

# Jacques Rancière's Aesthetic Communities

## I. The 'Return' to the Aesthetic

We are, again, witnessing a 'return' to the question of the aesthetic. By this, of course, I don't mean that criticism has returned to concerning itself with making distinctions between good and bad art. Few of us within literary studies, barring notable exceptions such as Harold Bloom, have rediscovered a Leavisite urge to classify artistic production in order to identify those items worthy of inclusion in the tradition, great or otherwise. Rather, what has been increasingly apparent is a movement (back) towards the philosophical question of aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

Such a movement is, of course, more or less explicitly a re-engagement with the legacy of German idealist and romantic thought. As such, it presents an invigoration of the European philosophical tradition in which the definitions, forms and functions of art are again open to widespread critical debate both within and beyond ('Continental' or 'Modern European') philosophy as a discipline. Such debate has more decisive importance than might at first appear from this peremptory sketch of a critical fashionability, however. Its significance may be read, as Jay Bernstein and others have done, as the crucial dimension of the Kantian Critical project to elaborate the underlying unity of reason through analyses of pure reason, morality and aesthetic judgement.<sup>2</sup> Such a characterization of this 'return' as an extension of the Kantian project is eminently plausible, since it offers a reading of modern European philosophy that finds its pre-echo in one of the central texts of the idealist tradition. As has by now become well-known, the trace of the full stakes of this debate about the place of the aesthetic may be found in the so-called 'Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism', which states unequivocally: 'I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are only siblings in *beauty*.'<sup>3</sup> I cite this text not only because of its encapsulation of the spirit of the early idealism, but also because it focuses on the relation between nature, freedom and beauty.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is both an extension of the Kantian project and bears the marks of Schiller's response to

Kant. In both the Kantian and Schillerian versions, the aesthetic takes on a crucial role as an exemplar of judgement *per se*, operating as the desired articulation between pure and practical reason, that is, between modalities of the rational itself and their determinations of the realm of moral decision and decisive action.

Just as in the German thought from which it derives, in contemporary discussions the aesthetic has again taken on a systemic place in philosophy's attempts to identify (with) itself. Peter Osborne has even suggested that it is this relation to the question of the aesthetic that marks out the specific project of Continental philosophy, and that the modern European philosophical tradition—defined here in opposition to Quine's 'Anglo-American' or 'Analytical' sense of philosophy as seeing the world 'from a logical point of view'—sees the world precisely 'from an aesthetic point of view'.<sup>5</sup> Let us merely note in passing the complication that lies within this phrase—from an aesthetic point of view—that would be introduced by a recognition of 'point of view' as precisely a matter of *aisthesis*. An 'aesthetic point of view' would thus be readable as containing the two modalities of 'aesthetics', on the one hand, that of the thought of art, and on the other, that which designates the broader field of perception.

This context is invoked in order to help us orient what remains particular to Jacques Rancière's project. What the sketch that I have just provided might seem to imply, of course, is that art has simply been re-colonized by philosophy, taken again as one (and only one) of its objects, but the systemic role of the aesthetic is what guards against such an incorporation. Since Kant's elaboration of the aesthetic, then, art has remained a foreign body to philosophy, never simply absorbed into or under conceptual determination.<sup>6</sup> Aesthetics is not, consequently, one realm of philosophy among others. In part this is because art has always been the point at which philosophy is forced to open itself out to and into a world that it cannot dominate. And, in part, this is where philosophy meets the political, and not in terms that are too easily thought of as 'political philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> In such an encounter between art, politics and philosophy, there is ample evidence for the need to exercise caution. Addressing the relations involved in this encounter, Rancière proposes at the conclusion of an article entitled 'What aesthetics can mean' that: 'Aesthetics is not the fateful capture of art by philosophy. It is not the catastrophic overflow of art into politics. It is the originary knot that ties a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community.'<sup>8</sup> This article is an attempt to understand what aesthetics (in the work of Jacques Rancière) can mean.

## II. *The Fateful Capture (Aesthetics and Philosophy)*

Rancière has given us a distinct version of this re-reading of the Kantian legacy. In *L'inconscient esthétique* (*The Aesthetic Unconscious*), for example, he tells us that the aesthetic is understood in the *Critique of Judgement* not as 'theory' but as an 'adjective', that it designates a type of judgement and not a domain of objects. He further proposes that 'the "aesthetic" is not a new name to designate the domain of "art". It is a specific configuration of this domain. It is not the new rubric under which is lined up that which previously came under [relevait<sup>9</sup>] the general concept of the *poetic*. It marks a transformation of the regime of thought about art. And this new regime is the place where a specific idea of thought constitutes itself.<sup>10</sup> It is only through the post-Kantian writings of Schelling, the Schlegels and of Hegel that the aesthetic comes to take on its restricted sense as thought about art, but not without, as Rancière wryly notes, an insistent declaration of the inappropriateness of the term (*IE*, 13).

