

## Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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Translated by Jon Roffe

What should be understood by the invocation of an ‘aesthetics of knowledge’? It is clearly not a matter of saying that the forms of knowledge *must* take on an aesthetic dimension. The expression presupposes that such a dimension does not have to be added as a supplementary ornament, that it is there in every sense as an immanent given of knowledge. It remains to be seen what this implies. The thesis that I would like to present is simple: to speak of an aesthetic dimension of knowledge is to speak of a dimension of ignorance which divides the idea and the practise of knowledge themselves.

This proposition evidently implies a presupposition concerning the meaning of ‘aesthetics’. The thesis is the following: aesthetics is not the theory of the beautiful or of art; nor is it the theory of sensibility. Aesthetics is an historically determined concept which designates a specific regime of visibility and intelligibility of art, which is inscribed in a reconfiguration of the categories of sensible experience and its interpretation. It is the new type of experience that Kant systematised in the *Critique of Judgement*. For Kant, aesthetic experience implies a certain disconnection from the habitual conditions of sensible experience. This is what he summarises as a double negation. The object of aesthetic apprehension is characterised as that which is neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire. Aesthetic appreciation of a form is without concept. An artist does not give form to a given matter according to a function of knowledge [*savoir*].

The reasons of the beautiful are thus separate from those of art. They are also separate, though, from the reasons which render an object desirable or offensive. Now, this double

negation is not only defined by the new conditions of appreciation of art works. It also defines a certain suspension of the normal conditions of social experience. This is what Kant illustrates at the beginning of the *Critique of Judgement* with the example of the palace, in which aesthetic judgement isolates the form alone, disinterested in knowing [*savoir*] whether the palace serves the vanity of the idle rich and for which the sweat of working people has been spent in order to build it. This, Kant says, must be *ignored* to aesthetically appreciate the form of the palace.

This will to ignorance declared by Kant has not ceased to provoke scandal. Pierre Bourdieu has consecrated six hundred pages to the demonstration of a single thesis: that this ignorance is a deliberate misrecognition [*méconnaissance*] of what the science of sociology teaches us more and more precisely, to grasp the fact that disinterested aesthetic judgement is the privilege of those alone who can abstract themselves – or who believe that they can – from the sociological law which accords to each class of society the judgements of taste corresponding to their *ethos*, that is, to the manner of being and of feeling that its condition imposes upon it. The disinterested judgement on the formal beauty of the palace is in fact reserved for those who are neither the owners of the palace nor its builders. It is the judgement of the petit-bourgeois intellectual who, free from worries about work or capital, indulges himself by adopting the position of universal thought and disinterested taste.<sup>2</sup> Their exception therefore confirms the rule according to which judgements of taste are in fact incorporated social judgements which translate a socially determined ethos.

Bourdieu's judgement, and that of all those who denounce the aesthetic illusion, rests on a simple alternative: you know or you do not [*on connaît ou on méconnaît*]. If you do not know [*méconnaît*], it is because you do not know [*sait*] how to look or you cannot look. But to not be able to look is still a way of not knowing how to look. Whether philosopher or petit-bourgeois, those who deny this, those who believe in the disinterested character of aesthetic judgement do not want to see because they cannot see, because the place that they occupy in the determined system, for them as for everyone else, constitutes a mode of accommodation which determines a form of misrecognition [*méconnaissance*]. In

short, the aesthetic illusion confirms that subjects are subjected to a system because they do not understand how it works. And if they do not understand, it is because the very functioning of the system is misrecognition. The savant is the one who understands this identity of systemic reasons and the reasons for its misrecognition.

This configuration of knowledge rests on a simple alternative: there is a true knowledge [*savoir*] which is aware and a false knowledge [*savoir*] which ignores. False knowledge oppresses, true knowledge liberates. Now the aesthetic neutralisation of knowledge [*savoir*] suggests that this schema is too simple. It suggests that there is not one knowledge but two, that each knowledge [*savoir*] is accompanied by a certain ignorance, and therefore that there is also a knowledge [*savoir*] which represses and an ignorance which liberates. If builders are oppressed, it is not because they ignore their exploitation put in the service of the inhabitants of the palace. On the contrary, it is because they cannot ignore it, because their condition imposes on them the need to create another body and another way of seeing than that which oppresses them, because what is oppressive prevents them from seeing in the palace something other than the product of the labour invested and the idleness appropriated from this labour. In other words, a “knowledge” [*savoir*] is always double: it is an ensemble of knowledges [*connaissances*] and it is also an organised distribution [*partage*]<sup>3</sup> of positions. The builder is thus supposed to possess a double knowledge [*savoir*]: a knowledge relative to their technical compartment and a knowledge of the latter’s conditions. Now, each of those knowledges has a particular ignorance as its reverse: they who know how to work with their hands are supposed ignorant with regard to appreciating the adequation of their work to a superior end. This is why they know that they must continue to play their part. But to say that they “know” [*sait*] this is in fact to say that it is not they who know what the system of roles must be.

