

Aesthetics and Politics Revisited: An Interview with Jacques Rancière

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GAVIN ARNALL: You argue in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that “it is within the mimetic regime that the old stands in contrast with the new.” This makes us think of the surrealist practice of invoking the outmoded, a practice overlooked by many theorists of the avant-garde who characterize the avant-garde as inclined toward rupture, the future, and the new. Do you see this romantic gesture of invoking the outmoded and utilizing it in a new way as a practice in accord with the aesthetic regime? Does this practice, in other words, participate in constructing what you call “the newness of the tradition?”

JACQUES RANCIÈRE: Yes, I think so. The aesthetic regime means a rupture with what came before, the mimetic regime. The latter was ruled by an idea of the historical evolution that created a gap between the ancients and the moderns. On the one hand, the ancients were supposed to provide models. But, at the same time, they were the primitives, and it was no longer possible to do the same thing as they had done. One had to study Sophocles or Aeschylus, but it was not imaginable to perform their plays because they were at odds with modern refinement. I think one of the markers of the move toward the aesthetic regime is the project to present on stage the plays of Greek dramatists. Even the concept of the classics is linked with the aesthetic regime, which leaves open the possibility of reusing, recycling, and reinventing the ancient forms. I think it is quite an important point. You mention surrealism as a way of reusing existing forms,

and it is true that in surrealism there are instances of reusing aesthetic forms that are scorned, such as popular culture. Basically, I think that the aesthetic regime means this possibility of reappropriating all the works of the past, that it has been constructed by forms of recycling, by reinterpretations. The idea of rupture has been heavily emphasized; however, it is important that precisely the most radical statements of rupture with the past are combined by forms of artistic practice that were in fact practices of reinterpretation and the reuse of existing forms. Surrealist practices clearly belong to that tradition that is part of the actual tradition of modernism, along with future-oriented ideas of art constructing the new forms of life. Modernism has always thrived on that duplicity. The problem is that what is called modernism today belongs to neither of these two forms. It is in fact an antimodernist ideology elaborated in narrow leftist circles at the end of the 1930s. Postmodernism in turn validated the confusion and contributed to obscure the historical reality of aesthetic modernism.

ARNALL: You also assert in *The Politics of Aesthetics* that the aesthetic revolution predates the technological revolution. In that case, what are the preconditions for the possibility of the aesthetic revolution? Whereas the development of technology is used by Walter Benjamin and others to explain the specific characteristics of modernity and the consequent practices of the avant-garde, what would you say conditioned the aesthetic revolution?

RANCIÈRE: I don't know whether I can say what are the technical or eco-

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conomic conditions for the aesthetic revolution. You must not think about the aesthetic revolution in classical Marxist terms, looking at what is the precondition or what is the economic basis or the technological basis. It is certain that new media played a part in the constitution of the aesthetic regime—not so much in revolutionizing artistic practice itself as in creating new forms of diffusion that helped create a new art world. One has emphasized the role of photography. But before photography, the new techniques of lithography had allowed the wide circulation of artistic reproductions, notably in popular magazines. But the conditions for the creation of this new art world were first and foremost political—and even military. The French Revolution and the opening of the Louvre gave a new status to works of art. In the past they had been submitted to a double hierarchy. There was the academic hierarchy of genres of painting linked to the dignity of their subjects. And there was the social hierarchy, linked to the function of works of art, destined to illustrate religious dogmas, to glorify monarchy, or to set the décor of aristocratic life. Now they were offered to the view of anonymous visitors and spectators. In front of them, the hierarchies of genres tended to vanish, and the works, separated from their hierarchical destinations, were increasingly perceived as expressions of the collective grandeur of the people and of their collective patrimony. Even the seizures by the French revolutionary and Napoleonic armies resulted in creating the new visibility of art as a collective patrimony, erasing the distinctions of genres and the hierarchies of schools. The aesthetic revolution is part of a wider redistribution of forms of experience. It is linked with a transformation in the forms of experience so that the condition is conditioned.

