

# What's the problem with critical art?

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*Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* by Jacques Rancière,  
translated by Zakir Paul  
Verso, 272 pp, £20.00, June, ISBN 978 1 78168 089 6

In the fierce critiques that the charismatic thinkers of postwar France directed at each other – Lévi-Strauss v. Sartre, Foucault v. Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari v. Lacan, to pick out just a few – the theoretical stakes were high, and the political implications seemed momentous. One could talk, seriously, of the ‘politics of theory’, and many of us distant onlookers did so. But that was a few decades ago; what about now? Are there any *maîtres à penser* left? Do we still want such figures?

One contender is Jacques Rancière, who recently retired as professor of philosophy at the University of Paris-VIII. Rancière emerged at the age of 25 as a co-author, with Althusser, of Reading ‘Capital’ (1965), but broke with him over the revolts of May 1968: Althusser took the Party line, accusing the participants of ‘infantile leftism’. For Rancière ‘the lesson of Althusser’ (the title of his 1969 critique of his former mentor) was elitist in its theoretical focus on the ‘scientific’ Marx. As an antidote he undertook historical research into uprisings in 19th-century France, turning to labour archives of the 1830s and 1840s, out of which he developed an account of the struggles of workers for emancipation and equality in *The Nights of Labour* (1981). This emphasis on egalitarianism was again evident in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), his most influential essay in historical reflection, in which Rancière recovered the signal principle of the early 19th-century French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot that ‘all men are equal in intelligence’ and so equally disposed to learning if treated accordingly. In subsequent books on the rapport between philosophy and politics, Rancière insisted on the essential role of ‘dissensus’ in both fields; it was here, too, that he first highlighted ‘the distribution of the sensible’ as the primary terrain of theory and activism alike. Rancière has carried these concerns over to his study of the arts, which has preoccupied him for the last 15 years. *Aisthesis* is the culmination of this line of his thinking.

The key, for Rancière, is the notion of different ‘regimes’ of the seeable and the sayable, or, as he puts it in *The Future of the Image* (2003), ‘different articulations between [artistic] practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility’. In his view the Western tradition has experienced only three regimes on this grand scale, which he calls ‘ethical’, ‘representative’ and ‘aesthetic’ respectively. The ethical regime, first articulated by Plato in *The Republic*, aimed to ensure that all images (this was an age before art was considered a distinct order) were properly founded and appropriately directed, that is, that they were concerned with ideal forms and served the ethical development of the community. In the representative regime, outlined by Aristotle but codified only in the 17th and 18th centuries, ‘the intelligibility of human actions’ became the central criterion of art, which

made the refinement of mimesis its essential task. To this end the liberal arts were separated from the mechanical, the fine arts from the applied, and representations were ordered in a strict hierarchy of subjects and genres, with epic poetry and history painting at the top. The aesthetic regime then emerged as the representative order broke down in the revolutionary transformations of the late 18th century. In the aesthetic regime, Rancière writes in *The Future of the Image*, 'the image is no longer the codified expression of a thought or feeling'; 'words no longer prescribe, as story or doctrine, what images should be.' There developed a new equality among the subjects that could be represented, and a new freedom in the styles that could be used. As a result, the hierarchy of subjects and genres was overthrown, and even the division between fine and applied arts was challenged. Art as a privileged category of its own was finally secured.

Clearly, more is at stake in this account of the aesthetic regime than any local reading of modernist art as a passage from figuration to abstraction; the shift from the representative order, Rancière writes in *The Future of the Image*, 'does not consist in painting white or black squares rather than the warriors of antiquity'. Nor is the aesthetic regime strictly a matter of 'the conquest of autonomy by each art', he tells us in the first pages of *Aisthesis*. In fact, Rancière attests, 15 years of work have brought him to the 'exact opposite conclusion' that the arts in the aesthetic regime are driven 'to blur the boundaries that separate them from each other and from ordinary experience'. It is not that abstraction and autonomy are not indicative of the aesthetic regime, only that the embeddedness of artistic practice in social life is equally characteristic of it. Indeed, it is precisely this belonging together of 'pure form' and everyday worldliness that comprises the aesthetic regime.

Rancière finds this doubling in each of the 14 'scenes' that make up *Aisthesis* (the title indicates that his loose model is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*). Although he moves from the publication of *The History of Ancient Art* by Winckelmann in 1764 to the appearance of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans in 1941, his focus is on the arts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that is, on high modernism. His range of interests is impressive: Rancière delves into the poetry of Whitman, the acrobatic performances of the Hanlon-Lees group, the dance of Loïe Fuller as taken up by Mallarmé and others, the theatre as reimagined by Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, the applied arts as practised by Emile Gallé and championed by Roger Marx, the sculpture of Rodin as understood by Rilke, the different cinemas of Chaplin and Vertov, and the photography of the Stieglitz circle. In each instance Rancière finds the imperatives of the aesthetic and the mundane at work together: with Chaplin, for example, 'the exact gestures of the popular mime transform themselves into the pure plastic forms deployed on screen'; and with Stieglitz 'the objectivity of photography ... makes the love of pure forms coincide with the apprehension of the inexhaustible historicity found at every street corner, in every skin fold, and at every moment of time.' In influential accounts of this period, such as *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) by the German literary critic Peter Bürger, the project of aesthetic purity, which we used to call 'modernist' (as in abstract painting), and the mission to reconnect art and life, which we used to label 'avant-garde' (as in Dada or surrealism), are usually distinguished as two

different stages. In fact they are not only distinct but opposed, as the first is seen to set up the institutional autonomy of art that the second is thought to attack. For Rancière, however, there is no contradiction between the two imperatives: the aesthetic regime is precisely this dialectic of modernist purity and avant-garde worldliness.

