

WHAT IS THE AESTHETIC REGIME?

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The aesthetic regime is a polemical concept forged by Jacques Rancière to contest the categories that inform many art historical narratives. It cuts across the divisions that organize museum collections and shape the picture of twentieth-century art handed down in many art history textbooks and survey courses. The majority of Rancière's recent writings on literature, art, and the history of aesthetic philosophy are intended to clarify what he terms the "aesthetic revolution," the wholesale cultural transformation that took place at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century. As such, they deal with many of the artists, objects, and ideas customarily designated as "modern." Rancière argues that "modernism" is a problematic concept that prevents us from grappling with the politics of this radically distinct form of art, more properly termed "aesthetic." Modernism, Rancière suggests, is an idea that "seems to have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience."¹ By modernism, Rancière understands the familiar thesis that modern art, in order to effect a demonstration of its independence from other practices and domains of life, engages in processes of self-purification by which each art rids itself of elements borrowed from other media.

Rancière has also devoted a considerable amount of energy to critiquing the positions that understand recent artistic strategies in terms of the historico-theoretical concept of "postmodernity." For him, postmodernism should be understood as a reckoning with the distortion imported into the arts of the aesthetic regime by the myth of artistic modernity. The concept of postmodernism is not, for all that, the recovery of art's political potential. Rather, "Postmodernism ... was simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a 'distinctive feature of art' by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture."² As we will see, many of the theoretical discourses associated with postmodernism strip art of its critical, political capacities, either by surrendering the will to determine how art differs from other aestheticized aspects of contemporary life or by directing it into a problematic ethics of the sublime. In a sense, one could argue that if Rancière spends so much time exposing the problematic assumptions of the artistic and theoretical paradigm known as modernism, it is because it is the flawed starting point for many of the positions claiming to supersede it. Given that much of Rancière's attention has recently been devoted to contemporary production, it makes sense to view this work of historiographical critique, the inquiries into the notions of modernism and postmodernism, as part of an attempt to clarify the conditions in which contemporary art is produced. Doing so, he wagers, will allow us to take stock of the full range of possibilities at art's disposal, as well as to advance a theoretical account more attuned to its unique political capacities.³

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the first moment of this enterprise, Rancière's critical reappraisal of modernism. In this essay, I want to take stock of the way in which Rancière's work combats many positions claiming to occupy the space opened up in the wake of modernity. Although the aesthetic regime allows us to offer a new account of the politics of the philosophical discourse of aesthetics, as well as to describe individual works in terms of their abilities to shift the coordinates of what is seeable, sayable, and possible, it

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is not my intention in this essay to enumerate fully the political aspects of the aesthetic regime. This is a task I have pursued in other places, and one which requires a lengthy analysis of the connections between art, aesthetics, and equality.⁴ Rather, I want here to describe the aesthetic regime in terms of its historiographical use-value, and thus indicate how it challenges many theorizations of twentieth-century art. I attempt this in full recognition of the fact that the aesthetic regime is not a chronological account of art. It is a historically conditioned and locatable way of “making sense of sense,” that is, of arranging and ordering the sensuous productions of art. While Rancière describes certain key historical moments or “scenes” in the genesis of this regime, he takes great pains to insist that it is not an absolute historical threshold, one that could be easily equated with a particular period of art.⁵ The critical work of the first part of this essay prepares the ground for the elaboration of an idea of art that allows us to describe the political import of individual products. One important aspect of the aesthetic regime is that it rids us of some broad generalizations about how the art of different periods does or does not relate to the more general distribution of practices that Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible,” or the general distribution of bodies, voices, and capacities at work within a given community.

Rancière has at various points made it clear that his position is intended to counter some specific historical conceptualizations of art, most notably the one that emerges from the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, a thinker who continues to exercise tremendous influence on discussions of visual art. Here, I hope to expand the reach of the aesthetic regime and show how it offers an alternative to a number of historico-theoretical accounts of art. Some of the positions addressed in this essay are not discussed directly by Rancière. In fact, some references are more germane to the North American world of art than to the French context that generally informs Rancière’s writings. The point is not simply to recount the exchanges between Rancière and his interlocutors, but to offer an account of how the aesthetic regime challenges many assumptions regarding twentieth-century art. At stake in these encounters is the attempt to reverse the fatalism that has accrued to many art-historical narratives.