At the opening of his essay 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', Rancière cites a statement from the Fifteenth Letter of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller states that man 'is only fully a human being when he plays' and Rancière offers the following gloss: 'We could reformulate this thought as follows: there exists a specific sensory experience — the aesthetic — that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community'.<sup>11</sup> The aesthetic — here clearly thinking in broad terms of *aisthesis* rather than in the narrower sense of the perception and judgement of works of art — is the articulation between art, the individual and the community. The nature of this promise becomes clearer if we look again at the relevant passage of Schiller:

For, to mince matters no longer, man only plays when he is in the fullest sense [*Bedeutung*] of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays. This proposition, which at the moment may sound like a paradox, will take on both weight and depth of meaning [*Bedeutung*] once we have got as far as applying it to the two-fold [*doppelten*] earnestness of duty and of destiny. It will, I promise you [*ich verspreche es Ihnen*], prove capable of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful [*der ästhetischen Kunst*], and of the still more difficult art of living [*Lebenskunst*].<sup>12</sup>

Only in philosophy, says Schiller, does this account of the relation between life and beauty sound unexpected; in Greek art and feeling such a relation was perfectly common, both alive and operative.

Schiller here places himself in the line of romantic thought that has been called ‘the German dream of Greece’, in which these two arts, *ästhetischen Kunst* and *Lebenskunst*, come together.<sup>13</sup> Where Rancière locates the promise within a ‘specific sensory experience’ that is called the aesthetic, we can see from the passage from Schiller that it is the author who makes the promise — *ich verspreche es Ihnen* — rather than (the experience of) the aesthetic itself. This is not to suggest that Rancière is mistaken in his location of the promise, rather that what his commentary reveals is that Schiller’s promise is a two-fold one. In other words, Schiller promises that the aesthetic holds this promise.

A possible reading opens up here that would link this promise, the promise of the aesthetic, with the other promises that characterize a certain vision of the nineteenth century. For it should already be clear from the passage from Schiller that the aesthetic is, from the outset, bound up with a notion of the political. This is a binding that is the burden of philosophy since Kant, but as readers of Rancière are frequently reminded, this was ever so. In such a bind, the relation of the beautiful to the art of living figures the promised communities, the promised utopias, that Rancière discusses in *On the Shores of Politics*.<sup>14</sup> Schiller’s promise is thus a modality of the ‘dream of the people’ (*OSP*, 5), it is an aspect of a relation to time that links the present moment of a speech act — its ‘context’ of enunciation in Austin’s terms — to an idea of the future and to the idea of another place.<sup>15</sup> This may be a utopic idea, an idea that can only be recognized in its perfection simultaneously with a recognition of its non-presence (as a no-place or *nunquam*, as Thomas More describes it).<sup>16</sup> We should be cautious, however, since Rancière warns in *The Flesh of Words* that he works with a very specific sense of the spatial dimension of utopianism: ‘Utopia for me is not the place that exists nowhere, but the ability of overlapping between a discursive space and a territorial space; the identification of a perceptual space that one discovers while walking with the *topos* of the community.’<sup>17</sup> To the extent that this must always be a perceptual space, it is already in relation to *aisthesis*.

(A parenthetical promise. One path that opens up here, but that for reasons of space will not be taken in this article, would allow us to trace the figure of the double and its cognates in Rancière’s work.

- Beginning perhaps with the texts collected under the title ‘Le Prolétaire et son double’ (‘The Proletarian and his double’), recently reprinted as section 1 of *Les Scènes du peuple*.<sup>18</sup>

- We would have to take into account Rancière's sense of the duplicity of political philosophy (OSP, 12).
- This path would also lead us to an encounter with Rancière's habit of 'doubling' titles by allusion, including examples such as: i) the echo of Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son double* (*The Theatre and Its Double*) in the title above; ii) of Derrida's 'De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale' ('From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve') in naming the first part of *La Parole muette* (*Silent Speech*) 'De la poétique restreinte à la poétique généralisée' ('From Restricted to General Poetics');<sup>19</sup> and iii) of Freud and Leclair in the essay 'Un enfant se tue'.<sup>20</sup>
- It would take us through Rancière's stylistic doubling in which, as more than one reader has noted, it is not always possible to separate paraphrase from 'commentary'. While all commentary seeks to offer a double of the text of which it speaks, Rancière's texts offer especially striking models of such practice.<sup>21</sup>
- Any approach to this matter of doubling would also have to proceed from an awareness of the extent to which Rancière re-reads himself, often highly critically, as for example in 'Un enfant se tue' or 'How to Use *Lire le Capital*'.<sup>22</sup>
- It would also be necessary to think a little more carefully about the role that Rancière assigns to mimesis. From a return to Schiller and doubling — as a way of linking the mimetic imperative and the role of art — we might proceed to a consideration of the politics of mimesis, offering as a comparative context the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, René Girard and Jacques Derrida.<sup>23</sup>
- Finally, here at least, the double or two-fold is a crucial figure in both *Disagreement* and *On the Shores of Politics*.

