



Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Continuum, 2006)

RANCIÈRE, FOR DUMMIES

by Ben Davis

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 116 pp., Continuum, 2006, \$12.95.

The 66-year-old French philosopher Jacques Rancière is clearly the new go-to guy for hip art theorists. *Artforum* magazine's ever-sagacious online "Diary" has referred to Rancière as the art world's "darling du jour," and in its recent issue, the magazine itself has described digital video artist Paul Chan as "Rancièrian" -- as an aside, without further explanation, no less! For anyone looking for a primer, Rancière's slim *The Politics of Aesthetics* has just been published in paperback.

Rancière has the undeniable virtue, for the esoterica-obsessed art world at least, of being something of an odd duck. A one-time fellow traveler of Marxist mandarin Louis Althusser, Rancière split with him after the May '68 worker-student rebellion against the de Gaulle government, feeling that Althusser, a partisan of the Stalinized French Communist Party, left too little space in his theoretical edifice for spontaneous popular revolt. Against this background of disenchantment, Rancière set out to explore the relationships between philosophy and the worker, rethink ideas of history and try to construct a progressive theory of art.

The Politics of Aesthetics is a quick and dirty tour of a number of these themes. It features five short meditations on various conjunctions of art and politics, plus a lengthy interview with Rancière by his translator Gabriel Rockhill titled "The Janus-Face of Politicized Art," an introduction by Rockhill and a concluding essay by the art world's other favorite quirky philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. It is a short but serious book and, in keeping with French intellectual practice, sensuously impenetrable, coming equipped with a glossary of terms for the uninitiated.

Politically, Rancière favors the concept of equality. "Politics exists when the figure of a specific subject is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society" (p. 51). Translated into layman's English, Rancière is saying that politics is the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the established order. Esthetics is bound up in this battle, Rancière argues, because the battle takes place over the image of society -- what it is permissible to say or to show.

Back-to-back with this "esthetics of politics," in Rancière's thinking, is a "politics of esthetics" itself. To unlock its nature, much time is spent picking over the idea of modernism and placing it within Rancière's tripartite scheme of art "regimes." This complex intellectual equation can be simplified substantially if one realizes that what he is doing is combining, in a clever way, art history with labor history.

First of all, there's the "ethical regime of art," in which artistic images are evaluated in terms of their utility to society. This is linked by

Rancière with that old bugaboo from the philosophy of art, Plato's banishment of painters from his ideal community. Rancière associates this "regime" with the antique idea that defines artwork as common craft labor. Under this regime, he writes, "the mimetician provides a public stage for the 'private' principle of work" (p. 43) -- that is, artists' work cannot be granted too much power or acclaim because the laborer performing the "artistic" task of imitating reality operates according to the same criteria as someone making a bucket, and in this aristocratic way of thinking, common laborers have no voice within society.

Succeeding the ethical regime is the "representational regime of art," a novel way of dealing with the art-labor alliance. Art "ceases to be a simulacrum, but at the same time it ceases to be the displaced visibility of work. . . . The art of imitations is able to inscribe its specific hierarchies and exclusions in the major distribution of the liberal arts and the mechanical arts." Art is granted its own sphere with its own rules, and elevated above those of common craft. Politically, this second way of thinking about art objects corresponds to the bourgeoisification of the artist, his transformation into a figure with his own freedom and independence, elevated above the demands of common labor (vividly documented, for those looking to confirm the principle, by Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*).

All this is just warm-up to Rancière's real enthusiasm, however, his very own theory of modernism. The "esthetic regime of art," as he grandly baptizes it, breaks down the various hierarchies of the other regimes, asserting "the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroy[ing] any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself." (p. 23) In the great, contentious opening up of art of the last 200 years, Rancière appreciates a kind of utopian waffling between contradictory roles for the artist, as autonomous creator and laborer -- art can still be free of the restrictions of common craft, but it also doesn't have to be shackled to any particular noble content that distinguishes it from everyday life -- prefiguring a progressive equality in its attack on old esthetic hierarchies.

And this is where the "politics of esthetics" comes in. Rancière wants to argue that such artistic egalitarianism is analogous to the breaking down of real social and political hierarchies. He is careful, however, to make clear that this is a matter of analogy -- towards the end of his interview with Rockhill, he wisely cautions that there can be no one-to-one match-up between the contestation of artistic boundaries and struggles for political equality. "[T]here is no formula for an appropriate correlation," Rancière asserts. "It is the state of politics that decides that Dix's paintings in the 1920s, 'populist' films by Renoir, Duvivier or Carne in the 1930s, or films by Cimino and Scorsese in the 1980s appear to harbor a political critique or appear, on the contrary, to be suited to an apolitical outlook on the irreducible chaos of human affairs or the picturesque poetry of social differences." (p. 62)

This is undeniably a valuable corrective to lazy posturing of the "my art is my activism" kind. On the other hand, if the political state of things determines the political meaning of art, where does that leave the "politics of esthetics," the ostensible destination of the whole journey? It is here that a certain willful confusion slips in below the turgid surface of Rancière's pronouncements, one that probably explains the trendy appeal of this deeply self-serious political thinker to the blissfully irresponsible art world. In his book *Metapolitics*, another French post-Althusserian philosopher, Alain Badiou, opines that Rancière's political reflections are characterized by a singular unwillingness to draw conclusions about any specific political situation. They are, Badiou concludes, more "motifs" than food for

political militancy -- and what could better describe the art world's relation to the political?