Plato has explained this once and for all. Artisans cannot be occupied with the common matters of the city for two reasons: firstly because work does not wait; secondly, because god has put iron in the souls of artisans as he has put gold in the souls of those who must run the city. In other words, their occupation defines aptitudes (and ineptitudes), and their aptitudes in return commit them to a certain occupation. It is not necessary for artisans to

be convinced in the depths of their being that God has truly put iron in their souls, or gold in those of their rulers. It is enough for them to act on an everyday basis as though this was the case: it is enough that their arms, their gaze and their judgement make their know-how [*savoir-faire*] and the knowledge of their condition accord with each other, and vice versa. There is no illusion here, nor any misrecognition. It is, as Plato says, a matter of 'belief'. But belief is not illusion to be opposed to knowledge and which would hide reality. It is a determined rapport of the two 'knowledges' and the two 'ignorances' which correspond to them.

It is this arrangement [*dispositif*] that aesthetic experience deregulates. It is thus that such experience is much more than a way of appreciating works of art. It concerns the definition of a type of experience which neutralises the circular relationship between knowledge [*connaissance*] as know-how [*savoir*] and knowledge as the distribution of roles. Aesthetic experience eludes the sensible distribution of roles and competences which structures the hierarchical order. The sociologist would like this to be nothing more than the illusion of the philosopher, who believes in the disinterested universality of judgements concerning the beautiful, since it ignores the conditions which determine the tastes and the manner of being of the worker. But here the builders believe Plato rather than the sociologist: what they need, and what aesthetic experience signifies, is a change in the regime of belief, the change of the rapport between what the arms know how to do and what the eyes are capable of seeing.

This is what we read, fifty years after Kant, in the journal of a worker in the time of the 1848 Revolution, a builder who claims to recount his working day but seems much rather to be writing a personal paraphrase of the *Critique of Judgement*. To cite an extract of his text:

*Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination towards the*

*spacious view to enjoy it better than he possessors of the neighbouring residences.*<sup>4</sup>

Ignoring the fact that the house belongs to others, and acting *as if* what was being enjoyed by the gaze also belonged to him – this is an operation of an effective disjunction between the arms and the gaze, a disjunction between an *occupation* and the *aptitudes* which correspond to it. This is to exchange one *as if* for another *as if*. Plato told *stories* [*histoires*], *myths*, in order to submit technical knowledges to a knowledge of ‘ends’. This knowledge of ends is necessary to found a hierarchical order. Unfortunately, this supplement which provides foundation for the distribution of knowledges [*savoirs*] and positions is without demonstrable foundation itself. It must be presupposed, and in order to do so a story needs to be recounted which must be ‘believed’, in the sense defined above.

Knowledge, Plato says, requires stories because it is in fact always double. However, he aims to comprehend these stories within an ethical framework. ‘Ethics’, like aesthetics, is a word whose meaning must be specified. We easily identify it with the moment in which particular facts are judged according to universal values. But this is not the foremost meaning of *ethos*. Before recalling law, morality or value, *ethos* indicates the abode [*séjour*]. Further, it indicates the way of being which corresponds to this abode, the way of feeling and thinking which belongs to whoever occupies any given place. It is in fact this which is at issue in the Platonic myths. Plato recounts stories which prescribe the way in which those who belong to a condition must live it. That is, he inscribes ‘poetic’ productions within a framework such that they are lessons, where the poet is a teacher of the people, good or bad. This is to say that for Plato, there is no ‘aesthetics’.