This parenthetical note should end by doubling my own promise to pursue this at a later date. And so it does.)

In responding to Schiller's double promise, Rancière proposes that this bringing together of the arts of life and beauty could be read negatively as indicative of an 'aesthetic illusion' masking the class determination of aesthetic judgement, and thus as a form of ideological mystification itself doubled in and as an overly abstract and universalizing philosophy.<sup>24</sup> But, he goes on to suggest, it is more fruitful to pursue the truth-content of the statement about the link between being human and playing, and further to pursue the truth-content of this promise concerning aesthetic experience. It is possible, says Rancière, that rather than adopting a view which would lead to the voiding and

avoiding of this supposed mystification, we should recognize that ‘the statement and the promise were only too true, and that we have experienced the reality of that “art of living” and of that “play”, as much in totalitarian attempts at making the community into a work of art as in the everyday aestheticized life of a liberal society and its commercial entertainment’. He continues: ‘The point is that neither the statement nor the promise were ineffectual. At stake here is not the “influence” of a thinker, but the efficacy of a plot—one that reframes the division of the forms of our experience’. (AR, 133) The promise, read in terms of its effect, is thus seen as performative, in the terms made familiar by speech act theory, and what it performs is both a ‘plot’ and a division.<sup>25</sup>

Experience itself—in terms which extend far beyond the subject-centred ‘influence’ of a Schiller—is at stake in the division that Rancière invokes. The spectre of the community as a work of art, of the aestheticization of politics, offers an immediate warning of the import of the relation between aesthetics and politics.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as Rancière remarks, this should not be thought of too quickly in terms of Walter Benjamin’s warnings on the aestheticization of politics, but instead in terms of politics as a configuration of perception, or of the sensible, of what it is possible to see.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, Rancière has called this division the ‘partage du sensible’, the sharing and sharing out of the ‘sensible’ or perceptible.<sup>28</sup> This is not just a matter of recognition, but of what it is possible to recognize. This takes on an explicitly political dimension in Rancière’s thought around the question of the ‘count’, of what is taken into account, and thus of the identification of those who may play a part, participate or ‘part-take’ in politics:

Ways of counting, of counting oneself, of getting oneself to count. Ways of defining interests that cannot be reduced even to the simple calculation of pleasure versus pain; forms of profit that are also ways of being together (of resembling one another or being distinct from one another) and of defining those gaps which Hannah Arendt saw as the very principle of political *inter esse*. (OSP, 64)<sup>29</sup>

Central to this *partage* is the division of what Rancière calls regimes of art.<sup>30</sup> In a footnote to ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes’, he gives a summary of his thinking on three distinct regimes of art which I hope, for the sake of brevity, you will forgive me for citing at length:

In the ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy. They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals

and the community. Plato's *Republic* offers a perfect model of this regime. In the representational regime, works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, and so are no longer subject to the laws of truth or the common rules of utility. They are not so much copies of reality as ways of imposing a form on matter. As such, they are subject to a set of intrinsic norms: a hierarchy of genres, adequation of expression to subject matter, correspondence between the arts, etc. The aesthetic regime overthrows this normativity and the relationship between form and matter on which it is based. Works of art are now defined as such, by belonging to a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible, which presents us with an immediate adequation of thought and sensible materiality. (AR, 135, note 1)

There are then, three distinct regimes: the ethical, the representational and the aesthetic. Each of these regimes offers a privilege not so much to a type of art as to a mode of relating to art, which is to say, to a different articulation of the rational and the moral through the aesthetic.

This notion of the regime, and of its determining role in the history of philosophy's encounter with the aesthetic, is central to Rancière's recent work. In a discussion of Alain Badiou's 'inaesthetic', he returns to this division of aesthetic history, and the essay begins by adding a little flesh to the skeletal account reproduced above. Rancière proposes that the first regime of philosophy's encounter with art may be associated with Plato (as he indicates in the passage cited above), but not if we think of the Platonic attitude to art expressed in the *Republic* in terms of a *subordination* of art to politics. As Rancière comments: 'In this order of things the notion of *art* as we understand it is nowhere to be found. (. . .) For as a matter of fact Plato does not subordinate art to anything. More radically still, he *knows* nothing of art'.<sup>31</sup> Truth and art are radically separated since in the Platonic dichotomy of truth and simulacrum (as 'mere' *appearance*) there is no space between truth and simulacrum in which art might exist. Art is judged by its impact upon the ethical dimension of the community and the individuals within it, not for any inherent relationship to truth. It is this ethical imperative that leads to the elevation of rhetoric over poetics, although even this requires some negotiation of the problem that the orator needs only to be persuasive, without necessarily making the oration true. For this reason, among others, Plato is famously suspicious and even contemptuous of democracy. As Rancière glosses it: 'The people are the mere appearance produced by the sensations of pleasure and pain manipulated by rhetoricians and sophists to stroke or intimidate the great animal, the morass of folk who have nothing, gathered together

at the assembly.’ (*D*, 10) And so Rancière again stresses sensation, and thus an implicit sensorium, in this case made apparent through the *aisthesis* of pleasure and pain.<sup>32</sup>