The move that Rancière makes in his assault upon the notions of modernism and postmodernism is actually quite simple: he argues that both are abstracted and limited perspectives on a much broader and far-reaching transformation that took place within Western culture at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century. The art of the aesthetic regime, or simply aesthetic art, is forged according to a different set of assumptions about the relationship between art and life than had been the case during what Rancière calls the “representative regime of art.” Rancière’s conception of the representative regime corresponds roughly with French “*classicisme*,” and the heavily regimented forms of cultural production known as the *belles lettres* and the *beaux arts*. The axioms of representation indicate, for example, which subjects can be depicted in art, what is a “high” or “low” subject, the manner in which various objects, themes, and peoples are to be treated, and the responses certain depictions ought to elicit. A crucial feature of the art of the representative regime is that the question about the relationship between art and life is settled in advance by the idea that art is a representation. In fact, the axioms of representation separate sharply the work from the subjects depicted therein, thus preventing any confusion regarding the boundaries between art and life. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, artists and thinkers begin to re-think what makes art art, troubling the principles that once separated art from life. Movements such as Realism, Romanticism, and collage reinvigorate art by calling into question the boundary separating art from life. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists and writers treated subjects that were previously deemed off limits, finding fodder in the lives of common people, the interiors of bourgeois homes, the markets of Paris, and the commodity form. Revoking the idea of separation at the heart of representation, these artists introduced bits and pieces from the everyday into their compositions. By being incorporated into art, these elements were transformed. Everyday objects, gestures, and forms of expression assumed a status previously reserved for historical, mythological, and religious subject matter. Thus, throughout what is customarily designated as “modernity,” quotidian objects and practices were imbued with complex layers of meaning, and the artist charged with the task of collecting, organizing, and deciphering its traces. At the same time, these processes raised with new force the question of how art is related to and, more importantly, different from life. Aesthetics, with its central categories of experience and reflection,

emerged with the recognition that there were no longer any preordained rules for distinguishing in advance the objects of art from the products of everyday life, and that each experience had to be evaluated in its irreducible singularity.

Rancière views this historically contingent form of art, aesthetic art, as harboring political potential because of its ability to shift the aesthetics of politics or what he calls “primary aesthetics.”⁶ Aesthetic practices are political because they contest, impact, and alter what can be seen and said. These aesthetic practices are, for Rancière, one of the primary means of creating dissensus. One way of describing dissensus is to say that it is a “separation [*écart*] of the sensible from itself.”⁷ Instances of dissensus are moments in which the supposed obviousness of the distribution of bodies, voices, and capacities, breaks down. Aesthetic art troubles traditional patterns of assigning meaning to that which appears to our senses, and, more generally, cultivates the separation of sense or meaning [*sens*] from sense [*sens*]. Aesthetic art is a rejection of the idea that things have a single and definitive meaning. It is therefore one of the means by which the meanings of an object, a body, a policy or a group of people can be contested. The ability of art to impact the distribution of the sensible stems from the ambiguous and complicated relationship between art and life at the heart of the aesthetic regime. As Rancière frequently points out, even art’s most self-secluding forms—those seized upon by critics and historians as embodying the very spirit of modernity, such as abstraction in painting and intransitive writing—impact the broader distribution of the sensible. In their resistance to simple interpretation, they function as a reproach to the idea that what appears to our senses could ever be supplied with a uniform meaning. They are one example of what it means to manifest a separation of the sensible from itself. Art’s sensible heterogeneity is what holds out the promise that the sensible more generally can be reconfigured. Aesthetic art is at once composed of materials gathered from the everyday distribution of the sensible, and, because of its form as art, to some degree marked by its difference from it. What aesthetics advances, then, is an idea of art according to which art is at once informed by the products and practices of the everyday, *and* in some significant way different from it. Aesthetic art is that which cannot but call into question the meanings assigned to roles, practices, and capacities because it is what questions the process of assigning meaning as such. It is this form of art whose identity Rancière is keen to clarify and protect.

