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*Notes on Jacques Rancière and Emancipation*

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The issue for Rancière is emancipation – our emancipation. One aspect of this emancipation, in regards to the arts, involves understanding two opposing conceptions about the arts and recognizing their co-existence. The first conception grows out of a belief, formulated as part of Modernism, that the *forms* of art were tied to the modern era's aspirations for a new way of life (Constructivism, Suprematism, Bauhaus, etc are the examples). In the perceived failure of Modernism's utopian promise, as demonstrated by the decimations of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz, the critique of art and the way it was seen functioning within the broader culture took a decidedly negative turn, it being implicated in the Modernist dream turned nightmare. Theodor Adorno, for example, proclaimed that there could be no art after Auschwitz. As part of this disenchantment, art was demoted from its privileged position in the revolutionary vanguard and relegated (or elevated, depending on your point of view) to a different role, or at least a role that no longer assigned it revolutionary potential. In some circles art and artists were criticized as being part of a "culture industry" (stemming from Adorno, The Frankfurt School, etc through Marx) in which art was constituted as being little more than a degraded consumer fantasy before which we were passive spectators or, even worse, it was seen as an active ingredient in our alienation – catalyst to the inescapable melancholy inspired by the frenzied phantasmagoria that we call contemporary (Modern/post-modern) life: part and parcel of the endless flow of destabilizing images that form the consumer spectacle. Thus one of the first entries in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* states, "Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a *partial* way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life." (*The Society of the Spectacle*, #2, page 12)

More contemporarily, and built from slightly different arguments, are cultural critiques like those found in Giorgio Agamben's condemnation of aesthetics in *Man Without Content*. According to these critical narratives, one of the few ways in which art and artists can extricate themselves from activities that contribute to Debord's "autonomous movement of non-life" is to abjure the spaces sanctioned for art, which are seen as privileged, hierarchical, non-communal, elitist and instead venture into the streets, the impoverished neighborhoods, non-art spaces where artists can engage in interactive projects with disenfranchised or marginalized communities who, working collectively, carry out socially responsible practices, for the betterment of the community.

Now to the second conception. This one is formal and ontologically based and is most directly associated, in the United States at least, with Clement Greenberg and his disciples. This narrative foregrounds art's autonomy on the basis of its inherent qualities and, in the process, separates it from the social engagement (politics, if you will), which it sees as contaminating art's purity. In this instance, art, by being beautiful or pure, is placed on a pedestal disengaged from the messy world, asked only to refer to itself and the unspeakable (sublime) realms that emerge through its unique materiality or essence. It is in this sense that Clement Greenberg can proclaim as he did in his 1939 essay, *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, "In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. The nonrepresentational or "abstract," if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature."

Ranciere rejects both of these conceptions. The first he rejects because in the aesthetic regime (what we might call the modernist/post-modernist era, a designation that Ranciere rejects as being ahistorical and misleading), "the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content." (The Politics of Aesthetic, 14). That is to say the correlation between a form

and a particular content (say egalitarianism or a new liberated way of life) may be correlated but, in the end, the equality of subject matter and of the forms used to deliver it make any correspondence of necessity between the two impossible. For example, the so-called forms of democracy – how it is expressed architecturally – can easily be adopted by totalitarianism and vice versa, as becomes vividly clear when comparing the architecture of contemporary Washington, DC with that of Berlin under the Third Reich, both inspired by interpretations of Greek classicism. The second conception he rejects because in its obsession with arts unique essences as some sort of predetermined aesthetic journey from representation to flatness and abstraction, it seals art off from the contingencies of the world, disconnecting “the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.” (Politics of Aesthetics, 23). In his view there is no direct cause and affect relationship between artistic forms and the feelings and thoughts they inspire. In his essay, *The Emancipated Spectator*, he writes, “The identity of cause and effect is the principle of stultification... [T]he principle of emancipation is the dissociation of cause and effect.”