In this invocation of pleasure and pain, Rancière echoes a famous passage in Kant, in which the double-edged experience of sensation is related to aesthetic value. In §53 of the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant attempts to distinguish between the arts, claiming the highest place for poetry (a philosophical gesture common to Heidegger and others), in part because of its undisguised relationship to play, and thus to pleasure. This emphasis on play lies behind the section of Schiller that we have already seen. Carefully disentangling poetry from oratory, and led by the Platonic objection to the division of oratory from truth, Kant stresses the impact of the poetic on the imagination, emphasising its ‘honesty and sincerity’. When he comes to the commentary upon these passages (§54), Kant notes that a further distinction is necessary, in this case between that which may be liked when it is merely judged and that which genuinely gratifies us. If this distinction is maintained: ‘we can explain how a gratification can be disliked by the very person who feels it (. . .) or how profound grief may yet be liked by the person suffering it (as a widow’s sadness over the death of her worthy husband)’.<sup>33</sup>

There is something in this question of pleasure and pain that we can trace through Rancière’s work like a red thread. We have already seen that for him the count of politics cannot be reduced to the calculation of pleasure and pain, and we have seen his somewhat ironized stance towards the Platonic denigration of the people, who are seemingly led by such ‘mere’ sensation rather than by reason. But it is precisely such sensation that Rancière discovers at the root of communication, and it is precisely such sensation that leads him towards the ‘goal’ of an equality that is not simply the idea of the Platonic (or the Althusserian) master. Yet thinking of equality as a goal is already to have made a mistake in understanding Rancière’s project. In his work on Joseph Jacotot and pedagogy in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, we again find reference to pleasure and pain, but this time in the context of the community of equals, a community based on the *presumption* of a shared intelligence, a shared capacity that is not the gift of a political organization, leader or institution:

The principal service that man can expect from man depends on that faculty of intercommunicating their pleasure and pain, hopes and fears, in order to be moved reciprocally (. . .) Intelligence is not a power of understanding based on comparing knowledge with its object. It is the power to make oneself understood through another’s verification. And only an equal understands an equal. (*IS*, 72–3)



In contrast to a Platonic drive to know the capacity of the human being, Rancière follows Jacotot in the generosity of this presumption: 'It is true that we don't know that men are equal. We are saying that they *might* be.' (IS, 73) Such an apparently simple proposition has dramatic consequences for conventional notions of the relation between tutor and student, offering a profound disturbance to the mechanistic doxa of 'student-led teaching' that dominates the pedagogical practices of so many Western institutions.<sup>34</sup>

Again, however, this notion of equality has an aesthetic dimension. For Rancière, following Jacotot, relates the equality of this shared intelligence to the possibility of an expression that is equal to that of the artist. This does not mean, of course, that we all create works that are equal *as art*—Rancière's notion of equality is both simpler and more profound than this—but instead that there is a process which may be shared:

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 with being 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. (IS, 70–1) (Let us simply note in passing another double.)

*Aisthesis*, both as that which is felt and as that which is to be felt by the others, is at the heart of this equality. There is again a sense that this is part of a promissory structure, however: 'We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists.' (IS, 71)

As has already been suggested, to leave it here would be to miss the impact that Jacotot's work—through Rancière—has for our familiar ideas of pedagogy. Explicatory pedagogical practices presume not only an inequality—in which the teacher leads the student from ignorance to knowledge—but also a temporal scheme that is analogous to notions of Progress. Personal enlightenment and the Enlightenment ideal share a structure that emphasizes a guided movement from a shadowy ignorance into the light. Jacotot's approach is so remarkable because it begins from a position of equality, and thus breaks with this promissory structure; if it is a dream it is one that does not fall into a linear temporality of deferred Progress.

In order to understand the role of art in this thinking more fully, let's return to the delineation of the aesthetic regimes. The second, representational regime is more readily associated with Aristotelianism, centred on the paired terms *mimesis* and *poiesis*: 'Art does not exist

here as an autonomous notion. But there does exist a criterion of discrimination within the general realm of the *tekhnai*, namely the criterion of imitation'. (AIA, 219) Art in general does not exist in the representational regime, but the criterion of imitation makes it possible to identify what work particular arts are supposed to do, and to judge whether a specific example is or is not 'art'. The principle of imitation distinguishes within a realm of 'making' (as *poiesis* implies), but it does not allow for an independent realm of art, nor for an artwork that might stand outside the realm of making or doing in general. Ultimately, this is a regime governed not by a principle of truth in or as art, but by conventions and structures that are not themselves specific to art.

