

# Distribution of the Sensible

Robert Porter

## The Future of the Image

Jacques Rancière

Translated by Gregory Elliott

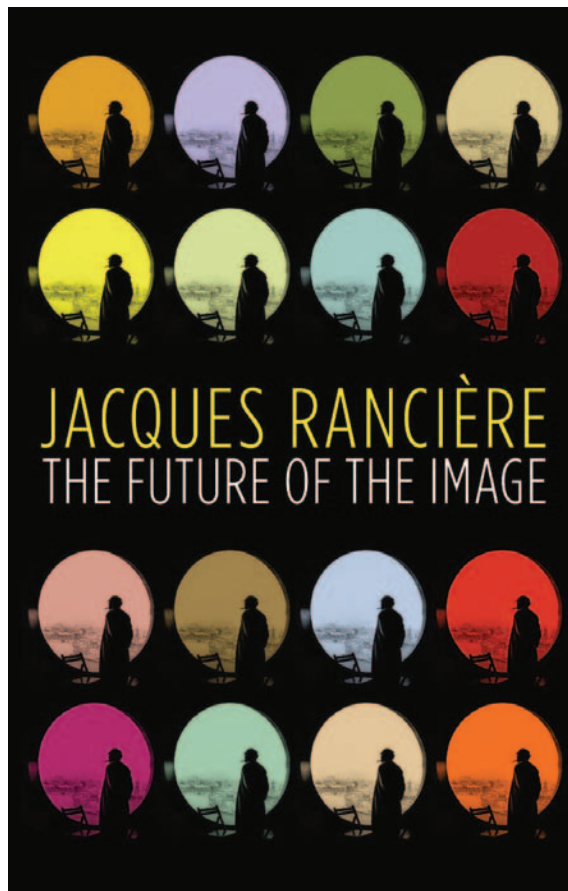
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Jacques Rancière emerged on the intellectual scene in the early 1960s as part of a group of ‘young Althusserians’ (Balibar, Macherey, Establat being the others) who contributed to *Lire le Capital* which, along with Althusser’s hugely influential *Pour Marx*, fundamentally shaped the field of ‘structuralist Marxism’. However, Rancière began to distance himself from Althusser when he published *La Leçon d’Althusser* in the mid 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 subjectivization’, 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.<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, it was Rancière’s critique of the rigidity of Althusserian scientism that came to dominate the early reception of his work in the mid 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Throughout 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*.<sup>3</sup> So 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 Rancièrian perspective. There is the politics of maintaining order (politics as police) and a politics of disruption (‘political subjectivization’), 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 hitherto excluded or marginalized.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to point out that Rancière’s political thought connects explicitly to his aesthetics and cultural theory, while perhaps inevitably acknowledging that Rancière’s work traverses the fields of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘political theory’ in ways that frustrate the possibility of drawing and maintaining any sharp distinction between them. Now, it has become something of a



cliché to say that Rancière’s work cannot be easily circumscribed within traditional disciplinary borders. So, the story goes that although Rancière theorizes politics he is not confined to the disciplinary norms of political theory (norms that are explicitly challenged in and through his work), that although he does historical work, he is not a historian in any accepted sense, that although he has written a series of texts on art he is not a traditional student of aesthetics. No doubt this is partly a result of the influence of Alain Badiou’s remark that “Rancière is an heir to Foucault”, an intellectual who has “never been a member of any particular academic community”.<sup>5</sup> The point here, dare I say, is not to get too preoccupied with a cliché of eclecticism and trans-disciplinarity, but to begin to appreciate the connections Rancière makes across supposed disciplinary boundaries or, more particularly for our purposes here, how concepts of ‘politics’ and ‘aesthetics’ assume shape and form in his thought, and how these concepts shape up precisely through virtue of the ways in which they are connected. So what

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is their connection then for Rancière? In recent books such as *The Flesh of Words*, *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *Film Fables*, Rancière time and again implicitly and explicitly builds on one of the basic insights from *Disagreement*: namely, that politics involves a ‘distribution of the sensible’, where this can be understood as a legitimization of certain ways of seeing, feeling, acting, speaking, being in the world with one another... Put bluntly, Rancière suggests that art or aesthetic practices (for example, the novel, photography, film, painting...) can be political to the extent that they play a key function in this ‘distribution of the sensible’. So if, as Rancière wants to argue, politics revolves around “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” around “ways of doing and making” a shared sense of what we have in common, then ‘artistic practices’ are always-already political: that is, “aesthetics is at the core of politics”.<sup>6</sup>

A couple of general principles or basic themes have emerged and they are worth stressing at this point. First, Rancière is concerned to understand and critique the logic of depoliticization at play in the given social-political formation (if we assume, with Rancière, that depoliticization has an exclusionary logic, that it prevents those excluded or marginalized from speaking and thereby assuming the right to speak). Second, this political critique, or the emergence of politics itself (if we assume, with Rancière, that politics only properly emerges through the antagonism of a given order) has aesthetics at its core to the extent that it can bring about a redistribution of the sensible, a shift in public consciousness concerning how we see, what is seen, who can legitimately say this is what is seen, felt... Given the importance of these themes or basic tendencies in Rancière’s thought it should come as no surprise that they are at play in the most recent work to appear in translation; *The Future of the Image*. We can take each theme briefly in turn.