Postmodernism has served as the most wide-ranging and—despite many of its anti-foundational pretensions—systematic effort to articulate the ways in which the arts of the second half of the twentieth century are conceived, analyzed, and practiced. The notion functions as the marker of a cultural mutation—the dating of which has been in dispute since the term was coined—analyzed in the fields of literary studies, architectural history, philosophy, feminist theory, and sociology. Here, I am less interested in these debates than in how the concept functions to demarcate two distinct historical periods within twentieth-century art. It is quite common within a North American context, for example, to distinguish sharply between modern and contemporary art. While there is some debate about the exact chronological markers, and the artists associated with each period, the two terms fit, more or less, with the use of the terms “modern” and “postmodern” in art historical contexts. “Postmodern” and “contemporary” generally designate approaches to artistic production that reject modernism’s emphasis on medium specificity, that is, the idea that each art ought to concern itself with itself to the exclusion of elements borrowed from other arts. Postmodern art is instead said to blur the boundaries separating the arts from one another, along with the barriers modern artists, writers, and theoreticians erected in order to separate art from life. Contemporary art is likewise supposed to have abandoned modernity’s monolithic stylistic paradigm, developing instead with a newfound pluralism in which multiple conceptions of art reside comfortably beside one another. Many “postmodern strategies” are designed to liquidate the modernist notions of originality and authorship through the use of appropriated imagery, the recycling of forms, and by “referencing” the art of the past. For thinkers such as Frederic Jameson, postmodernism is a type of historical consciousness, one marked by the awareness of coming after a period in which these ideas were accompanied by great political urgency. While modernity joined together the artistic and political avant-gardes in an earnest battle over the status of culture and the future of humanity, postmodern thinkers and artists wallow complacently in an eclecticism that joins together various ideas, styles, and fashions. For Jameson, what the ironic gestures and games of pastiche attempt to hide is the profound melancholy triggered by the

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bankruptcy of the literary, artistic, and political avant-gardes. The second half of the twentieth century is, accordingly, the place where art loses its historical and political purchase.⁸

The eclecticism analyzed by Jameson is theorized and lauded by the critic and philosopher Arthur Danto, who prefers to employ the term “contemporary” or his own neologism “post-historical art” to refer to the arts that have superseded those of modernism.⁹ In Danto’s writings, there is a clear indication of how terms such as “postmodern” and “contemporary” function as grids of historical intelligibility, both reflecting and helping to define the ways in which art is collected and displayed. These notions also advance a conception of art, defining its capacities and potential political import. As Danto explains, “contemporary” is not simply a temporal term, but designates “an art produced within a certain structure of production never ... seen before in the entire history of art.”¹⁰

Danto’s account of the distinction between modern and contemporary art hinges on his experience of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*, first encountered at the Stable Gallery in April of 1964. For Danto, this work is indicative of the closure of a specific era of art, one that predicated art’s identity upon its difference from everyday objects. Following Hans Belting’s explorations of art before the beginning of art, Danto defines the era of art as lasting from the fifteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, with modernism being the final attempt to delineate a single essence of art.¹¹ Danto refers to the final phase of this story as the “Age of Manifestos.” He uses the phrase to encapsulate the way in which throughout modernity each work offered itself as the self-purified essence of art. According to his neo-Hegelian account, this paradigm was superseded around 1964 when pluralism became art’s *de facto* rule.

Warhol’s Brillo boxes have served as Danto’s guiding example for nearly fifty years. For him, they sum up the situation in which art can no longer be distinguished from reality except through the invocation of a philosophical idea of art. Danto contends that art thus ceased being art in the traditional sense, that is, as something recognizably different, at the level of its appearances, from the everyday furniture of the world. For him, the question of what makes art art has been transferred to the realm of ideas. As Danto explains, “All philosophical questions ... have that form: two outwardly indiscernible things can belong to different, indeed to momentously different, philosophical categories.”¹²

For Danto, contemporary art is free of the strong identity that had been ascribed to it throughout modernity. He views our era as one in which the attempt to outfit art with an essence by inserting it within a historical narrative has broken down. Whereas the manifesto-driven art of modernity attempted to couch the essence of art within a narrative of medium-specific self-purification, Danto’s post-historical art emerges from the realization that “there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is not one way art has to be.”¹³ Danto is unapologetic in his enthusiasm for pluralism, parody, and the circulation of references that so troubled Jameson. Indeed, one of the defining stylistic tendencies Danto points to is the movement according to which the treasury of art’s history—its forms and styles—once again becomes available for artists to freely appropriate. As he describes it, with the collapse of the idea that there is a single, legitimate artistic style, everything becomes possible for art once again.

This chronology and characterization is much different than Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic regime. What we see in it, however, is Danto attempting to come to terms with the “disorder” created by the age of aesthetics.¹⁴ Taken in by the myth of modernity, one could speculate, Danto fails to see that everything has been possible for art for quite some time. One could easily point to any number of examples that would call into question the identity of post-historical art. The readymades of Marcel Duchamp advanced as early as 1913 a version of the question that Danto takes to be the hallmark of contemporary art, the Cubist practice of collage introduced material from the everyday into the sacred space of art, and, on a certain reading, Realism itself was premised upon the idea that common persons, objects, places, and happenings could form the substance of art. It is thus in fact much earlier than 1964 that artists began to trouble the supposed separation between art and reality, which is one of the things that the aesthetic regime as a historical concept challenges us to re-think. The process

was set in motion by those artists, writers, and theorists who contested the idea, central to the representative conception of art, that the spaces of art ought to be reserved for recording mythological, religious, and historical events. It is in this sense that so-called modern painting shares the same set of historical axioms as Danto's post-historical art: anything from the broader world of quotidian objects can form the subject matter of art. It just happens to be the case that one of the more common ways in which this new indifference to subject matter manifests itself is in painting taking itself as its own subject matter.