Aesthetics means, in effect, a ‘finality without end’ [*finalité sans fin*], a pleasure disconnected from every science of ends. It is a change in the status of the *as if*. The aesthetic gaze which sees the form of the palace is without relation with its functional perfection, and with its inscription in an order of society. It acts as if the gaze could be detached from the double rapport of the palace with the knowledge [*savoir*] invested in

its fabrication, and the knowledge [*savoir*] of the social order which provides it with its context. Consequently, artisans act as if they were at home in the house that they otherwise know is not theirs, as if they possessed the perspective of the garden. This ‘belief’ does not hide any reality. But it doubles this reality, which the ethical order would like to consider as only *one*. As a consequence of this, they can double their working identities; to the identity of the worker at home in a defined regime can be added a *proletarian* identity – in other words, the identity of a subject capable of escaping the assignment to a private condition and of intervening in the affairs of the community.

It is this doubling that the sociologist refuses. On his account, the *as if* can only be an illusion. Knowledge cannot be aesthetic, but must rather be the contrary of the aesthetic. The aesthetic is, in effect, a division of knowledge, an interference in the order of sensible experience which brings social positions, tastes, attitudes, knowledges [*savoirs*] and illusions into correspondence. Bourdieu’s polemic against aesthetics is not the work of one particular sociologist on a particular aspect of social reality; it is structural. A discipline, in effect, is not first of all the definition of a set of methods appropriate to a certain domain or a certain type of object. It is first the very constitution of this object as an object of thought, the demonstration of a certain idea of knowledge – in other words, a certain idea of the rapport between knowledge and a distribution of positions.

This is what is meant by a discipline. A discipline is always something other than an exploitation of this territory, and therefore a demonstration of an idea of knowledge [*savoir*]. And an idea of knowledge [*savoir*] should be understood as a regulation of the rapport between the two knowledges [*savoir*] and two ignorances. It is a way of defining an idea of the thinkable, an idea of what the objects of knowledge themselves can think and know. It is therefore always a certain regulation of dissensus, of its dehiscence [*écart*] in relation to the ethical order, according to which a certain type of condition implies a certain type of thought.

It is this context of the thinkable which is at work when Bourdieu constructs the *dispositif* of phrases and photographs, attesting that the distinguished and popular classes each

adopt, whatever Kant says, the tastes which correspond to their place. We know that the questionnaires used for this purpose are made notably to avoid the phenomena of 'allodoxy'. For example, the following opinion is proposed to the popular public: 'I love classical music, for example the waltzes of Strauss'. The formulation of the opinion is conceived as a snare for the workers who will lie, saying that they love classical music, but are betrayed, being ignorant of the fact that Strauss does not deserve to be considered a composer of classical music.

It is clear that the sociological method here presupposes the result that it was supposed to establish. In other words, science – before being a method to study the phenomena of orthodoxy and allodoxy – is an orthodoxy, a war machine against allodoxy. But what it calls allodoxy is in fact aesthetic dissensus, the dehiscence between the arms and the gaze of the carpenter, the sensible rupture of the relation between a body and what it knows – in the double sense of knowing. The settling of scores between the sociologist and Kant is first of all the settling of scores with our woodworker. Sociology, before being a discipline taught in the university is first of all, in another sense, a war machine invented in the age of the aesthetic which is also the age of democratic revolutions, as a response to the troubles of this age.

Before being the 'science of society', sociology was first historically the project of a reorganisation of society. It wanted to remake a body for this society supposedly divided by philosophical abstraction, protestant individualism and revolutionary formalism. It wanted to reconstitute the social fabric such that individuals and groups at a given place would have the *ethos*, the ways of feeling and thinking, which corresponded at once to their place and to a collective harmony. Sociology today has certainly distanced itself from this organicist vision of society. But it continues, for the benefit of science, to want what science wants for the good of society, to understand [*savoir*] the rule of correspondence between social conditions and the attitudes and judgements of those who belong to it. The scientific war against the allodoxy of judgements continues the political war against 'anomie' of behaviour, the war against the aesthetic and democratic unrest of the division of the body politic within itself.

Thus sociology enters into a polemical complicity with the Platonic ethical project. What it refuses, and what the philosopher declares, is that inequality is an artifice, a story which is imposed. It wants to claim that inequality is an incorporated reality in social behaviour and misrecognised in the judgements that this behaviour implies. It wants to claim that what science knows is precisely what its objects do not.