LAURA GANDOLFI: You state very convincingly that it is “because the anonymous became the subject matter of art that the act of recording such a subject matter can be an art.” How could you relate this to ready-made objects? Does the honor acquired by the commonplace in the aesthetic revolution contribute to the reception of readymade objects as art? And if so, can you explain why such objects were first received with such indignation, thinking specifically of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fontaine*, which was rejected by the museum when Duchamp initially submitted it?

RANCIÈRE: In my view, I don’t really give so much importance to Duchamp and to the readymade. I think the readymade is only a particular form of interpretation and implementation of something that was wider, an already existing erasing of the border between what be-

longs to art and what does not belong to art. The readymade plays no role in *The Politics of Aesthetics* because it plays no significant role in a redistribution of forms that had already occurred. In *The Future of the Image*, I addressed that redistribution through Emile Zola's novel *Le Ventre de Paris*. The book was published in the 1870s, but it bears witness to the aesthetic revolution illustrated by the construction of the new food market in Paris in the 1850s with its iron architecture. Zola makes the readers see it through the gaze of a painter who opposes the new beauty of the iron architecture and of the huge displays of vegetables, cheese, or fish to the old beauty of the gothic church nearby. He explains that his own masterpiece was not a painting but the rearrangement of the display of his cousin, a pork butcher. The readymade is only a side aspect of this wider revolution. Duchamp became an icon in the 1960s in the context of antimodernist polemics. But in his time, he was not important. What was much more important were the forms of collage by which cubists, cubofuturists, and surrealists tried to display on their canvases the new forms of economic, industrial, and urban life, from technical inventions to the culture of the cafes, windows, posters, and magazines.

ENEAS ZARAMELLA: In *The Emancipated Spectator*, you argue that the spectators are "active. They observe, select, compare, interpret. They make their own poems with the poem that is performed in front of them." Given this understanding of the spectator, how do you understand the role of police forces in conditioning or determining the interpretations or poems that are made by the spectator? In other words, does the current distribution of the sensible limit in some ways its redistribution? Or can a certain distribution of the sensible interfere with the ability of the spectator to interpret freely? You also referred to the "*désintéressement*" of the spectator in your lecture on Monday.¹ Could you discuss how this view of the spectator is related to the museum as an institution of art?

RANCIÈRE: I think one important condition of the emancipation of the spectator is precisely the creation of places where works of art or performances of art are no longer restrained to a specific audience or a specific function. The creation of art museums at the end of the eighteenth century was important in that respect. Now, of course, the museum is often seen as an instance of the legitimization of high art, but for a long time it was a place of confusion, and many were

1. Rancière, "Modernity Revisited: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art," lectures delivered at Princeton University, 19, 21, and 26 Oct. 2009.

worried about all those people coming into the museum and not being able to judge art, in the same way that people are now worried about Google, saying that it's a disaster, that all these people don't know how to do research. It was the same for the museum during the nineteenth century, the dispersion of all these people coming to the museum without knowing art. Over time, the new institution created a certain form of policy of the institution, more or less putting lay people out of the museum to have them reenter through educational programs. It was the same in the nineteenth century with certain forms of the reorganization of theaters, creating more comfortable theaters, which means getting the mixed population out of the theater. After this, those who had thrown them outside bemoaned: "Oh, it's too bad—the common people won't go to the museum; they won't go to the theater," and then they created programs to have people come to the museum and the theater. I think what allows the spectator to create his or her own poem is the existence of places and spectacles whose status remains more or less indeterminate. When people go to the museum now, they are in front of modes of exhibition and explanatory labels that tell them what they must see. It is different with forms of art that escape canonization. For instance, I think to my own experience of cinephilia, when I was young. It was a time of indetermination, when film buffs created a kind of autodidactic cinematic culture at a remove from what was supposed to be high culture. What happened afterward is the canonization of the artists that they had selected, the specialization of film studies, and the phenomenon of the multiplex, an attempt to segregate the public and an attempt to give to each audience what is supposed to be its lot.