The point is not simply to call attention to moments from the history of art that weaken Danto's claims regarding the specificity of contemporary art. It is to challenge the historical constructions that prevent us from taking account of aesthetic art's politics. It matters greatly how one interprets this new situation in which art finds itself at the start of the nineteenth century, for it is the characterization of this new situation that will determine what, if any, political capacities can be assigned to art in theoretical terms. For his part, Danto adds that the price to be paid for art's newly won freedom and its ability to make use of its past, is that the original valuations once ascribed to such forms are lost. With respect to the possibilities of aesthetic pluralism that we have been discussing, Danto explains, "One can without question imitate the work ... of an earlier period. What one cannot do is live the system of meanings upon which the work drew in its original form of life."¹⁵ Contemporary art thus maintains a problematic relationship with the art of the past: it deploys its forms and circulates its signs, but it can make little more than an ironic use of them in the present. This is, in a sense, to admit that post-historical art—"art after the end of history," as it were—amounts to little more than a game of deciphering an obscure code designed for insiders. Ultimately, it remains to be seen why it would even matter that the contemporary scene is defined by pluralism.

One virtue of the aesthetic regime as a historical concept is that it prevents us from stumbling into such impasses where we are left only to lament the powerlessness of art in the face of whatever forces one might care to name—poverty, war, the art market, capitalism, advertising, the simulacrum. As a counter-concept uniting a number of different periods in art, the aesthetic regime reveals itself to be hostile to narratives of innovation and their implicitly triumphalist teleologies. The dominant narrative as I have been reconstructing it from Danto's thought holds that twentieth-century art can be parsed according to two paradigms: the modern, in which art has a strong identity promoted through exercises in self-purification, and the postmodern, recognizable in those works that undermine the separateness said to have hampered modern art. As an *aesthetic* concept, the aesthetic regime encourages us to keep alive this question about the relationship between art and life, a question that recent aesthetic theories, like Danto's, settle with the assessment that art has become indiscernible from life. The aesthetic regime encourages us to reflect upon the subtle differences that distinguish individual expressions, practices, objects, and experiences from the broader distribution of practices. Premised as it is upon the ideals contained in many of the key texts of aesthetic theory, the aesthetic regime recognizes that, while inherently problematic and perhaps destined to remain in search of itself, the concept of art as something distinguishable from the broader distribution of practices is worth preserving. It is this idea of art as breach within the sensible that allows us to imagine the sensible otherwise.

Danto's position shares with the work of Jean-François Lyotard the idea that the contemporary period is marked by the absence of a totalizing or grand narrative. As is well known, Lyotard described postmodernism as a new epistemological condition, one in which the splintering of the narrative form calls into question all-encompassing systems of meaning, such as Christianity, Marxism, and even the nature of science itself. In aesthetic terms, Lyotard attempted to articulate the subtle differences separating modern and postmodern art. Lyotard developed this new paradigm through a reworking Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime." For Lyotard, both the arts of modernity and postmodernity are arts of the Kantian sublime, that is, works which put forward the fact that the unrepresentable exists. The key difference is that modern art is nostalgic, holding out hope for joining together the Ideas of reason and their material presentation. "It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as ... missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure."¹⁶ Postmodern art, on the other hand, denies "the solace of good forms." It devotes its energies to imparting a sense of the unrepresentable in the presentation itself,

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disrupting the nostalgia for order, totality, and closure. Accordingly, it is the duty of the avant-garde to testify to the folly, and even the horror, of modernism's attempts to change the world by means of artistic forms. Thus, art should not have the hubris to attempt to name the unnameable, but rather say what it cannot say. Lyotard: "It is important, very important, to remember that no one can—by writing, by painting, by anything—pretend to be witness and truthful reporter of, be 'equal' to the sublime affection, without being rendered guilty of falsification and imposture through this very pretension."¹⁷ Art must, therefore, renounce its claims to representation and seek out new ways of revealing that every representation is condemned to a forgetting—the presence of the Other, the trauma of an event—that is constitutive of thought, and only able to be remembered as forgotten.¹⁸ To summarize, one could say that Lyotard's influence on the conceptualization of contemporary art has been twofold: first, he helped to shape the conversation in terms of narrative, framing the postmodern as a skepticism directed at modernity's chief epistemological categories; and, second, he attempted to describe a new mode of artistic production by offering a fragmentary reading of the European avant-garde.