Since both the ethical and representational regimes sever art from truth, it is only the third regime that deserves the name of the 'aesthetic' proper. In this regime, 'the identification of art it carries out no longer operates by way of a specific difference within the realm of various ways of doing and by way of criteria of inclusion and evaluation that allow one to judge these conceptions and executions, but instead by identifying a mode of sensible being proper to artistic products' (AIA, 219). The sensorium that is central to Rancière's approach is thus neither an abstraction from perception nor a taxonomical convenience; it is the sensorium that makes perception possible through the structures that govern the regime. Rather than simply being opposed to a representational mode, Rancière proposes that the discrimination that is at the heart of the thinking of this aesthetic regime is in fact a return to *mimesis*, properly understood. *Mimesis* was, Rancière argues, always a matter of distinguishing between that which was and was not art. It is *mimesis* that allows for the delimitation of a specific realm, making possible the inclusion and comparison of objects within that realm. Yet this leads us to a paradox. Rather than posing an obligation to resemblance, an aesthetic identification of art that takes proper account of *mimesis* leads to an exposure to non-identity:

The products of art make manifest in sensible mode that quality of the *made* that is identical with the un-made, that quality of the *known* that is identical with the un-known, or of the *willed* that makes it identical with the un-willed. In short, what is proper to art, and finally nameable as such, is its identity with non-art. And it is in this respect that, henceforth, the notion of truth positively pertains to art. (AIA, 220)

This is perhaps best understood through a recognition of the crucial difference created by two possible translations of the word *mimesis*. If it

is rendered as 'imitation', then there is a suggestion of *mere* repetition, and in particular of the following of rules, precepts and examples. Put crudely, while such imitative practices were central to the artistic production and pedagogy of the early modern period, carrying no negative connotations, in post-romantic poetics such activities are subsumed in notions of imagination, inspiration and genius.

Such a vision is changed by translating *mimesis* as 'representation'. Again, however, it seems necessary to point out that in shifting our focus to the political dimension, we should not be thinking of representation in the terms made familiar by 'representative' democracy, in which pre-existing entities are given a share in the political process, but instead of a regime of representation in which it is possible for political entities to appear which may well transform that process.

### III. *From the Catastrophic Overflow to the Originary Knot (Art and Community)*

Let's accelerate (or redouble) our reading. The stakes of our conceptualizations of art become clear when we return to the relation between art and politics. This relation is the backdrop to our restagings of the debates about aesthetics within and outside of philosophy. That Rancière reaches for the figure of catastrophe should not surprise us. Catastrophe has turned itself into a trope of the fate of art, a turn (strophe) within a turn (trope). As such, catastrophe takes a detour through the tragic, threatening to plunge us into the mournful or the melancholic.<sup>35</sup> Yet this catastrophe is not itself artistic, as a matter simply of 'bad' art; it takes on a disastrous aspect in its relation to the realm of the political. Catastrophe occurs precisely from and as this 'overflow', from this passage of art into politics.<sup>36</sup>

Yet Rancière, of course, wishes to mark out the aesthetic in terms which do not, or at least do not too easily, with too evident a necessity, lead to this catastrophic overflowing. As I began by stating, to some extent the articulation of the aesthetic in terms of a relation between art, politics and philosophy is a matter of the stance adopted towards the romantic and idealist inheritance in the Continental tradition. Another way of putting this would be to see it as a narrative of modernity, since it has become common to see philosophical modernity as a specific after-effect of the Kantian Critical project. From this connection, we might begin to trace the outlines of a catastrophic modernity that is itself the inheritance of a certain romantic or idealist thought. But, again, we should be cautious in

attempting to map Rancière's delineation of the regimes of art on to a temporal scheme. In particular, Rancière has repeatedly stressed his discomfort with the very idea of modernity.<sup>37</sup> It is instructive, then, to compare Rancière's approach to the aesthetic with one of the more influential presentations in recent years of the post-Kantian tradition.

'Aesthetic', as we have seen, is used by Rancière in two distinct though not unconventional ways, one fairly general and one more specific. The first is used in phrases such as the 'aesthetic of the political', in which what he wishes to stress is the idea that politics is a conflict which centres upon the perceptible or sensible — what can be seen or heard, whose voices register, and so on — in order to define the representational system implied by a certain sensorium (based on a notion of *aisthesis*). The more restricted sense of the aesthetic refers to particular artistic practices and the regimes through which they present specific modes of thought.<sup>38</sup> Aesthetics, then, is always the manifestation of a mode of thought, either in terms of a particular politicized notion of representation (which is at the heart of Rancière's elaboration of the connection of aesthetics to democracy), or else in terms of a thought about art which will nonetheless have political entailments. It is easy to see the extent to which this participates in the post-Kantian European philosophical inheritance, but we should not — in recognizing this family resemblance — overlook the degree to which Rancière's rethinking of the aesthetic offers a challenge to that inheritance.

