

THE SYMBOLIC AND THE MATERIAL:  
A REVIEW OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE'S *AISTHESIS: SCENES  
FROM THE AESTHETIC REGIME OF ART* (VERSO 2013)  
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*Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*<sup>1</sup> is one of Rancière's most substantive works, to be ranked alongside *Nights of Labour*, *Disagreement* and *Mute Speech* in terms of the breadth and significance of its analyses. The book consists of a series of fourteen chapters, analysing as many "scenes from the aesthetic regime of the arts", all structured according to methodological principles Rancière describes and explains in the following terms:

Each one of these scenes presents a singular event, and explores the interpretive network that gives it its meaning around an emblematic text. The event can be a performance, a lecture, an exhibition, a visit to a museum or to a studio, a book, or a film release. The networks built around it shows how a performance or an object is felt and thought not only as art, but also as a singular artistic proposition and a source of artistic emotion, as novelty and revolution in art - even as a means for art to find a way out of itself. Thus it inscribes them into a moving constellation in which modes of perception and affect, and forms of interpretation defining a paradigm of art, take shape. (xi)

The inaugural scene is located in Dresden, 1764, and stages a passage from Winkelmann's newly published *History of Art in Antiquity*, which thus marks one of the possible beginnings of the "aesthetic regime". It is followed by an extract from Hegel's 1828 lectures on aesthetics focusing on a detail in a Murillo painting the philosopher would have noticed whilst visiting the art galleries in Berlin and Munich. Following it are chapters on the critical reception in 1830 of Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black*, pointing to the novel's end as its true "scandal"; the text of an 1844 conference by Emerson; a representation in Paris in 1879 by the English clowns, the Hanlon Lee Brothers, as described by the French poet Théodore de Banville; the review published by Mallarmé in the *National Observer* in 1893 of a performance by Loie Fuller; an article by Maeterlink published in 1894, reviewing a new production of Ibsen's *Solness* by Lugné-Poe; an 1910 conference by Roger Marx dedicated to the designing work of Emile Gallé, pronounced in front of a collective of workers; a 1902 text by Rainer Maria Rilke on the work of Rodin; a 1908 article by Edward Gordon Craig on the principles

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of modern theatre; a 1916 review of Chaplin by Viktor Chklovski; a 1921 article by Paul Rosenfeld on the photography of Alfred Stieglitz; a 1926 review of Dziga Vertov's *The Sixth Part of the World* following its initial release; and finally, an extract from James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1936. Simply listing the chapter contents already gives a sense of how rich and detailed the book is, and of the general impression it might make on the reader. Even though Rancière explicitly rejects any claim to systematicity, the chronological progression and the level of historical detail make it clear that he has conceived this book as a fresh, major substantiation of his attempt, waged for more than two decades now, to establish a counter-history and a counter-theory of aesthetic modernity.

The book's method and its overall theoretical effect are reminiscent of the early political studies. It shares a comparable mode of archival-philosophical exegesis, the method that was devised to conduct the *Logical Revolts* project,<sup>2</sup> which led to the publication of the *Nights of Labour*. In *Aisthesis* as in the early studies in the "proletarian dream", the "emblematic text" around which the reconstruction is developed is systematically situated within the discourses to which it responded at the time and which responded to it in turn. The historical and conceptual hermeneutic is conducted through Rancière's typical mode of free indirect style. The purpose of this strategy, then and now, is to reduce the distance between conceptual elaboration and the object analysed, to transform the object of analysis into the subject of its own conceptuality, to let the subjects of practice unveil the conceptual knots at the heart of their practices. The counter-historical dimension of such a method stems from the fact that it brings back to life forgotten moments, crucial episodes whose memories have been repressed by the official histories. In *Aisthesis*, this is for instance the genealogy of influential grotesque characters linking the figures of Pierrot, Arlequin, the Hanlon Lee Brothers,<sup>3</sup> all the way to Chaplin and the other greats of early slapstick comedy.<sup>4</sup> These figures of the mechanical body, Rancière shows, exert a powerful aesthetic influence on many of the 20<sup>th</sup> avant-gardes even though they do not register as worthy reference points in scholarly narratives. Historical corrections such as these also have direct counter-theoretical import. The practices are no longer observed from an external position that would thereby constitute a position of authority. The historical scene studied is not just an example or an episode in a larger narrative. Rather, it appears as a specific, local configuration in which acts and discourses create a specific context of sense in which they agentially intervene. In the political field, the point of this is to return political agency to the actors and their movements. In the aesthetic field, it is to do justice not just to individual creativity, but also to the conceptual depth of practices that mobilise the opportunities and face the contradictions of the aesthetic regime. The agency thereby unveiled operates not just at the level of content, but also performs an inversion of the usual relationship between learned discourse and the objects of study. However erudite and detailed the analyses in *Aisthesis* might be, they continue to operate on the logic of the ignorant schoolmaster whereby the master's mastery consists in the capacity to ask questions to which the subjects themselves provide the answers. The inversion of the relation of authority goes together with the dissolution of the boundaries between high art and popular art, between the noble, well-established and the new, minor art forms, like Loie Fuller's serpentine dance,<sup>5</sup> the art of scenography,<sup>6</sup> the pantomime, or slapstick comedy.

