

Real Phôné

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“... it seems that the only thing that counts are the words with which all people manifest that they wish to stay away from being or action.”

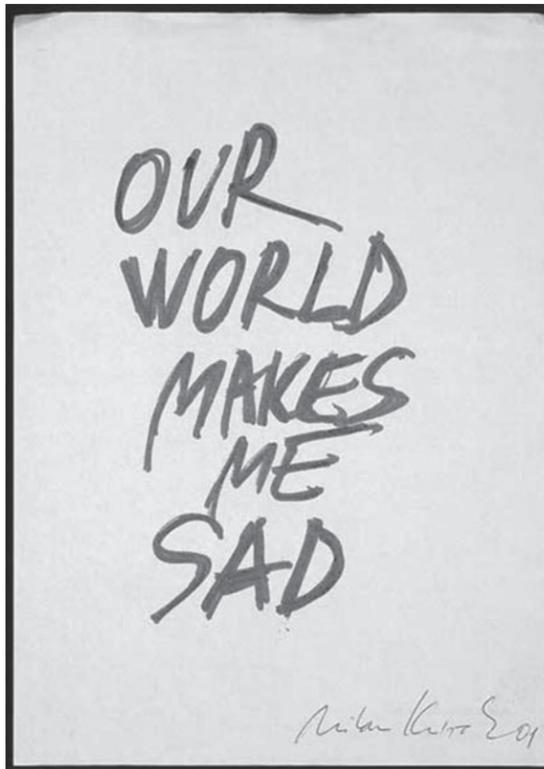
– Pierre Guyotat, *Coma*

It seems that one of the original divisions of social life, one which to some degree defines the practice of politics, could well be that which splits off the domestic and reproductive spheres of existence from that of public life. The discriminations that ensue extend to a mode of speech that is permitted into the polis and a mode that, in being akin to animal-life, is excluded. Rancière, discussing Aristotle, states: “the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the logos, which is alone able to demonstrate a community in the aesthesis of the just and unjust, in contrast to the *phôné*, appropriate only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure”¹ (p.37).

In some ways Walter Benjamin’s conjectural category of the ‘affective classes’, a class which would be one that sees no regressive wrong in expressing pleasure and displeasure, is one for which *phôné* would be valued and not sought to be converted into *logos* simply in order to be admitted to the polis. If it could be said that the working class was formerly in the position of the excluded and seeking access to representation, then, the reframing of its anger and suffering into the language of politics, has to a degree made it a consensual figure. Its visibility by means of representation has made it into a “figure possessing a specific good or universality” upon which a hoped-for practice is based. Is this maybe why Rancière asserts that “politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject” (p.28) for the pre-existing subject, one that ‘possesses’ the *logos*, is already a representation made visible, made perceivable, by the currently operative ‘distribution of the sensible’ and as such cannot effect a new “dissensual reconfiguration of the common experience of the sensible” (p.140)? This may go some way to guessing at Rancière’s reasons for the abandonment of class struggle politics, but it does not explicitly explain what ‘supplement’, what non-existent subject, could come to take its place and effect what could take on a pro-revolutionary hue: the ‘redistribution of the sensible’.

It feels like Rancière’s notion of ‘distribution of the sensible’ is of equal importance for him as such Marxist notions as the ‘ownership of the means of production’ or the ‘redistribution of wealth’ are to a more straightforward socialist politics. It seems to figure as a radical concept that may have received its charge back when Rancière was writing about the worker-poets of utopian socialism for whom workers’ emancipation was “not about acquiring a knowledge of their condition it was about configuring a time and space that invalidated the old distribution of the sensible”². It’s as if the homogenising effects of capital, its reduction of disposable time and its guiding of the meanders of sensuality, have effected a colonisation of the sensorium, for, by means of what he calls a ‘police function’ Rancière asserts that this distribution of the sensible “structures perceptual space in terms of places, functions, aptitudes etc, to the exclusion of any supplement” (p.92). One could think here of Deleuze’s Control Society (“marketing is the now the instrument of social control”) or of the effects of the division of labour as they impact upon our ability to sense and feel, on the stunting of our experience in favour of the sliced-up gridlock of corporate culture. Elsewhere Rancière, more dramatically, has the distribution of the sensible as effecting a “definite configuration of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the fields of our interventions” (p.148).

