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Distribution of the Sensible

The Future of the Image
Jacques Rancière
Translated by Gregory Elliott
Verso, 2007

Jacques Rancière emerged on the intellectual scene in the early 1960s as part of a group of ‘young Althusserians’ (Balibar, Macherey, Establet being the others) who contributed to *Livre le Capital* which, along with Althusser’s hugely influential *Pour Marx*, fundamentally shaped the field of ‘structuralist Marxism’. However, Rancière began to distance himself from Althusser when he published *Leon de Althusser in the late 1970s*. Inevitably, perhaps, the Althusserian distinction between science and ideology came under Rancière’s attack, implying as it did a will to master the ‘masses’, a will to scientifically know how and why the masses are caught in the grip of ideological misrecognition, a will to speak on their behalf, to know the truth about them. Rancière’s violent reaction to this tendency in Althusserianism springs from his long-standing commitment to the idea that the emergence of politics, or what he would call modes of ‘political subjectivisation’, occurs when people begin to speak on their own behalf, and in speaking on their own behalf, assume the right to occupy public space, a public space whose co-ordinates immediately shift to take account of these new voices.

Unsurprisingly, then, it was Rancière’s critique of the rigidity of Althusserianism that came to dominate the early reception of his work in the mid 1970s. Through the 1980s and early 1990s Rancière proved himself to be a prolific writer, publishing works such as: *The Night of Labor, The Philosopher and his Poor, The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Short Voyages to the Land of the People and On the Shores of Politics*. What we see here is Rancière developing a unique voice as a political theorist, a voice that perhaps reaches maturity in 1995 with the publication of *Disagreement*. What kind of political theory are we talking about here? Put simply, politics, for Rancière, emerges through the formation of a mode of subjectivity that begins to speak for itself, through a call to be heard and seen in public space. Politics, then, is antagonism, the disruption of the hitherto constituted political order (Rancière pointedly refers to this as the order of police, an order of administration, the politics of maintaining order…) by a subject who emerges and demands a role and a part to play in a reconfigured public sphere (Rancière often talks about this emergent mode of subjectivity as ‘a part with no part’ in the given, as that part of society with as yet no properly defined place…). So we can begin to see that the term ‘politics’ can come to signify a double meaning and significance from a Rancianian perspective. There is the politics of maintaining order (politics as police) and a politics of disruption (‘political subjectivisation’), the instrumentality of administration and its destabilization. Key here, for Rancière, is the ability to see how politics as police precipitates a depoliticization of the public sphere and to understand how such a depoliticization can be concretely challenged in public space by those who emerge and demand a role and a part to play in a reconfigured public sphere, a public space whose co-ordinates immediately shift to take account of these new voices.

He seems to be detecting a shift away from a critical appreciation of the necessary connection between the aesthetic and the political...
The semiologist repents having spent much of his life saying: Look out! What you are taking for visible self-evidence is in fact an encoded message whereby a society or authority legitimates itself by naturalizing itself, by rooting itself in the obviousness of the visible. He bends the stick in the other direction by valorizing, under the title of punctum, the utter self-evidence of the photograph, consigning the decoding of messages to the platitude of the studium.

Turning to the notion that aesthetic practices can contribute to a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’, it is perhaps worth foregrounding the extent to which Rancière insists on the power of words. For example, and in what I found to be a most interesting chapter, ‘Painting in the Text’, Rancière seeks to analyze the relation between painting and criticism, aesthetic practice and aesthetic discourse. Too many words, Rancière says, is the dictum that sums up the often repeated diagnosis and denunciation of the triumph of aesthetic discourse over aesthetic practices. The assumption or claim here being that words devour practice, parasitically living off it, while clothing it in a metalanguage that is unhelpfully abstract (for example, a Freudian reading of Francis Bacon, a Deleuzian reading of Bacon or whatever…). Rancière’s response to this familiar gripe is not to directly challenge it, but to make the philosopher’s move and refuse to accept the grounds on which the problem is posed in the first instance. Most immediately, Rancière wants to reject the seemingly intuitive notion that we can simply have practices on the one hand (say, a painting by Francis Bacon) and criticism on the other (say Deleuze’s book *Francis Bacon*) that we can simply have ‘pictorial phenomenon’ and then a ‘torrent of discourse’ about that ‘pictorial phenomenon’. Put simply, he wants to argue that criticism, aesthetic discourse or, most basically, words can condition the possibility of painting by reconfiguring and then circumscribing the domain of the visible itself, that ‘texts reconfigure the visibility of what painting does’. Words, even criticism that seemingly abstracts itself from a given concrete medium or set of practices, can always already function as aesthetic practice in its own right; that is, words can do political work in that they can condition the ‘distribution of the sensible’. ‘Words’, Rancière claims, ‘no longer prescribe, as story or doctrine, what images should be. They make themselves images…’.

Notes
1. For a useful and interesting discussion of the concept of ‘political subjectivisation’ in Rancière, and for a good appreciation of Rancière’s critical relation with Althusser, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999.
4. That is to say, politics as police precipitates or encourages a depoliticization of the public sphere by insisting on the normative rightness of order (‘We must maintain order at all costs!’) and a failure, wilful or otherwise, to see that the current system of identifying the ‘public’ or the ‘people’ may leave others uncounted for. And yet those excluded or marginalized can become a ‘people’, political subjects who supplement the police account and render problematic the current order of identification.