Rancière detects a clear tendency toward depoliticization in contemporary theorizations of the image. Simply put, he seems to be detecting a shift away from a critical appreciation of the necessary connection between the aesthetic and the political and a worrying trend toward what he considers to be a reactionary reverence for art, one clouded in religion and mysticism. For example, in chapter one, ‘The Future of the Image’, Rancière engages the work of Roland Barthes, or, better still, we are presented with two images of Barthes: the critical Barthes of *Mythologies* and the rather more reactionary, even religious, Barthes of *Camera Lucida*. More particularly, Rancière reads Barthes famous distinction between the ‘studium’ (that is, the encoded message that the critic deciphers in order to show how the image can ideologically reproduce the values of the dominant) and the ‘punctum’ (that is, the pre-reflective, pre-ideological and affective power of the image) as a reactionary gesture. That is to say, by foregrounding the idea of a punctum Barthes, argues Rancière, runs the risk of shrouding the image in mystery, of relegating the important work of political or ideological critique to the banal. Why does Barthes do this? Well, Rancière suggests (and the religious tone of the language is obviously key here) that there may be some feeling of ‘guilt’ on Barthes part, that the move toward a notion of the image that somehow transcends or stands beyond the messiness of the social-ideological field is nothing less than the expiation of the “sin of the former mythologist: the sin of having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs”. Rancière continues with his accusation:

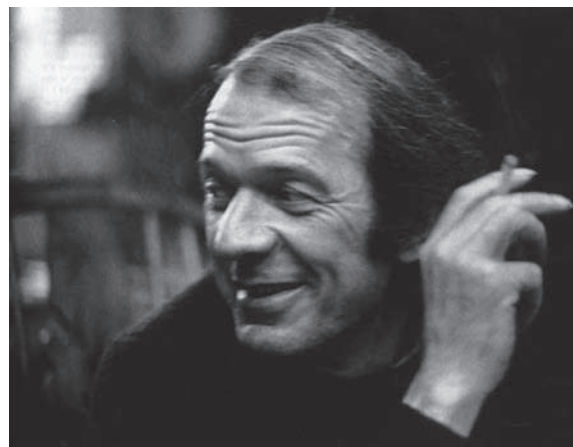
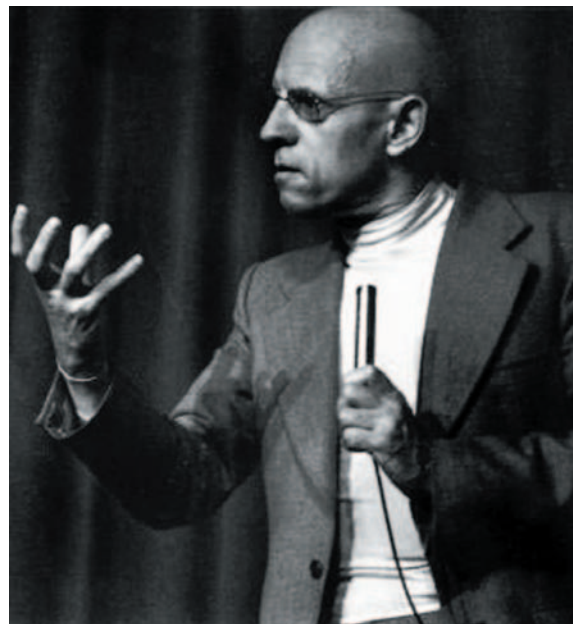
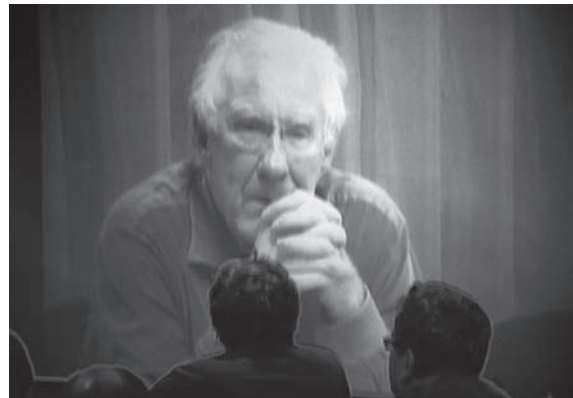
The semiologist repents having spent much of his life saying: Look out! What you are taking for visible self-evidence is in fact an encoded message whereby a society or authority legitimates itself by naturalizing itself, by rooting itself in the obviousness of the visible. He bends the stick in the 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*.<sup>7</sup>

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...'.<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

1. For a useful and interesting discussion of the concept of 'political subjectivization' in Rancière, and for a good appreciation of Rancière's critical relation with Althusser, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999.
2. See, for example, Ted Benton, 'Discussion: Rancière on ideology', *Radical Philosophy* 9 (Winter 1974): 27-8; Ian Craib 'Rancière and Althusser', *Radical Philosophy* 10 (Spring 1975): 27-8.
3. Slavoj Žižek, for example, has no qualms about referring to this book as 'the masterpiece of his political thought'. See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Lesson of Rancière' in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 71.
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.
5. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 107.
6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 12-13.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 10-11.
8. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 87.



Anti-clockwise  
from left:  
Jacques Rancière  
Louis Althusser  
Slavoj Žižek  
Gilles Deleuze  
Roland Barthes  
Michel Foucault  
Alain Badiou