The emphasis on the hermeneutic and the agential seems at odds with Rancière's explicit rejection of phenomenological themes and methods, and his undeniable indebtedness to a structuralist sensitivity. It is however one of the main features of the notion of "regime of the arts" to marry those seemingly antagonistic dimensions. The irruption of the principle of equality in modern societies does not simply operate on the institutional level. More deeply it alters the very conditions of experience and thought and thereby exerts a direct aesthetic effect. Equality, by collapsing the hierarchies of genres, propriety and styles, reshapes the very modes of perception and thought. It opens the entire field of *aisthesis*, the world itself as something to be sensed, perceived and thought, for modes of expression to be reinvented. Such a view of aesthetic modernity remains structuralist in some respect, because it describes the world as overall *sensorium* by specifying the functional relations linking its constitutive elements (affect, perception, thought, word, sense and the community of sense), and defines the meaning of each element in terms of the place it takes in the field in relation to the others. The opportunities and difficulties inherent in this new regime stem from the fact that it is now up for grabs to show how, using what expressive tools, with which material, in which genre and through which medium,

there is “logos and pathos”, that is, how sense and sense-making articulations and practices mobilise and take hold of “mute things”.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, as in every structural field, this new regime has its own specific contradictions, its defining blind spot, linked to the fact that there is also “pathos in logos”, that sense itself runs the risk of collapsing into “muteness”, the absurd, the dead.

The explicit aim of *Aisthesis* is to pursue the defence and illustration of the aesthetic regime hypothesis. As a counter-narrative to other theories of aesthetic modernity the book might appear puzzling in terms of its overall effect. The narrative is highly fragmented. Even though some loose thematic threads appear after a while, the links between “scenes” remain implicit, each scene is relatively self-enclosed. However, readers tempted to jump to conclusions about a possible exhaustion of Rancière’s analytical powers should remind themselves that this effect was already the one produced by the succession of scenes in *Nights of Labour* in relation to another problem, that of the contradictory relations between labour and emancipation. In fact, just as the fragmented, aporetic narrative presented in *The Nights of Labour* prepared the way for the full presentation of Rancière’s political apparatus in *Disagreement*, similarly, if less visibly, *Aisthesis* also proposes significant conceptual innovations in relation to aesthetics. The book significantly extends and renews Rancière’s characterisation of the conceptual knots structuring the aesthetic regime. This renewed understanding appears notably in the constellation of interlinked formal concepts and thematic threads being woven throughout the fourteen chapters.

One of those conceptual threads is Rancière’s paradoxical, symbolic materialism. Materiality, the “prose of the world”, the shine, texture, and the sheer weight of objects, the specific qualities of the natural elements, the evolutions of light, or simply the profusion of things in the world, in other words, what the French term “*le sensible*” properly refers to in what one is tempted to call its intrinsic Merleau-Pontian sense, this materiality takes central importance in the aesthetic regime since the latter is defined as the opening of the world as a general *sensorium*. Materiality is the only possible place of sense in a regime that emerges from the dissolution of ontological boundaries. It is one of the most striking paradoxes of Rancière’s thought, that it is able to accommodate a never reneged upon structuralist impetus with such strong emphasis on the sensuousness of world experience. In *Aisthesis* Rancière’s paradoxical materialism expresses itself firstly in some astonishing pages, notably in chapters on Emerson and Whitman and the later chapter on James Agee, in which the philosopher relishes in the sheer poetic pleasure of parataxis, the infinite richness of the “prose of the world”.<sup>8</sup> However, the knot at the heart of *aisthesis* is that there is logos in pathos, sense and expressivity are nowhere to be found but in the “sensible” itself. In this new book, the exploration of the potentialities and paradoxes entailed in this univocal nature of the prose of the world leads to a reappropriation of the early-Romantic notion of symbol, interpreted in a literal, materialist way, that is, “not (as) the figural expression of abstract thought”, but as “the fragment detached from the whole that carries the power (puissance) of the whole” (64).<sup>9</sup> This definition of the symbol fits well with the intimate logic of Rancière’s thought, as the symbol becomes a figure of thought that is indistinctly semantic and material, semantic in its very materiality. This logic of material symbolism runs through the book. It receives a most striking expression in the following passage dedicated to James Agee’s attempt to capture the “cruelty of what there is”, in this particular case, the enigmatic messages hidden in the everyday objects found in an old chest of drawers:

the ‘frivolous’ inventory of the drawers only fully renders a minute portion of the elements that are gathered in the infinite and unrepeatable intertwining relations between human beings, an environment, events, and things, that produced the actuality of these few lives. It is possible to account for these lives and their place in the world, however slightly, only by going beyond the significant relation between the particular and the general and by reaching for the symbolic relation of the part to the unrepresentable whole that expresses itself in the part’s actuality. (250)