This purely symbolic commitment to politics corresponds to a casuistic emphasis on the political power of symbols. Rancière will say that new kinds of artworks create new communities and ways for people to relate to one another. For him, this gives them a possible relation to politics. Elsewhere, he will even add that the artistic equalization of literature and painting in the "esthetic regime of arts" is the model for real political liberation: "The channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of 'literary' disincorporation" (p. 40). But, by his own logic, all the subtle theorizing about how esthetic struggle, if not reducible to the struggle for political equality, produces a "different type of equality," is a distraction from the key question: Given that their relation is only ever analogical, what makes "esthetic politics" progressive in its relation to actual, on-the-ground agitation, as opposed to escapist or reactionary?

Rancière insists that the literary and visual equality of the "esthetic regime" has something liberating about it that escapes brute political determination. "To put it crudely, you cannot lay your hands on capital like you can lay your hands on the written word" (p. 55), he says. "It is a matter of knowing if absolutely anyone can take over and redirect the power invested in language. This presupposes a modification in the relationship between the circulation of language and the social distribution of bodies, which is not at all in play in simple monetary exchange." But, of course, if the techniques of artistic modernity have reshaped the way art relates to the everyday, they have also lent themselves to a whole apparatus of intellectual elitism and obscurantism that serves to enforce the existing "social distribution of bodies" -- for exactly this reason, yet another French post-Althusserian, Pierre Bourdieu, coined the term "cultural capital." As Rancière himself acknowledges elsewhere, the theater of Brecht, for instance, is formally the same whether it is performed at a union hall or for hoity-toity intellectuals -- it's the kind of social forces that make use of something that determine "politics," not what "regime" it belongs to.

Rancière's lofty language and constant qualifications signal to the reader on every page that we are dealing with a problem that is very difficult indeed. But the question of political art is, in fact, straightforward. We can see how Rancière muddies the waters if we look at how he treats Russian Constructivism. "It is the paradigm of aesthetic autonomy," he declares, "that became the new paradigm for revolution, and it subsequently allowed for the brief but decisive encounter between the artisans of the Marxist revolution and the artisans of forms for a new way of life" (p. 27). This is to give rather too much autonomy to the paradigm of esthetic autonomy. Trotsky's argument in *Literature and Revolution* is simpler and clearer: Bohemian artists and political revolutionaries both stood in opposition to the conservatism of Russia's Czarist society. But it was the success of the political revolution that opened a channel for artistic rebellion to play a socially progressive role (and without the political clarity of a Trotsky, some of these same artists were even able to buy into the right-wing, art-hating Stalinist state -- say what you will about Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* as a satire on Stalin's leadership cult, *The Old and the New* is an avant garde hymn to his brutal forced collectivization of farming).

Today, we can take as an example something like the Visible collective, headed by Naeem Mohaiemen, an art group that seeks to draw attention to the U.S. government's detentions of Arabs and Muslims since 9-11, currently at the Tenement Museum in New York (and on the web at www.disappearedinamerica.org). Esthetically, they have used all kinds of different strategies, everything from slick

light-box installations, to comic films, to simple banners depicting the faces of the disappeared, making it clear that formal issues are secondary to getting people involved. Politically, the group's purpose is very clear -- to build the visibility of this crucial issue as part of a real struggle. This doesn't mean that it is good art (it also doesn't mean that it is not good art), but it is clearly political art. And it is ultimately more illuminating than Rancière's microscopic examinations of the utopian kernels in avant garde formal programs, which betray an intellectual's bias towards purely intellectual means of resistance.

In the final sentences of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière concludes that he considers his own oeuvre to be a poetic endeavor, in keeping with his insinuation that esthetic refinement represents some kind of ideal for political thought. Here, he is subject to his own critique. The mellifluous, impenetrable language of theory is often thought of as a sign of sophistication. But it can just as well serve as a way of covering over underlying inconsistency or lack of substance. It all depends on how it is being used. For insight into the role that Rancière's prose is playing here, one can look to Gabriel Rockhill's translator's introduction, where he huffs and puffs about how he is seeking a place between two languages, performing the by now so-clichéd-its-funny gesture of appropriating the philosopher he is working on to challenge the "very meaning of translation itself." Or one can read Slavoj Žižek's postface, which he titles "The Lesson of Rancière," arriving at a "lesson" that is in fact two paragraphs cut-and-pasted (literally, from the look of it) from a previous book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Or one can check out the idea of politics at work in that *Artforum* essay on Paul Chan.

Such an inability to call obscurantism as one sees it -- the confusion of complex form with serious meaning -- is, of course, an intellectual problem, leading to the substitution of quirky diction for critical thought. It is also, in this case, a political problem, in that it draws good people's efforts into false intellectual debates. But it is, finally, an esthetic problem as well. Failing to deal with such thought skeptically can only make the art world more insular, and more pompous.

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