I have taken the example of sociology. I could also just as well have taken that of history. We know how the historical discipline, for more than a century, has declared itself in revolution. It has thus proclaimed its separation from chronicle-history which attached itself to facts about great men and to the documents written by their chroniclers, secretaries and ambassadors, and by this to devote themselves to material facts and long periods of the time in the life of common people. They have thus related its scientific status to a certain democracy. However, it is clear that this democracy is also one democracy opposed to another. It opposes the material reality of long cycles of life to the agitations which disturb the surface, like the distraction of the builder's gaze, and the ephemeral revolutionary journal in which it is recounted. History, for Marc Bloch, is the science of man in time. But this 'in time' is in fact an organised distribution of time. It confirms that the true time of the builder is the long time of life which reproduces itself, and not the suspended time of aesthetic experience, and that towards which it makes time deviate: the 'short' time, the 'ephemeral' time of actors in the public sphere. It functions as an ethical principle of adherence, defining what can be felt and thought by the occupants of a space and a time. The 'new history', the history of material life and of mind-sets belongs to the war that sociology is also engaged in.

To speak of war is not to disqualify the disciplines in question. It is to recall that a discipline is always much more than an ensemble of procedures which permit the thought of a given territory of objects. It is first the constitution of this territory itself, and therefore the establishment of a certain distribution of the thinkable. As such, it supposes a cut in the common fabric of manifestations of thought and language. The disciplines found their territory by establishing a dehiscence between what the phrases of the

woodworker say and what they mean, between what the woodworker describes to us and the truth hidden behind the description. They must therefore engage in a war against the claim that there is another knowledge and another ignorance than that which belongs to their condition. In other words, they must engage in a war against the war that the worker is himself fighting. A well-ordered society would like the bodies which compose it to have the perceptions, sensations and thoughts which correspond to them. Now this correspondence is perpetually disturbed. There are words and discourses which freely circulate, without master, and which divert bodies from their destinations, engaging them in movements in the neighbourhood of certain words: people, liberty, equality, etc. There are spectacles which disassociate the gaze from the hand and transform the worker into an aesthete. Disciplinary thought must ceaselessly hinder this haemorrhage in order to establish stable relations between states of the body and the modes of perception and signification which correspond to them. It must ceaselessly pursue war but pursue it as a pacifying operation.

In-disciplinary thought<sup>5</sup> is thus a thought which recalls the context of the war, what Foucault called the ‘distant roar of battle’. In order to do so, it must practice a certain ignorance. It must ignore disciplinary boundaries to thereby restore their status as weapons in a dispute. This is what I have done, for example, in taking the phrases of the joiner out of their normal context. This normal context is that of social history, which treats them as expressions of the worker’s condition. I have taken a different path: these phrases do not describe a lived situation. They reinvent the relation between a situation and the forms of visibility and capacities of thought which are attached to it. Put differently, this narrative [*récit*] is a myth in the Platonic sense: it is an anti-Platonic myth, a counter-story of destiny. The Platonic myth prescribes a relationship of reciprocal confirmation between a condition and a thought. The counter-myth of the joiner breaks the circle. The indisciplinary procedure must thus create the textual and signifying space in which this relation of myth to myth is visible and thinkable.

This supposes the creation of a space without boundaries which is also a space of equality, in which the narrative of the joiner’s life enters into a dialogue with the

philosophical narrative of the organised distribution of competencies and destinies. This implies another practice – an interdisciplinary practice – of philosophy, of its relation to the human sciences. Classically, philosophy has been considered a sort of super-discipline which reflects on the methods of the human and social sciences, or which provides them with their foundation. Thus a hierarchical order is established in the universe of discourse. Of course these sciences can object to this status, treat it as an illusion and pose itself as the true knowledge of philosophical illusion. This is another hierarchy, another way of putting discourses in their place. But there is a third way of proceeding, which seizes the moment in which the philosophical pretension to found the order of discourse is reversed, becoming the declaration, in the egalitarian language of the narrative, of the arbitrary nature of this order.

The specificity of the Platonic ‘myth’ is constituted by the way in which it inverts the reasons of knowledge [*savoir*] with the purely arbitrary insistence on the story [*conte*]. While the historian and the sociologist show us how a certain life produces a certain thought expressing a life, the myth of the philosopher refers this necessity to an arbitrary “beautiful lie”, a beautiful lie which is at the same time the reality of life for the greatest number of people. This identity of necessity and contingency, the reality of the lie, cannot be rationalised in the form of a discourse which separates truth from illusion. It can only be recounted, that is, be stated in a discursive form which suspends the distinction and the hierarchy of discourse. The privilege of philosophy – contrary to the abstraction, whether valuable or regrettable, that it is generally claimed of it – is thus the literal directness of its discourse: the directness with which it has known how to state this condition of the primary identity between reasons and narratives, the directness which alone permits it to speak of the organised distribution of lives.