*Aisthesis* also focuses specifically on the dynamism of the material and expressive forces that meet and produce their effects at these “sensible” loci Rancière calls “scenes”. As we saw, a “scene” names a local configuration of matter, objects, perception, poetic action and thought. A key associated notion is that of the “figure”, which denotes first the specific expressive formation emerging at the point of the scene, but also encompasses the

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contradictory nature of these configurations in which thought is materialized and matter made expressive. The impasses, paradoxes and contradictions of aesthetic expression mean that neither pole ever finds its appropriate counterpart in the other pole, there is no expressive transparency or material adequacy in the aesthetic regime. The figure is thus "sensible presence that embodies the power that forged it, but also a differal of this presence" (18); "the literal, material presence of a body as well as the poetic operation of metaphorical condensation and metonymic displacement" (99). Rancière also emphasizes the closeness between the figure and the scene, since the figure is itself "an act instituting a place, a singular theatre of operations" (ibid.). This exploration of the dynamic powers at the core of expressive formations explains the importance taken by the arts of the stage and performance in *Aisthesis*. Whilst Rancière defined the basic coordinates of the aesthetic regime through the study of modern literature in *Mute Speech*, it is now the many forms of expressive performance that become paradigmatic for his aesthetic theory. The Scene was already a key concept of his political theory; it now receives its full conceptual treatment as the central category of Rancière's ontology of modern sensibility.

The Figure and the Scene specify the topological and dynamic conditions under which a Symbol can emerge. These formal categories are aptly complemented by another theme that also takes spectacular prominence in *Aisthesis*, namely the Body and the Life that traverses it. At the heart of the representative regime features a normative conception of action and expression that implies a conception of the body, of the way in which it is mobilized by the subject in modes of affection, expression and action. Without providing any systematic treatment of the question, *Aisthesis* distils a thorough analysis of the rules underpinning the representation and place of bodies within the classical, representative regime. Five norms come to the fore: the positive norm of activity which makes passivity a sign of low status or pathological state; second, the body as means and medium of action, a functional body caught up internally and externally in the logic of means and ends, cause and effect; third, the body as organism, obeying the laws of good proportions between the parts, a principle defining beauty as harmony; fourth the body as one, fully articulated and integrated entity; and finally, the body as unitary, expressive centre of affect, perception and thought. The dismantling of the rules and norms of the representative regime impacts directly upon the underlying image of the body. In place of the ideal of the harmonious body as expression of the will and medium of action, new figures arise: the body as fragmented, mechanical, indifferent, passive, suffering, acrobatic, dynamic, energetic, and so on. However, these new bodily modes of the aesthetic regime are only possibilities; the rules of the representative regime continue to operate in the reign of the Spectacle. The aesthetic "fable" is only a virtuality repressed by the continued dominance of old poetics caught up in the old rules of heroic status, cause-effect and means-ends connections, the hierarchy of values, and so on.

Beyond their heterogeneity, these figures of the body of aesthetic modernity all share in Rancière's own version of the dissolution of the sensory-motor schema. The unity, harmony and sense-directedness of the classical body is challenged by deep, amorphous life forces that provide the new bodies of the aesthetic regime with their energy at the same time as they also undermine their organicism. A distinctive Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean strand has consistently gained momentum in Rancière's recent writings. It comes to the fore quite spectacularly in his latest magnum opus, in passages featuring explicit vitalistic arguments. Underneath the meaningful actions and movements of representative bodies the powers of life operate with no regard for the categories of perception or the understanding. This occurs emblematically with the Belvedere Torso, the Figure that opens the book. The consideration of the life forces that get hold of the body of art make it, now more eminently than the canvas or the page, the ultimate "surface of conversion". The body that is indifferent, impassible, inexpressive or immobile becomes the eminent receptacle for movements and forces that shatter the illusions of controlled, willful individual and social action: "the free movement, the movement that is the same as rest, only liberates its powers when the bonds are loosened that forced the positions of the body to signify specific emotions" (10). This modern trope of the fragmented body finds a most eminent echo in Rodin (chapter 9), in whose sculpture, as Rilke shows, "bodies do not act; from now on, actions constitute bodies" (157). With Rodin, we discover the need "to renounce using the organic body as a motor for action; better yet, to undo this body, to dismantle it into multiple unities identical to multiple gestures or scenes" (160).

