret Rancière's declaration of discontent: as an admonition to recall the political potential once perceived within the aesthetic and to thereby take stock of how that might challenge an increasing sense of ethical consensus in art, politics and critical theory, as well as the ways in which we think through them.

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