It would be wrong to suggest that Danto and Lyotard operate with the same chronologies of twentieth-century art. Lyotard advances a rather complex temporal sequence according to which the postmodern is intimately bound up with the modern, and the artists that he cites—Braque, Picasso, Lissitzky, Duchamp, Rothko, Newman, Buren, and Monory—defy simple historical and stylistic categories. Danto, however, practically translates Lyotard when he explains that what is distinctive about post-historical art is that it "no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives."¹⁹ What Danto and Lyotard thus share is the supposition that contemporary artistic products should be understood in terms of their rejection of the modernist narrative. Danto's realization that there is no historical essence to contemporary art, and his analysis of the accompanying stylistic eclecticism, repeats, in a figural idiom, Lyotard's thesis about the incommensurability of heterogeneous language games, each equally legitimate and equally groundless. As we have seen, for Danto, contemporary art is characterized by an "anything goes" mentality inasmuch as in the absence of a strong narrative-theoretical identification no one style predominates. For him, art turns philosophical to prevent itself from becoming completely meaningless when historical narratives falter. Like Danto's post-historical art, Lyotard's postmodern artist is "in the position of a philosopher."²⁰ This notion enables Lyotard to endow art with an ethical capacity: art is that which, in the name of justice, continually searches for the means to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable, along with the rules of its own production. Danto, I would submit, has difficulty reconciling aesthetic pluralism with his idea that art has become philosophical, since he warns that philosophy should be wary of capitulating to pluralism.²¹ In order to avoid re-inscribing art within a strong, univocal narrative, he thus posits that post-historical art is fundamentally different from what has come before it inasmuch as it is indiscernible from life itself.

We see the consequences of this position if we examine the inverted and radicalized version found in the work of Jean Baudrillard, who, despite his initial romance with the New York art world, leveled several savage critiques of it throughout the 1990s. Drawing upon his earlier accounts of simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality, Baudrillard diagnoses contemporary art as the ambiguous triumph of the aesthetic agenda of the European avant-gardes. The demands for the effacement of the boundaries between art and life have been realized, he claims, not by artists but by a reality thoroughly subjected to aesthetic transformations. In contrast with Danto, for whom the Hegelian account of art's destiny was confirmed by the philosophical puzzle presented in the *Brillo Box*, Baudrillard sees the aesthetic transformation of reality, and its subsequent effacement by the signs of consumer culture, as responsible for the abolition of art. He explains, "There was a Hegelian perspective in which one day art would be brought to an end This glowing perspective evidently did not materialize. What happened is that art substituted itself for life in the form of a generalized aesthetics that finally led to a 'Disneyfication' of the world..."²² In a brief yet important essay entitled, "Transaesthetics," Baudrillard laments the death of art brought about by the reorganization of the world according to the aesthetics of capital. "What we are witnessing ... is a semio-urgy of everything by means of advertising, the media, or images. No matter how marginal, or banal, or even obscene it may be, everything is subject to aestheticization, culturalization, museumification."²³ Accordingly, art, understood as the capacity for illusion, for adventure, and for opposition to reality, has come to an end.²⁴

The death of art does not, however, mean that the production of its spectacle will cease. For even though art has died, its shadow continues to be shown in many caves throughout the world. Like Jameson and Danto, Baudrillard characterizes contemporary culture as aesthetically permissive. Unlike Danto, however, he sees no creative possibilities in art's resuscitation of past forms. Quotation and reappropriation—culture degree Xerox—indicate instead that the art world has lost its capacities for invention. Whereas Baudrillard credits Duchamp and Warhol with having created genuine “anthropological events,” that is, operations which, respectively, introduce banality into aesthetics, and which decouple artistic production from the artist's subjectivity, contemporary practitioners cynically exploit the ignorance of the art-going public.²⁵ The art system thrives on the confusion between art and a reality already transformed by capital. With the readymade gone global, what prevails in the art market is refuse and recycled clichés—both at the level of materials and stylistic forms. And if stylistic eclecticism is the norm, if various movements can pacifically coexist, it is only because at its very heart, the art world recognizes that all its competing movements are really without significance.