Is it maybe in the interests of a self-preservation that this state of affairs is tolerated by many for



Right: *Our world makes me sad*, Milan Knížák, 2001

what we have with the ‘distribution of the sensible’ seems to be another more recent police function of preventative measures. The ‘distribution of the sensible’ protects us from the trauma of unmediated (cultural) experience in order to preserve desire as functional and satisfied with what is already in circulation to appease our already identified senses (taste). Could one say the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (carried out not solely by a huge media workforce but by underlying dispositifs) is concerned with blocking dissensual interventions by making them imperceivable and hence unconscionable? Erich Fromm certainly thought so when he offered that societies “develop a system, or categories which determine the form of awareness. This system works, as it were, as a socially conditioned filter”³. Is such a ‘partitioning’, then, a fair distribution according to choice or a structural ruse to avoid the ‘common’ of shared affect and the rousing of those who ‘come to partake in what they have no part in’. Aristotle: “a lack of strong affection among the ruled is necessary in the interests of obedience and absence of revolt”⁴. This line of enquiry could extend to cultural critics too. The rash of interpretations of objects and oeuvres has not only a publicity outcome but the ‘cop in your head’ function of prosthetic thought and a reducing of the indeterminacy of chance encounters.

Where then for the politics of dissensus? Rancière: “the essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part identified with the community” (p.36). But who could this supplement be and from what community? Whilst Rancière offers that this supplement could be made up of those “with no qualification to rule, which means at once everybody and anyone at all” (p.53) and whilst this seems less than meretricious, it is still unclear how this ‘non-subject’ would act to ‘redistribute the sensible’ (determine for itself the ‘form of awareness’) or how politics could escape the loop of consensus/dissensus. This is further complicated when Rancière, not picking up again the thread of *phôné* and hence the ‘domesticating’ sphere, seems to be in accord with a form of civilized consensus when he has it that politics is the “making of statements and not simply noise” (p.152); or, in *On the Shores of Politics*, when he urges individuals to “tear themselves out of the netherworld of inarticulate sounds”⁵. Taken from the point of view of Benjamin’s prospective affective class, is it not here, in what is definitively and historically excluded from politics, that the ‘non-subject’ arises? The rejection of *phôné*, of the sound of suffering, of noise and its replacement with the

functionality of (theoretic and rhetoric) language, is itself a proviso of permanent consensus and a foreclosure of the strong affect needed “for staging scenes of dissensus”.

In some areas, like music and therapy, noise is a compound of affects, it is that which is not easy to interpret, it is the sound of suffering, of phylogenetic agony, it is the breach of the real as constituted by the *logos*, it is rousing. And as such, as unmediated experience (i.e. non-narrated, non explicated), as raw nerve, it is neither denounceable, nor decidable nor demonstratable. If this unpolitical sound of suffering, this *phôné*, is difficult to listen to, if it is auto-traumatic, if crucially, it emanates from ‘those without part’, it could well effect a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ beyond that of a *logos*-led dissensus that Rancière asserts is a part and parcel of democracy. A redistribution that could figure the non-subjects as ‘whatever singularities’ (Giorgio Agamben), as ‘approximate people’ (René Ménil), as the affective classes through which noise as unnameable affect requests that we attend to it with a non-prosthetic ‘living attention’. These non-subjects, then, are those for whom *phôné* can supplant the *logos*, for whom the convolutions of the diagnosed and the wailings of the infant are communicative. In many ways it is the domestic and reproductive sphere that has never been allotted a ‘sensible’ and in this light the ‘domestic utopia’ of Fourier was one attempt at a ‘redistribution of the sensible’. Barthes suggests that “Fourier has chosen domestics over politics” and that his penchant for neologisms “upsets the laws of language”⁶. With this there seems to be a choice that lies beyond choosing the ‘just and the unjust’, beyond ‘good and evil’, in that through the domestic comes the noise of desire and the inconsistent expression of suffering that demands that we hear it with all its lawless and inarticulate *phôné*.

These may be grand claims for a polyvalent noise, but it comes to act as a metaphor for the effects of suffering and the self-exclusion from the polis of those that suffer. Where better to find the “the interval between identities”, that Rancière suggests can found the political subject (p.56), than in those ‘non-subjects’ who in attending to the *phôné* are seeking to refine their species-being through a traumatic refusal of the partitioning effects of identity and the overdetermined forms of awareness that this entails. The worker-poets of Rancière’s Proletarian Nights are said to have “made themselves ‘other’ in a double hopeless rejection, refusing both to live like workers and to talk like the bourgeoisie”⁷. As workers they were denied access to the ‘sensible of poetry’, separated from it in a structure of work and militant politics. Being neither workers nor bourgeois puts them in the in-between of a contemporaneous ‘distribution of the sensible’ (if, in fact, such a distribution allots identities in its operation), and their leaving to found utopian communities was maybe, as with Fourier, their attempt to give their ‘redistribution of the sensible’ a public space that was not a polis for political subjects but a ‘domestic utopia’ of approximate people. But what kind of space is this that these worker-poets wanted to create? The practice of poetry, whilst seemingly attributable to the *logos*, may very well interject too much *phôné* to be taken as political. Is it, then, an Atopic space? When Barthes, in *A Lovers Discourse*, writes of atopia he speaks of “making language indecisive”. Is he, perhaps, here hinting at a practice of poetry? When he supplements this with “one cannot speak of the other, about the other... the other is unqualifiable”⁸ this too sets us at a great distance from the polis for it is there where the *logos* reigns that just these generalising and other-defining modes of speech come to qualify, quantify and speak-for the ‘supplement’ and its anonymous suffering.