In contrast Rancière proposes a counter discourse, based on a contradiction, which, on the one hand, recognizes art’s autonomy (a specific way of thinking, seeing, and speaking that is particularized when we stand in spaces reserved for art). On the other hand, it imagines a liberating sensibility that simultaneously reaffirms art’s connections to the world of which this sensible experience is a part – its heteronomy. In this conception, stemming from Schiller’s concept of “free play,” autonomy and heteronomy are opposite sides of the same coin – perceived simultaneously. According to Ranciere it is within this non-hierarchical condition that art provides a space for sensual experience that sets us apart and yet brings us together, but not together in the sense of a univocal collective, united by shared ideologies but as free individuals linked with other free individuals in dissensus. Dissensus, the ability to recognize contradictions and to discern avenues of acceptance and resistance within them, operates in the zones opened up by the evaporation of hierarchies, the disintegration of categories. The result is a stretching of the sensory fabric in which everyone – truck drivers, day laborers, artists, scholars – has the ability and the means to participate. In this sense Ranciere’s scheme is egalitarian

(non-hierarchical) because it doesn't presume an individual's capacity or incapacity to understand, to have sensory awareness, or to intervene based on occupation, cultural background, race, or financial status. In the *Emancipated Spectator* he writes, "Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together, and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of 'being together'. The solitude of the art work is a false solitude: it is an intertwining or twisting together of sensations, like the cry of a human body. And a human collective is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations in the same way." (page 56)

For him the problem of contemporary critical "postmodern" discourses and some art practices that grow out of them (or feed into them) is that, while perhaps claiming otherwise, they provide no means of emancipation but tie us to the same old conversations that describe us as inexorably trapped in conditions of servitude within an opaque culture of alienation and simulations without origins. He describes the processes that perpetuate this condition as akin to a vast conspiratorial machine or beast that is churning out deception to a population (us) that is conceived as ignorant, and lacking in the means to resist or interrogate the disorienting spectacle around it. In Ranciere's conception, this model can only generate more ignorance by implying no way out; nothing but submission and resignation, the very things that these critiques and relational art works say they are trying to overcome. Hardly a path to emancipation in his opinion. As Joseph Tanke points out, it is the path "that ultimately leads us into the impasse where we lament the powerlessness of art, [and] it is precisely this incapacity that Ranciere's counter-histories are intended to combat" (The Case of the Aesthetic Regime). Referring to these postmodern critiques, Ranciere writes:

"Therefore I do not want to add another twist to the reversals that forever maintain the same machinery. Instead, I have suggested the need and direction of a change of approach. At the heart of this approach is the attempt to uncouple the link between the emancipatory logic of capacity and the critical logic of collective inveiglement. To escape the circle is to start from different presuppositions, assumptions that are certainly unreasonable from the perspective of our oligarchic societies and the so-called critical logic that is its double. Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place. It would be assumed that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no

monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place and at any time. What dissensus means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible. Collective understanding of emancipation is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection. It is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus. It is the employment of the capacity of anyone whatsoever, of the quality of human beings without qualities. As I have said, these are unreasonable hypotheses. Yet I believe that today there is more to be sought and found in the investigation of this power than in the endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast.” (from *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 48-49, *The Misadventures of Critical Thought*)

Here is another relevant quote, this one from Guattari and Deleuze’s book *What is Philosophy* that Ranciere sites in his essay *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community* from his book *The Emancipated Spectator*:

“The writer twists language, makes it vibrate, seizes hold of it in order to wrest the percept from perceptions, the affect from affections, the sensation from opinion – in view, one hopes, of the still-missing people... This is precisely the task of all art and, from colours and sounds, both music and painting similarly extract new harmonies, new plastic or melodic landscapes, and new rhythmic characters that raise them to the height of the earth’s song and the cry of humanity: that which constitutes tone, health, becoming, a visual and sonorous bloc. A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-created protestations, their constantly resumed struggle. Will this all be in vain because suffering is eternal and revolutions do not survive their victory? But the success of a revolution resides only in itself, precisely in the vibrations, clinches, and openings it gave to men and women at the moment of its making and that composes in itself a monument that is always in the process of becoming, like those tumuli to which each new traveler adds a stone.”