The high point of this romantic conception of the dissolution of the boundaries between art and philosophy is found in the work of the Jena thinkers. Schlegel's elevation of poetry over the other arts, like that of Lessing, makes of poetry *an* art form that becomes *the* art form. As is well-known, in the *Athenaeum* fragments and the essay on Goethe (reproduced in *CR*), Schlegel conceives of a romantic artwork that would be both itself and the Idea of itself.<sup>39</sup> The poem itself takes on the transcendental function previously the preserve of philosophy, such that there is no separate philosophy of art. But this means not only that philosophy becomes poetry, but that poetry must also take on a philosophical function; in short, it must become philosophy. In this conception, Schlegel lays the ground for the modern sense of the autonomous work of art, as well as setting forth its fragmentary and ironic characteristics. There are clearly connections between this Schlegelian conception of the functions of art and philosophy, and the 'idea of thought' that Rancière locates in the aesthetic.

How, then, does Rancière respond to what we might think of, with the hindsight offered by our place in philosophical modernity, as an originary rethinking of philosophy's role? If we go back to the regimes of art — ethical, representational and aesthetic — we are returned to the question of sense experience. The ethical identifications of the first (Platonic) regime, like the *poietic* ones of the second (Aristotelianism), divide art from truth precisely by being unable (or simply unwilling) to open a space for art as art. But the space offered by the aesthetic regime is not strictly an autonomous one either. Rancière's account of the aesthetic, as we have seen, in drawing together art, thought and community depends upon the notion of division, or of *partage*. Politics arises within this constellation, but neither as a determinant nor as a product of the regimes of art. *Partage* effects an ordering, a division and a sharing that cannot be thought of in terms of 'power':

Democracy, in fact, cannot be merely defined as a political system, one among many, characterized simply by another division of power. It is more profoundly defined as a certain sharing of the perceptible, a certain redistribution of its sites. And what orders this redistribution is the very fact of literarity: the 'orphan' system of writing, on reserve, the system of those spaces of writing that, with their overpopulated void and their overtalkative silence, riddle the living cloth of the communal *ethos*. (*FW*, 104)<sup>40</sup>

The comments on literature that we find in a text such as *The Flesh of Words* are entirely of a piece with the 'political' arguments of a text such as *Disagreement*: 'The speech that causes politics to exist is the same that gauges the very gap between speech and the account of it. And the *aisthesis* that shows itself in this speech is the very quarrel over the constitution of the *aisthesis*, over this partition of the perceptible through which bodies find themselves in community. This division should be understood here in the double sense of the term: as community and as separation.' (*D*, 26) The analysis in *Disagreement* of police and politics, of the 'wrong' and of dissensus, while deepening the implications of Rancière's understanding of the stakes of political entanglements, never takes us away from this question of the 'sensible'. Any attempt to switch our attention from art to politics simply leads us back to the matter of how we make sense (and of how sense may be sensed). Politics neither stands outside of perception nor determines it: 'Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.' (*D*, 42)

Of course, such comments make any discourse on the autonomy of art hard to sustain. But, as we might expect from a thinker

who has devoted so much effort to artworks and their interpretation (including, alongside literature, film and what we now call visual culture), autonomy can itself be used as a term, so long as it is reconceived in an appropriate manner:

The modern emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous discourse determining an autonomous division of the perceptible is the emergence of an evaluation of the perceptible that is distinct from any judgment about the use to which it is put; and which accordingly defines a world of virtual community—of community demanded—superimposed on the world of commands and lots that gives everything a use. (. . .) So the autonomization of aesthetics means first freeing up the norms of representation, and second, constituting a kind of community of sense experience that works on the world of assumption, of the *as if* that includes those who are not included by revealing a mode of existence of sense experience that has eluded the allocation of parties and lots. (*D*, 57–8)

Much turns on the *as if*, on the constitutive possibilities of a kind of fiction. It is perhaps in this context that we can explain Rancière's rewriting of Aristotle and of Althusser: 'The modern political animal is first a literary animal' (*D*, 37). This world of assumption, of the *as if*, is thus analogous to the pedagogical presumption of Jacotot. Both pedagogy and the aesthetic are revealed as inevitably drawn into a political dimension of which they were always a constitutive element. Inclusion, like equality, is a question of where you start from, not of a goal to be attained through Progress. The catastrophe implied within a notion of aestheticization, tied as it is to a concept of modernity, is too limited in its account of the aesthetic.<sup>41</sup> And yet, within a given world, not all assumptions are possible. Or at least, not all assumptions may be sensed within a particular division of the sensorium. The power of this *as if* stems precisely from giving the connection between an idea of thought and an idea of community an originary status. As Rancière's work reminds us, we have never left the aesthetic, but neither have 'we', as moderns, invented it.

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## NOTES

- 1 Among many examples which might be cited, see *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, edited by Peter Osborne (London, Serpent's Tail, 2000); *The New Aestheticism*, edited by John J. Joughin

and Simon Malpas (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003); and Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, second edition (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003).