Rancière's interest in aesthetics seems to go against what seems to me, in his 'Ten Theses on Politics', to be his pro-political aim of injecting dissensus into the polis to recharge democracy. His fight against consensus in this text seems to be about saving politics from 'annihilation' (p.44). But, if the required modes of 'dissensual subjectification' are such that they should "reveal a society in its difference to itself" (p.42) is it not that we have already taken cognisance of this point? The aesthetic discussions that Rancière engages in seems to have much more to start out from in that they allow for and seem to encourage an impact of the aesthetic on the current 'distribution of the sensible'. Art, he suggests, can undetermine our awareness, can upset identitarian equilibriums, can introduce us into the forbidden and can encourage our intervention in the 'folds of the real'. Aesthetic practice, then, for me, seems to be charged with revealing the difference in ourselves, to revealing and cultivating a sense of society in ourselves (it could consequently be just as much therapeutic as aesthetic). This troublesome and once pathologisable trait ('we are all a complex of different, miniature groups' – Deleuze), with all its infra-psychic conflicts premising any common transformatory articulation, is a further indication of the relevance of the *phôné* for any 'redistribution of the sensible'.

In his discussion of one of several scenarios for aesthetics, that of 'art becoming life', Rancière has it that for this schema the alternative to politics is "viewed as the constitution of a new collective ethos" (p.119). This view, says Rancière, goes back to Schiller who, it seems, may have had an impact upon the utopians that followed him and whom, Rancière suggests, influenced the young Marx with the synchronic notion of a 'human revolution'. Here communism is seen as the founding of a 'sensory community' that may have more applicability to Fourier's passionate combinations of the phalanx than the parties and leagues that ensued. And so, what is ushered-in by 'sensory community' is the 'affective labour' of domestic and reproductive work, a 'spieltrieb' or play drive (p.116), where the relation between non-subjects is neither solely passive nor solely active, that replaces knowing with doing, delegating with sharing, and, who knows, intertwines the partition of the sexes in an imbrication of "being-there-for" in a shared transitional space.

So, in 'Rethinking the Link', Rancière has it that for Schiller "the only true revolution would be a revolution overthrowing the power of active understanding over 'passive' sensibility, the power a class of intelligence and activity over a class of sensitivity and wilderness"⁹. One could say that this is not only a restaging of the projected conflict between *logos* and *phôné*, but an indicator that sensitivity and wilderness are the markers of a 'dissensual subjectification', an atopic subjectification that resists its apprehension by a *logos*-driven normalcy. What could follow from this, then, is a displacement that helps affinities to assemble: "I divine that the true site of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself"¹⁰. The 'class' that Schiller speaks of, then (as well as perhaps hinting at Benjamin's 'affective classes'), is maybe premised on relational affinity: the unoriginal and thus unifying predisposition to sensual belonging which is a spark for singularities. For Fourier these singularities may well have taken the form of the perversions he encouraged into collective

expression. The 'redistribution of the sensible' that such shared perversions could occasion may very well have led to a far-reaching challenge to the 'determined forms of awareness' in that, following Lacan, perversion could well be seen as "the privileged exploration of an existential possibility of human nature"¹¹.

However, leaving aside Fourier's ideas for a 'collective prostitution' as well as the 'reciprocal polygamy' of the more risk-unaverse communes, this sensual belonging can be as straightforward and polymorphously perverse as listening-to the other. But it is a listening that is far from passive, it is an empathic and non-evaluative listening that can, in its offer of 'living attention', be sensual rather than instrumental. So, when Rancière writes that "art lives as long as it expresses a thought unclear to itself in a matter that resists it" I feel we are more or less in the realms of an attentiveness to the *phôné*. The struggle to express is itself a marker of some kind of suffering. The resisting matter could, in some instances, be the *logos*, the unwieldy institution that often speaks on our behalf or which overwhelms us with its 'founding' status. When Rancière goes on to add "it [art] lives inasmuch as it is something else than art" (p.123), we could well be in the realm not only of child-rearing, but also in the atopic space of the therapeutic relationship in which listening is orientated towards phases of singularity rather than carapaced 'selves'. Both these spaces are in many ways well distant from the polis and political discourse, but maybe it is here in the *phônétic* 'confusion of tongues', in the difficult disclosure of anxieties and of infra-psychic conflicts, in the 'heterogeneous sensible' of the self as a society, that there lies some chance of a redistribution of the sensible; a 'metacategorical revolt' to cite Alexander Trocchi. For in both these spaces, as in many improvisatory musical spaces, there rings out another of Rancière's hopes for critical art as an "art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects" (p.149).