It is here, Plato claims in the *Phaedrus*, that we must speak truth [*vrai*], there where we speak of truth [*vérité*]. It is here also that he has recourse to the most radical story [*conte*]: that of the plain of truth, of the divine charioteer, and of the fall which transforms some into men of silver, and others into gymnasts, artisans or poets. In other words, taking things the other way around, at the moment when he most implacably states the organised

distribution of conditions, he has recourse to what most radically denies it, the power of the story and that of the common language which abolishes the hierarchy of discourse and the hierarchies that this underwrites.

Disciplinary thought says: we have our territory, our objects and the methods which correspond to them. This is what sociology or history, political science or literary theory, says. This is also what philosophy, in the regular sense, says, posing itself as a discipline. But at the moment in which it wants to found its status as a discipline of disciplines, it produces this reversal: the foundation of foundation is a story. And philosophy says to those knowledges [*savoir*] who are certain of their methods: methods are recounted stories. This does not mean that they are null and void. It means that they are weapons in a war; they are not tools which facilitate the examination of a territory but weapons which serve to establish its always uncertain boundary.

There is no assured boundary separating the territory of sociology from that of philosophy or that of the historians from literature. No well-defined boundary separates the discourse of the woodworker who is the object of science from the discourse of science itself. After all is said and done, to trace these boundaries is to trace the boundary between those who have thought through this question and those who have not. This boundary is never traced other than in the form of a story. Only the language of stories can trace the boundary, forcing the aporia of the absence of final reason from the reasons of the disciplines.

I once proposed the concept of a 'poetics of knowledges [*savoirs*]'. A poetics of knowledges is not a simple way of saying that there is always literature in attempts at rigorous argumentation. Such a demonstration still belongs to the idle logic of demystification. The poetics of knowledges does not claim that the disciplines are false knowledges. It claims that they are disciplines, ways of intervening in the interminable war between ways of declaring what a body can do, in the interminable war between the reasons of equality and those of inequality. It does not claim that they are invalid because they tell stories. It claims that they must borrow their presentations of objects, their

procedures for interaction and their forms of argument from language and common thought. A poetics of knowledge is first a discourse which reinscribes the force of descriptions and arguments in the equality of common language and the common capacity to invent objects, stories and arguments. In this sense it can be called a method of equality.

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<sup>1</sup> TN: Throughout this essay, the appearance of the word ‘knowledge’ (for example, in the title) should be taken as a translation of *connaissance*, or its verb form, *connaître*, which signifies knowledge in the theoretical sense of the word. Whenever the word *savoir* is translated as ‘knowledge’, a note will indicate it as such. The translator thanks Professor Rancière for his generosity in correspondence concerning this translation.

<sup>2</sup> TN: The French here reads: “Il est propre à cette petite bourgeoisie intellectuelle qui prend son séjour entre les deux chaises du travail et du capital pour le siège de la pensée universelle et du goût désintéressé.”

<sup>3</sup> TN: Throughout, I have translated *partage* – one of Rancière’s key terms, as evidenced by his 2000 book *Le Partage du sensible* (La Fabrique, Paris), a text whose theses are intimately connected with those presented here – as organised division.

<sup>4</sup> G. Gauny, “Le Travail à la tâche” cited in Jacques Rancière, *La Nuit des prolétaires* (1981: Fayard, Paris), 91; quoted here from the translation by John Drury, *The Nights of Labour* (1989: Temple University Press, Philadelphia), 81.

<sup>5</sup> TN: Rancière’s neologism “in-disciplinaire” has been retained throughout. While slightly jarring, it is irreducible to the other modified forms of ‘disciplinary’: ‘non-disciplinary’ wholly detaches its sense from the disciplines, and ‘anti-disciplinary’ would return Rancière’s project to the battleground of the disciplines despite itself. Further, ‘indisciplinary’ has the advantage of retaining a link to the ignorance at the heart of knowledge that is Rancière’s concern here.