- 2 Such a reading is to be found in J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992).
- 3 See *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, edited by J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 185–7. Henceforth *CR*. The fragment is here attributed to Friedrich Hölderlin, although it is most likely the product of a collaboration between Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel in the summer of 1796. Obviously this complicates the ‘I’ in the cited sentence. This brief text has been widely discussed and frequently takes on a strategic, emblematic use. See, for example, Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001) and Bowie’s *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* which both include it as an appendix.
- 4 Rancière refers to this text in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London, Continuum, 2004), 27. (I am grateful to the publishers, and especially Rowan Wilson, for the chance to see this volume prior to publication.) Henceforth *PA*.
- 5 Osborne, ‘Introduction: From an Aesthetic Point of View’, in *From an Aesthetic Point of View*, 1–10 (4–5). The reference is to W.V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1953).
- 6 The obvious reference here is to §40 of Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1987), in which he states, in a discussion of the *sensus communis*, that ‘We could even define taste as the ability to judge something that makes our feeling in a given presentation *universally communicable* without mediation by a concept’, 162.
- 7 There isn’t the space here to do more than remark that Rancière’s *Disagreement* begins precisely with this question: ‘Is there any such thing as political philosophy?’ (vii). Later, he proposes: ‘The term “political philosophy” does not designate any genre, any territory or specification of philosophy.’ (*Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 61). Henceforth *D*.
- 8 Rancière, ‘What Aesthetics Can Mean’, translated by Brian Holmes, in *From an Aesthetic Point of View*, 13–33 (33). Henceforth *WA*.
- 9 I insert the original *relevait* simply to mark a term that perhaps contains more than is apparent. ‘Relève’ has been used by Derrida to translate the Hegelian *aufhebung*, usually rendered in English as ‘sublate’, and this has been adopted by others. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to unfold the appearance in Rancière’s text here, but for a sense of the complications of ‘relever’, see Derrida, ‘What Is a “Relevant” Translation?’, translated by Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), 174–200.

- 10 Rancière, *L'Inconscient esthétique* (Paris, Galilée, 2001), 14. My translation. Henceforth *IE*.
- 11 Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review* 14 (2002), 133–51 (133). Henceforth *AR*.
- 12 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters* [English and German Facing], edited and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982), 106–9. Rancière comments on Schiller's notions of naïve and sentimental poetry in *La Parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris, Hachette Littératures, 1998), 58, 62. Henceforth *PM*.
- 13 On this idea of Greece in German idealist and romantic thought see, among many discussions which might be cited, Jacques Taminiaux, 'The Nostalgia for Greece at the Dawn of Classical Germany', in *Poetics, Speculation, and Judgment: The Shadow of the Work of Art from Kant to Phenomenology*, translated and edited by Michael Gendre (Albany, SUNY, 1993), 73–92; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, translated by Felicia McCarren (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994) and Peter L. Rudnytsky, *Freud and Oedipus* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987).
- 14 *On the Shores of Politics*, translated by Liz Heron (London, Verso, 1995). Henceforth *OSP*.
- 15 On this notion of the nineteenth-century dream, see also Rancière's *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, translated by John Drury (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989). Henceforth *NL*.
- 16 Such an idea may be found, for example, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kantor (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 247.
- 17 Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004), 18. See also the exploration of the notion of utopia in *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, translated by James B. Swenson (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), 25–40 (Henceforth *SV*), in *PA*, 40–1, *OSP*, 5–37, in 'Overlegitimation', translated by Kristin Ross, *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 252–7, and throughout *NL*.
- 18 See Rancière, *Les Scènes du peuple (Les Révoltes logiques, 1975/1985)* (Lyon, Horlieu, 2003). It is hard to know whether the title might best be translated as 'The Scenes of the People' or as 'The Stages of the People', since the alternatives stress differently the ideas of perception and performance, both of which are key to Rancière's sense of the 'sensible' dimensions of political participation. This may be traced back to a positive reading of Plato's negative notion of 'theatrocracy'.
- 19 Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris, Seuil, 1967), 369–407. Translated by Alan Bass as *Writing and Difference* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 251–77.