In following to its end the means by which these theorists have sought to go beyond modernism, we see that what emerges is a conception of art that is little more than a testament to its own failure. As it is repeatedly formulated across these different positions, art is held to be indistinguishable from life, ceasing, as many attest, to offer possibilities for critique and social transformation. These strategies begin by contesting the autonomy that was constructed across the long life of modernism and end by decrying art's inability to separate itself from any number of heteronomous forces. Taking modernism at its word and attempting to effect a theoretical transformation premised upon it, specifically on the much-vexed question of the relationship between art and life, ultimately tends toward a position of indistinction that deprives art of critical import and theory of the power of discernment. Whether it is Jameson's analysis of the confusion wrought by the mutations of postmodern space, and the subsequent ruin of categories such as creativity, originality, and authenticity, Danto's attempt to extricate art from the narrative of modernity through the invocation of a new productive paradigm, or Baudrillard's equation of art with capital, the result is the same: art is led into a dead-end where its options are to satirize the arts of the past or to aestheticize the material of everyday life. Likewise, the aesthetics following from Lyotard's account of postmodernism serves to unnecessarily restrict art's possibilities. If, for Lyotard, art is still meaningful, it is because it is first ethical, that is, dedicated to the task of testifying to the unrepresentable. This strange admixture of aesthetics and ethics also stems from the desire to step beyond modernist notions of art's autonomy; however, it frees art from one type of isolation only to assign it another. In Lyotard's thought, diagnosed by Rancière as an “ethical diversion,” art is stripped of its political capacities and inserted into a “grand threnody of the unrepresentable/intractable/irredeemable . . .”²⁶

What I hope to have shown with these admittedly abbreviated and schematic analyses is that the theoretical positions that have attempted to describe the forms of artistic production emerging in modernism's wake share a number of assumptions which quickly morph into self-defeating discourses. To the extent that these theoretical accounts subscribe to a questionable understanding of the directions opened up by the arts at the close of the eighteenth century, they will be tempted to adopt the extreme positions that we have been analyzing. In hastily discarding the autonomy thought to characterize modern art, theoretical accounts of contemporary art relegate it to the unenviable position of being indistinguishable from other aspects of life. Framing the aesthetic regime of art as a grid of historical intelligibility, Rancière allows us to take distance from these problematic notions of contemporary art, along with the understanding of modernity upon which they are predicated. What the notion of the regime thus enables us to analyze is how a certain historically constituted form of art is capable of challenging the broader distribution of bodies, voices, and practices, even as it remains distinct from those distributions.

Rancière's re-examination of these historical categories is designed to recover the political implications of the new practices of art cotemporaneous with the advent of aesthetics. The political connotations of the word “regime” are quite deliberate, serving as a reminder of the essential stakes of his analysis. A regime is a series of axioms determining the sense or meaning that will be assigned to the sensible products created by artistic practices. As we have already indicated, one of the key concerns for any conception of art is to determine how,

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if at all, it relates to the distributions of sense created by other practices. In attacking the axioms of *mimēsis* at the center of representative poetics, the aesthetic regime disrupts the boundary between art and life, defining a shifting terrain wherein art is reinvigorated by being brought into contact with life, while life, it is thought, can be re-formed under the influence of aesthetic values. As Rancière presents it, the break with *mimēsis* meant “that there was no longer any principle of distinction between what belonged to art and what belonged to everyday life.” As a result, “Any profane object could get into the realm of artistic experience ... and any artistic production could become part of the framing of a new collective life.”²⁷

Modernism averts the challenges posed by this new sensorium where art and life swap properties, while retaining their essential identities, by interpreting the anti-mimetic direction as a ban on figuration and resemblance. It attempts to define, amongst this field of exchanges, a narrative of art’s autonomy, by preserving a form of *mimēsis*. Clement Greenberg, for example, defines modernism as the “imitation of imitating” in order to argue that modernity is not a rupture with the art of the past, but rather its continuation.²⁸ As Rancière points out, however, the breakdown of representation is not simply an iconoclasm waged against the image; it is the destruction of the network of values that made it support hierarchical visions of community. The breakdown of *mimēsis* is art’s escape from a system of distributions that rigorously separated art as imitation from life. Thus, art’s leap outside of *mimēsis* is not only the origin of art’s autonomy (as the narrative of modernism would have us believe), it is the historical pre-condition for strategies associated with the autonomy of art—abstraction in painting, silence in literature—as well as the source of art’s heteronomy—the exchanges between the various arts and the blurring of the distinction between art and life.²⁹ As Rancière says repeatedly and in many different ways, what we have at the heart of the aesthetic regime is an idea of art according to which its autonomy and heteronomy are linked as two sides of the same coin. It is upon this basis that the politics of the aesthetic regime comes into view.