This latter is maybe not something to herald as such as to discover in the discontinuities of history and it may explain Rancière's trap, as a much published cultural critic, to be compelled to speak of contemporary art. For such a 'refusal' as he envisions is already there in the radical indeterminacy of much surrealist practice; in the happenstance of contingent music, in a free improvisation willing to question idiom. But it is, one could hazard a guess, at play anywhere that there is a lack of conditionality and an openness to accept and treat as material the unconscious desires that animates and disables the potentially fluid metabolism of the 'heterogeneous sensible' of the social-psyche. This is the material (for better or for worse) through and from which group psychotherapy issues. So just

as such a practice or concern could be ascribed to the partitioning of art as a separate sphere it could just as likely be de-partitioned to become, like it was always, the propensity of 'everybody and anyone at all'. This generic capacity, a facet of species being caught in suffering in order to produce passion, could well be what is meant by 'class of sensitivity' or 'affective class', for in 'refusing to anticipate its own effects', in being beguiled by a candid expression of its own individualistic pitfalls, is it not that there is a refusal to reproduce the same confines for awareness? Does this refusal, based less on protective self-identification than on the mobility

Right: *Lying Down Ceremony*, Milan Knížák, December 1968, New Brunswick, Douglass College



of affective states, entail an 'autotraumatic' embracing of the 'wilderness' of the psyche as a social microcosm? The traumas embedded in the past are maybe not so much indicators of personalised pathologies as potential insights into the ongoing social constructedness of each 'self' as it is pervertedly incarnated in history.

During an interview, pondering Marx's statement 'man produces man', Foucault commented: "what must be produced is not man identical to himself... we must produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know"¹². Whether or not this 'existential possibility' could mean an evolved being to kick-start development beyond our being what Michael Balint has called 'neotenic embryos'¹³ is maybe not the point. What is maybe at play in refusing to 'anticipate effects' is an acknowledgement of both how we may well be 'neotenic embryos' and how, 'leaning-on' the offered commodity-props, we ward-off the effects of contingency. From repressed memories to social planning, from routines and timetables to keeping our fingers crossed, from the recycling of acclaimed cultural moments to a risk-averse society what we are faced with is, as Adam Phillips writes, "a history that our competence conceals"¹⁴. This history is one in which Marx and Freud collide: the necessity of an awareness of the past, to become historic beings in order to 'act out'. Rancière does make reference to works of the past as 'metamorphic elements' (p.125), but we could suggest that our own pasts, the history of relationships that have formed us (some haphazard and personal, some determining and structural), are the Grand Narratives from which to embark on a 'redistribution of the sensible'. That these may resound with *phôné* is no reason, from the perspective of the polis, to denounce them as incoherent, animalistic and self-centred. The polis encourages all of these things.

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Notes

- 1 Some notes on Jacques Rancière: *Dissensus, Continuum*, 2010. All page references in brackets relate to this book.
- 2 Jacques Rancière: 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Art Forum*: March 2007.
- 3 Erich Fromm cited by Adam Phillips in *On Flirtation*, Faber 1994, p.136.
- 4 Aristotle: *Politics*, Pelican 1981, p.110.
- 5 Jacques Rancière: *On the Shores Of Politics*, Verso 2007, p.5.0.
- 6 Roland Barthes: 'Fourier' in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Vintage 1993, p.342.
- 7 Jacques Rancière: 'Introduction to Proletarian Nights' *Radical Philosophy* No.31, 1982.
- 8 Roland Barthes: *A Lovers Discourse*, Noonday 1989, p.35.
- 9 Jacques Rancière: 'Rethinking the Link' at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/001881.php>
- 10 Barthes, *ibid*, p.35.
- 11 Jacques Lacan: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I – Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.218.
- 12 Michael Foucault: *Power/Knowledge*, Harvester Press 1980, p.121.
- 13 Michael Balint: *Primary Love and Psycho-Analytic Technique*, Karnac - Maresfield Library, 1985, p.133. "Man (sic) can... be regarded as an animal which is retarded even in his 'mature' age at an infantile form of love."
- 14 Adam Phillips, *ibid*, p.12.