In the mechanical body in turn can be witnessed the paradox of a body that is causalistically delivered over to unrelenting stimuli but keeps producing contingent effects, thereby undermining mechanistic causality and the integration of percept and output. In the energetic bodies of the Hanlon Lee Brothers for instance, as Théophile Gautier writes, “everything comes together and falls apart with an admirable insouciance: effects have no cause at all and causes have no effects whatsoever... This apparent helter-skelter and disorder, finally, depicts real life in its capricious aspect more accurately than the most intricate moral drama” (83). This, Rancière argues, directly anticipates Meyerhold’s biomechanics and constructivist scenography. The slapstick body caught up in the gags of early cinema thereby becomes a most illustrious representative of the deeper truth of the aesthetic regime. As Rancière suggests provocatively, “through Chaplinesque pantomime, cinema expresses the secret nihilism that accompanies the great mechanical faith, likening the demiurgical potential of machines to the shadow play on the walls of the cave, at the cost perhaps that these shadows turn out to be more exact and clearer than the plans of the engineers of the future” (206).

To act without plan, to act whilst not wanting anything, to refrain from acting altogether, to express by not meaning or intending anything, these paradoxical figures of being (a body) in the world constitute for Rancière the deepest layer of modern experience. This is the null point where sense and non-sense fuse and become the flipside of each other, the central knot at the heart of the aesthetic regime to which so many modern philosophers and writers have been sensitive. This trope appeared for the first time in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*. It explains Rancière’s paradoxical emphasis on inaction, passivity, inertia and apathy, and the hedonistic giving over to the movement of the world underneath the agitation of the human world, as the ultimate gestures of resistance. These figures of renouncement and abandonment appear in the first three chapters and punctuate the book at regular intervals. They connect directly with the heightened attention to the materiality of everyday objects and the sensuous qualities of the world. What does Rancière mean when he translates his central political concept, equality, in the aesthetics of material symbolism, speaking of the “pure equality of an emotion”, the “equality of pure sensation” and the “sharing without calculation of the sensible moment”?<sup>10</sup> Is there any other way of reading passages like this but as the sign of a late defeatism or pessimistic abdication by a once radical philosopher?<sup>11</sup> In fact, it should be obvious that the philosopher’s apparent embrace of apathy and abandonment can only be misconstrued as anti-political gestures if one makes the mistake of seeking an explicit political theory in a book of aesthetics. At the very least, one ought to grant Rancière the right to rely upon all of his past, substantive work in the forms and potentials of radical equality, and not have to keep repeating it today. In highlighting the prevalence of the figures of non-sense and anti-action in modern aesthetics, Rancière is making a double ontological point, which does apply to politics, but only as an external caveat: “Literary fiction (does not) enjoy contradicting the socialist science. Rather, it might well unveil its flipside: the science of society, bearing a future freedom in its womb and the philosophy of the will-to-live that wants nothing were born on the same ground: the site where old hierarchies of social and narrative order break down” (52). With his latest major book *Aisthesis*, Rancière reminds us critically that politics, like art, is only episodic. And he wants to make the point that works of art can be the accurate witnesses to the conditions in which any and all human action take place.

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### NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Trans. Zakir Paul. London: Verso, 2013; *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 2011. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the English edition.
2. The articles Rancière wrote for this project are now available in English in *Staging the People*, London: Verso, 2011, and *The Intellectual and His People*, London: Verso, 2012. For a summary of the aims and outputs of the collective project, see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 126-130, and J.-P. Deranty, "Logical Revolts", in *Jacques Rancière. Key Concepts*. Ed. J.-P. Deranty. Acumen, 2010, 17-24.
3. Chapter 5: "The Gymnasts of the Impossible (Paris, 1879)," 75-92.
4. Chapter 11: "The Machine and Its Shadow (Hollywood, 1916)," 191-206.
5. Chapter 6: "The Dance of Light (Paris, Folies Bergères, 1893)," 93-110.
6. Chapter 7: "The Immobile Theatre (Paris, 1894-1895)," 111-132; and chapter 10: "The Temple Staircase (Moscow-Dresden, 1912)," 171-190.
7. The short text of *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, which articulates this dual relationship most clearly (logos in pathos/pathos in logos, in other words, the possibility of sense in mute things and the existence of spots of senselessness at the heart of sense), is an important stage in Rancière's thinking in this respect.
8. Chapter 14: "The Cruel Radiance of What Is (Hale County, 1936-New York, 1941)," 245-262.
9. See also p. 101. I have used the available English translation but altered it in some passages.
10. See Chapter 3: "Plebeian Heaven (Paris, 1830)," 39-55.
11. As does Nicolas Vieillescazes in his review of the book in *Radical Philosophy* 177 (2013): 26-31.