As Rancière reads it from Kant’s third *Critique* and Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the aesthetic regime gives rise to a new form of experience that suspends the traditional relationships characteristic of everyday experience. The aesthetic regime posits that art is the occasion for an experience that disrupts the results of domination in everyday life. This holds true, Rancière contends, even for the self-secluding forms that modernists point to in order to make the case for art’s supposed autonomy. His idea in this respect is that art is not and never was autonomous from other aspects of existence. Aesthetics defines an identity of art in which art’s power is contained in its difference from the everyday, not its identification with it. Art harbors propositions for other ways of life and thus has a type of political agency, inasmuch as it refuses to be directly inserted into everyday systems of meaning. This is not to say that art is inherently progressive or the refuge of values denied in the political sphere. As Rancière is fond of saying, the arts contribute to projects of political emancipation what they can: they re-configure the sphere of appearances, reframe the way problems have been posed, and they contest the apportionment of capacities, voices, and roles. Artistic practices redefine what can be seen and said, as well as the implicit estimations placed upon members of our communities. If aesthetics has a political dimension to it, it is for this reason: art operates upon the aesthetic dimensions of the political. In *Disagreement*, Rancière analyzed the aestheticity of politics, demonstrating how questions of political participation and activity involve prior decisions about what will be counted as speech and what construed only as noise. To speak of an aesthetics of politics is to express the idea that politics is first and foremost a struggle over who and what can be seen and heard. Rancière: “Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it.”³⁰ Aesthetic art has a political dimension inasmuch as in both its production and reception individuals and groups alter their positions within society. The aesthetic experience separates the sensible from itself, allowing for different meanings, subjectivities, and directions to take root. Rancière again: “The modern political animal is first a literary animal, caught in the circuit of a literariness that undoes the relationship between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine the place of each. A political subjectification is the product of these multiple fracture lines ...”³¹ Aesthetic art ushers us into a moment of withdrawal, rendering us foreign to ourselves, and incompatible with the identities stamped upon us by the police order. The aesthetic is thus that constant reminder that what presents itself to our senses cannot be reduced to a single meaning or purpose. It is for this reason that

contemporary art does not need to become directly and explicitly political through the adoption of “political” themes and content. As aesthetic art, it already contains its own politics.

If modernism attempts to deny this fragile politics by transmuting it into a narrative of art’s increased isolation from the world, the contemporary accounts that we have been analyzing obfuscate it by effacing the resistant and critical character of the aesthetic experience. In an effort to undo the modernist conception of art’s essential separateness, they mishandle the very political capacities they would like to create. Retreating from the narratives of modernity, Lyotard outlines a unidirectional path for art and aesthetics, transforming art’s sensible heterogeneity into a monument of intellectual incapacity. Art is brought into contact with life, but only upon the condition that it not actively contribute to that life.

Lyotard’s framing of the question of postmodernity in terms of narrative informs Danto’s effort to delineate contemporary art from the productions of modernism. Whereas the latter project attempted to define for art a single essence, post-historical art is predicated upon the realization that there is no timeless essence of art. The breakup of the untenable modernist narrative results in an aesthetic pluralism where stylistic variations peacefully co-exist. Whether it is the availability of art’s past, pointed to by Danto, or the pastiche that Jameson describes, the outcome is, as Baudrillard attests, that art is without social or political consequence. As Jameson’s work makes explicit, pastiche is but another form of art about art, without the critical edge. Turning art into life without preserving some element of its difference deprives the aesthetic experience of its dissensual character. While this is no doubt an effort to escape from the teleology of modernity, it is fundamentally a misreading of the subtle ways in which art and life cross and sustain one another without thereby surrendering their differences.

The aesthetic regime is thus designed to provoke a series of counter-histories that would offer alternative explanations for the cultural transformations, new forms of experience, and the exchanges between art and life that paralleled the political upheaval of the French Revolution. As a chronological marker, Rancière’s aesthetic regime carries us from the end of the eighteenth century into the contemporary period. It attempts to demonstrate how two periods, thought to be separated by a rupture, can be united at what Foucault called the archaeological level, the network of historical *a priori*s shaping what can be seen and said. What is common to a number of different artistic practices is a conception of art according to which art is art only on the condition that it is more than art, and more than art only to the extent that it defines itself as distinct from life, that is, as art. It is this form of art that promises to be more than art that also carries the promise of political emancipation. The aesthetic regime shows how modernism was only a partial reading of this paradox, while recent theorizations are themselves only a partial recovery of the politics it entailed. It enables us to think and see how art and non-art are continually overlapping and intermingling, while retaining their essential differences. Art today, it seems to me, can thrive on this ambiguity where there is felt once again the need to demarcate art from life, but where no one can produce a hard and fast rule for how to do so.