ARNALL: One of the major elements of the representative regime is the primacy of narration over description. Novelistic realism, on the other hand, "imposes raw presence to the detriment of the rational sequence of the story." Do you see Benjamin's nostalgic discussion of the loss of the ability to narrate experience as perhaps unknowingly defending what you have called the representative regime? Could a negative element of modernity as characterized by Benjamin, such as the decline of the ability to narrate experience, actually be an expression of the aesthetic revolution?

RANCIÈRE: Well, I think it's a complicated issue. There are two points. I think what realism means and the realistic emphasis on description is a kind of break with the tradition of narration, the idea of fiction as action, and the Aristotelian definition of the poem as an imitation of

actions, which also meant, of course, a hierarchical view of the characters concerned in the poem, because action concerned active men, which meant men free from the links of everyday life and able to pursue great designs. I think that what we observe in the nineteenth century with the realistic novel is the ruin of that model of action. That ruin was often the subject matter of the novel—the failure of action, the failure of the model of the character pursuing ends determined by his will. But it also concerned the very structure of the fiction. During the nineteenth century, there was a kind of nostalgia for the times when there was good narration because the development of the action was not cluttered by the multiplicity of vulgar characters and vulgar things. I think Benjamin's nostalgia is perhaps something different, the idea of narration as belonging to a form of life and of popular culture. It is true that the promotion of realistic fiction, with this kind of suspension of action, can be viewed at the same time as the rupture of the aristocratic model of action and narration. On the other hand, it can be viewed as the end of the tradition of fiction as a form of human communication. I think there is something a bit strange in the attitude of Benjamin and probably some kind of, for me, dubious nostalgia. I don't think that the change in the structure of the novel means necessarily the incapacity of people to communicate their experience. It's not the same level. And, on the other hand, I'm struck by the fact that Benjamin bases his statement on the case of Nikolai Leskov because Leskov's tales don't follow an old tradition of narration. Rather, they obey a deliberate strategy, privileging the tale as something popular, against the Western-oriented intelligentsia in Russia. At the same time, Leskov's narrations are very complicated narratives with narrators telling what other narrators had told them so that, in fact, it is modern. It is a novel form of structure borrowed from the novel and not a kind of perpetuation of the antique tradition of narration.

ARNALL: I think it would be a good idea to return briefly to the question of the museum. If I understood you correctly on Monday, you described the museum as paradoxical insofar as it decontextualizes objects by removing them from their original public space while also enabling new communities to form. Can you describe the character of this possible community a bit more for us? Who exactly can take part in this community? Would you say that the museum is a place for the collective reception of art, even regarding museums that are private rather than public?

RANCIÈRE: I don't exactly think of the museums as a place of collective

experience but rather as one of individual experience that at the same time breaks an existing distribution of the sensible. The other day I argued that there was a kind of end of a certain destination of works of art. This does not mean that the museum creates a new kind of collective popular appropriation. Rather, it creates the possibility of new forms of perception that can also be implemented in the relation of people to their lived experience. And those new forms of perception in turn took part in the creation of new forms of social exchange and collective political subjectivization.

GANDOLFI: Can you speak about how some of your readings of aesthetic practices, such as the egalitarian aspect of writing, relate to issues facing the non-Western world? We are thinking, for example, of the considerably lower literacy rate of most countries in Latin America.

RANCIÈRE: Well, it depends on what you mean by the non-Western world. Most countries today belong at the same time to the Western and to the non-Western world, and the boundary of literacy means different things. There are civilizations in which writing is a privileged knowledge that takes on an explicit function of separation. This was the case for civilizations with a language of ideograms. In such cases, literacy means an absolute barrier, an infinite distance between the masses and the elite of the very few who are able to master the practice of writing. This was the case for the Chinese mandarins. It is not the same for what we call literacy and illiteracy in our countries. There are still countries where the rate of literacy is very low. But, first, the incapacity of writing does not forbid forms of poetic and rhetorical mastery of the oral language, which means true aesthetic capacities that can be enacted as political capacities. Furthermore, the boundary separating those who can write from those who cannot can be questioned and overstepped at any time, and the appropriation of writing, the struggle for stealing the privilege of writing from those who possess it became an issue at stake in the egalitarian struggle. It was the case for the forms of self-education that were part of working-class emancipation in nineteenth-century Europe, and it is still the case for the movements of landless peasants in Latin America today.