So far so good – and yet Rancière does prompt questions. First, how original is his scheme of different regimes? His description of the representative regime is similar, on the one hand, to accepted accounts of academic decorum in art history, and, on the other, to theoretical expositions of the ‘classical episteme’ by Michel Foucault and Louis Marin. (In *The Order of Things* Foucault defines this episteme as one in which words intersect with representations to provide a ‘spontaneous grid’ for knowledge, as in the botanical classifications of Linnaeus.) The description of the shift from the representative regime to the aesthetic is also familiar: the undoing of the hierarchy of subjects and genres is conventionally regarded as the foundational act of the 19th-century avant-garde, and art historians like Thomas Crow alerted us long ago to the turn to common culture in elite art of the 18th century. That Rancière brings together the imperatives of purity and worldliness might be an advance in aesthetic philosophy, but it is one already achieved in modernist studies. Moreover, that these two commitments are not contradictory was surmised by Foucault as early as *The Order of Things* – published in 1966 – in his account of ‘the empirico-transcendental doublet’ characteristic of modern knowledge and evident, for example, in the insistence of Clement Greenberg and others on both the purity of art and the materiality of its mediums.

How useful is the notion of regime in any case? Although Rancière broke with Althusser, he retained an Althusserian fascination with epistemological orders. Like Althusser, Rancière wants to avoid a grand Hegelian arc to history, and opts for the category of regimes in resistance to the ‘teleologies inherent in temporal markers’, as he puts it in *The Future of the Image*. This approach does help him to taxonomise the artistic discourses of the modern period, but it also makes it difficult to understand how they are determined. It is an old complaint about this method – often made against Foucault – that it turns discourse not only into its own cause but also into an agent in its own right. A related complaint is that it does not grasp historical change very well: epistemes, regimes and the like seem to come from nowhere, and to vanish just as suddenly, as if catastrophically. Finally, they can have the odd effect of explaining a lot and a little at the same time, which is to say that the insights are often so general as to appear at once momentous and obvious.

If these objections are at all legitimate, why is Rancière embraced so fully, especially in the art world, where he is read avidly by artists and critics alike? Certainly there is good reason for the interest: his ability to connect philosophy, politics and art might be unparalleled, and the same is true of his commitment to egalitarianism as both a topic of research and a goal of struggle. Moreover, unlike most intellectuals of his stature, Rancière actually attends to art, especially to contemporary art – which is, naturally enough, welcomed by its practitioners. Alas, he isn’t so attentive to art history. Aesthetic philosophers tend to fix on one moment or one model of artistic practice, to ontologise it

as art as such, and then to use this reified token for their own conceptual schemes. This move is fair enough if they are explicit about it, but not so fair when the truth of art thereby becomes singular, and they alone are allowed to adjudicate it (Arthur Danto springs to mind). There is no need to oppose theorisation and historicisation in this way; in fact it is counterproductive, for the one cannot do without the other.

Another reason Rancière has an abundant following in the art world has to do with its fatigue with 'criticality' as a principal criterion of practice. It is not only that his account of the aesthetic regime plays down the critical dimension of the avant-gardes of the past; Rancière thinks criticality is undermined in the present too. In his view it is compromised, in the first instance, by its arrogant posture of demystification. 'In its most general expression,' Rancière writes in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004), 'critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation.' He has several objections to this approach (which he caricatures here for his own purposes). First, not only is awareness not transformative per se, but 'the exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation.' Second, critical art depends on its own projection of a passive audience that it then presumes to activate. Third, critical art 'asks viewers to discover the signs of capital behind everyday objects and behaviours', but in so doing only confirms the 'transformation of things into signs' that capitalism performs anyway. Finally, critical art is trapped in a vicious circle of its own making. 'If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point,' he comments in an interview for *Artforum* in 2007,

it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilisation, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation.

Rancière has a point here: too often cynical reason masquerades as critical practice in contemporary art. Yet what he offers in its stead borders on wishful thinking. 'Aesthetic acts', Rancière argues in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006), are 'configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity'. This formulation of 'aesthetic acts' gives art an agency that it does not possess at present. That it can intervene effectively today in 'the distribution of the sensible' is far from clear; certainly art is no match for the image and information industries that control and concentrate 'the sensible' with such ease and efficiency. (This is not to totalise the market, the media or spectacle; it is only to size them up roughly.) At least for the time being, any redistribution of the sensible through contemporary art is a mirage and, when pitted against the capitalist 'transformation of things into signs', it is little more than the opiate of the artworld left.