- 20 Rancière, 'Un enfant se tue', in *Court voyages au pays du peuple* (Paris, Seuil, 1990), 139–71; 'A Child Kills Himself', in *SV*, 107–34. Sigmund Freud, "'A Child is Being Beaten": A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions', in *On Psychopathology: Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety and Other Works*, edited by Angela Richards, Penguin Freud Library 10 (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993), 163–93. Serge Leclaire, *On tue un enfant: Un essai sur le narcissisme primaire et la pulsion de mort* (Paris, Seuil, 1975); *A Child is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, translated by Marie-Claude Hays (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 21 On the question of style, see the Introduction to Rancière's *The Philosopher and His Poor*, edited by Andrew Parker, translated by John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), xiii (Henceforth *PP*) and Donald Reid's Introduction to *NL*, xxxii.
- 22 Reprinted in *Ideology, Method and Marx: Essays from Economy and Society*, edited by Ali Rattansi (London, Routledge, 1989), 181–9.
- 23 On mimesis and doubling, one must mention Derrida's essay on Mallarmé 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173–285. Compare Rancière's 'Musique, danse, poème: le cercle de la "mimésis"', in his *Mallarmé: La Politique de la sirène* (Paris, Hachette, 1996), 88–98 (*Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*). Rancière cites Derrida's essay here. Many Girard texts might be cited, beginning perhaps with 'To Double Business Bound': *Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (London, Athlone, 1988). See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, edited by Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 24 This is a reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For Rancière's negative assessment of Bourdieu's reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, see *PP*, chapter 9. For other comments on Bourdieu, see *OSP*, 52–4 and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by Kristin Ross (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991). Henceforth *IS*. The question of ideology in Rancière's work is a complex one, but see the translation of a 1969 essay 'On the theory of ideology', reprinted in *Ideology*, edited by Terry Eagleton (London, Longman, 1994), 141–61.
- 25 Rancière's sense of 'plot' here seems to have been influenced by the work of Hayden White, who provides an introduction to Rancière's *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, translated by Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994), vii–xix. On emplotment, see White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 5–11. As White points out (93–7), a version of this idea of emplotment is to be found in Hegel's *Philosophy of History*.
- 26 Rancière touches here on territory influentially explored by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, translated by

- Chris Turner (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990); *Poetry as Experience*, translated by Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999) and Heidegger: *La Politique du poème (Heidegger: The Politics of the Poem)* (Paris, Galilée, 2002).
- 27 On the distinction from Benjamin, see ‘Comment and Responses’, *Theory and Event* 6:4 (2003), §5. This piece is a response to a collection of articles themselves responding to Rancière’s ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, in *Theory and Event* 5:3 (2001). See also the comment: ‘Politics did not have the misfortune of being aestheticized or spectacularized just the other day. (...) There has never been any “aestheticization” of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle.’ (D, 57–8) The Benjamin text to which this refers is, of course, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’. Three versions of this essay are to be found in *Selected Writings*, edited by Michael W. Jennings and others, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003).
- 28 For explorations of these ideas in addition to *PA* and *IE*, see also Rancière’s *La Fable cinématographique* (Paris, Seuil, 2001), translation by Emiliano Battista forthcoming as *Film Fables* (Oxford, Berg), *Le Destin des images (The Fate of Images)* (Paris, La Fabrique, 2003), and *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris, Galilée, 2004). This last title is again problematic in terms of translation, with the French *malaise* carrying senses of unease, unrest or a feeling of faintness.
- 29 On Arendt, see also Rancière’s recent ‘Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:2–3 (2004), 297–310 (special issue: ‘And Justice for All? The Claims of Human Rights’, edited by Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava).
- 30 ‘Partage’ has been a central term in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who also, if rather differently, relates this notion to a sense of community. See, most obviously, ‘Sharing Voices’, in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, edited by Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany, SUNY, 1990), 211–59; *The Inoperative Community*, translated by Peter Connor and others (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991); ‘Of Being-in-Common’, in *Community at Loose Ends*, edited by the Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–12; and *La Communauté affrontée (Community Confronted)* (Paris, Galilée, 2001).
- 31 Rancière, ‘Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics’, translated by Ray Brassier, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward (London, Continuum, 2004), 218–31 (219). Henceforth AIA. See Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 32 For a brief note on the role of pleasure and pain in aesthetic thought, see my ‘Defending poetry, or, is there an early modern aesthetic?’, in *The New Aestheticism*, 119–30 (122).
- 33 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 201.

- 34 See my 'Impractical Criticism', forthcoming in *English: The Condition of the Subject*, edited by Philip W. Martin.
- 35 On this figure in the context of Nietzsche's thinking of tragedy, see Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Detour', translated by Gary M. Cole, in *The Subject of Philosophy*, edited by Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14–36.
- 36 It is tempting to take up this notion of 'overflow' in a discussion of Wordsworth's famous suggestion in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. See *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), 598. Rancière discusses Wordsworth in *SV*, *PM* and *FW*.
- 37 See the comments in *PA*, 20–30 and also in 'The Archeomodern Turn', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, edited by Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996), 24–40.
- 38 See 'Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement' (interview with Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh), translated by R. Lapidus, *SubStance* 29:2 (2000), 3–24 (11–12).
- 39 For a commentary on this conception of literature (to which Rancière frequently refers), see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, SUNY, 1988).
- 40 On this relation of literature to community, see also the comments on Hegel's conception of epic in *FW*, 119–20.
- 41 To do justice to the complexity of Benjamin's position on both aesthetics and catastrophe is not possible here, but it must at least be acknowledged. A discussion of catastrophe in this context would have to begin from the comments scattered through the work on the *Trauerspiel*.

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