ARNALL: Thinking of your concept of the community of equals, you've argued that it is not an end on goal but rather a presupposition that must be constantly verified. Is there a homologous concept to this political concept in aesthetics? You say very clearly that the aesthetic revolution did not end the representative regime, that there is still a mixture of the representative and the aesthetic regime, so I am won-

dering if the aesthetic revolution, like the community of equals, is something that has to be constantly reasserted, something that does not have a telos.

RANCIÈRE: One should not try to make strict connections between regimes of art and political presuppositions of equality or inequality. As for me, I never constructed a kind of global theory of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Instead, I tried to follow some threads, and I never know whether they will converge. It is true that equality is at work in both cases. But it is at work differently. The presupposition of equality is a basis for the existence of politics in general. This means that it is already valid for ancient democracy. Now, it is well known that the presupposition in that context concerned the free male citizen, and the fact is that the practice of arts in classical Greece was mostly founded on an ethical principle. On the other hand, the aesthetic regime is based on a specific form of equality that is much more inclusive (everything can enter the realm of art), but that has no specific connection with political equality. Insofar as the aesthetic regime is the opening of a space where there is no hierarchical presuppositions, it is the theory of the possible community of equals. Immanuel Kant clearly stated that this community of equals is the presupposition of aesthetic judgment and not the end or achievement of aesthetic experience. What I tried to do, for my part, was to extend in some way the idea of aesthetic judgment, for politics also obeys this principle of a judgment that anticipates a possible common sense or possible community. But it doesn't mean that there is a kind of telos of the aesthetic regime that would be the implementation of a full community. It is true, though, that the idea of aesthetic equality also created the idea of aesthetic education, and this latter idea resulted in the program of the aesthetic constitution of a true community of equals. There is an egalitarian presupposition at the basis of the aesthetic regime. On the one hand, that presupposition supports the capacity to see aesthetically in general, the possibility to perceive and appreciate objects and performances as artistic. On the other hand, there is an aesthetic utopia that has thrived on that presupposition, the program of a community of equals, where equality would be achieved in sensible life, in everyday life. In that case, the presupposition has been transformed into a telos. The enactment of equality always entails the risk of that transformation.

ARNALL: One final question we would like to pose involves Benjamin's discussion of the decline of the oral tradition and its relation to the loss of collective experience that is then regained with the develop-

ment of photography. You have argued, on the other hand, that painting and the novel have contributed positively to the redistribution of the sensible in various ways. Given that the aesthetic revolution did not completely overthrow the representative regime, could we say that Benjamin is sensitive to the negative aspects of the representative regime that remain in spite of certain redistributions of the sensible, such as the loss of collective experience as expressed through the decline in the oral tradition?

RANCIÈRE: In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, I called into question a technician reading of Benjamin, which overstates the radical newness of the technical arts. I showed that photography and cinema could become arts only for eyes and minds already transformed by the transformations implemented in literature and painting. Another point is the issue of the loss of experience. Benjamin's discussion in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," for me, has two aspects that are contradictory. On the one hand, there is this idea of the loss of collective experience, which is indebted to the German tradition of the nostalgia for the lost community. At the same time, what I think is important in Benjamin is the idea that with new technical forms, like photography and cinema, there is the possibility of new forms of experience. For me, this is the most interesting aspect of the essay on reproduction. With cinema, for instance, some forms of artistic subversion that were carried out by dadaism and surrealism as a kind of provocation are now available for everybody. Also, there is the possibility of a popular experience of cinema, of a form of expertise that is available to everybody. I think what is important in Benjamin is not so much the nostalgia for the loss of experience but rather his emphasis of new possibilities of aesthetic experience that are linked to new technologies.