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WHAT IS THE AESTHETIC REGIME?

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2006, 26.
2. *Ibid.*, 8.
3. This essay examines the politics of art and aesthetics, a politics different from, although no less important than, full-fledged political subjectification. Despite the points of connection analyzed by Rancière, art and politics are distinguishable inasmuch as the former alters the framework of what is perceptible, while the latter is a struggle for the constitution of a collective subject capable of transforming forms of part-taking. While the two endeavors have considerable points of overlap and often sustain one another, they are not synonymous. There is a crucial difference between aesthetics, which has its own politics, and politics proper, which, as Rancière demonstrates, has an aesthetic dimension. Art, therefore, does not need to deal directly with political content in order to become “engaged;” it is political in its very being. Aesthetic art operates upon the aesthetics of the political, provided it does not surrender its identity as art.
4. For a full account of the politics of the aesthetic regime, please see Chapter 3 of Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction—Philosophy, Politics, and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2011, 73-109, as well as the critique of this position contained in Chapter 5, 142-162.
5. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2011. These well-known methodological commitments regarding the admixture of different regimes is what allows Rancière to describe cinema, for example, as resulting from two different regimes, the representative and the aesthetic.
6. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13. “It is on the basis of ... primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”
7. Jacques Rancière, “Dix Thèses Sur La Politique” in *Aux bords du politique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998, 244.
8. Frederic Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
9. Arthur C. Danto, *After The End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 10.
11. Danto provides a slightly different account of the era of art and its closure in his essay from 1984, “The End of Art.” There, Danto places the anti-mimetic arts of modernism within a post-historical framework. He argues that with the advent of the Expression Theory of art, that is, the idea that art is about expressing emotions and feelings, rather than faithfully reproducing the external world, art’s essence becomes more and more bound up with theoretical discourses, and thus turns into philosophy. Danto: “Art ends with the advent of its own philosophy.” Arthur Danto, “The End of Art” in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 81-115.
12. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 35.
13. *Ibid.*, 34.
14. Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2004, 16-25.
15. Danto, *After The End of Art*, 203.
16. “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” appears as an appendix to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 81.
17. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews,”* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, 45.
18. *Ibid.*, 3-48.
19. Danto, *After The End of Art*, xiii.
20. Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?,” 81. Lyotard explains of the philosopher-artist, “the work[s] he produces are not ... governed by preestablished rules Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.”
21. On this point, see the conclusion to *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, where Danto explains, “Nothing could be more dismal to contemplate than philosophizing without end, which is an argument that philosophy is not art and that pluralism is a bad philosophy of philosophy” (210).
22. Jean Baudrillard interviewed by Ruth Scheps, “Art Between Utopia and Anticipation” in *The Conspiracy of Art*. Trans. Ames Hodges. New York: Semiotext(e), 2005, 53-54.
23. Jean Baudrillard, “Transaesthetics” in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. Trans. James Benedict. New York: Verso, 2002, 16.
24. *Ibid.*, 14.
25. On the first point, see Jean Baudrillard, “Art Between Utopia and Anticipation,” 52. He explains, “In itself Duchamp’s act is infinitesimal, but starting with him, all the banality of the world passes into aesthetics, and inversely all aesthetics

becomes banal: a commutation takes place between the two fields of banality and aesthetics, one that truly brings aesthetics in the traditional sense to an end.” For this understanding of Warhol consult Jean Baudrillard, “The Conspiracy of Art” in *The Conspiracy of Art*, 25-29.

26. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 29.

27. Jacques Rancière, “From Politics to Aesthetics?” *Paragraph* 28: 1 (2005), 21.

28. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Francis Francina and Charles Harrison. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982, 5-10.

29. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 24. See also, Rancière’s essay “Painting in the Text” in *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. New York: Verso, 2007, 73. There, he explains, “Those who regard *mimesis* as simply the imperative of resemblance can construct a straightforward idea of artistic ‘modernity’ as the emancipation of the peculiarity of art from the constraint of imitation: the reign of coloured beaches in the place of naked women and war horses. This is to miss the main thing: *mimesis* is not resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance.”

30. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 26-27.

31. *Ibid.*, 37.