

Outnotes for indiscipline¹

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“..aber wir warteten deiner an jedem Morgen, nahmen dir deinen Überfluß ab und segneten dich dafür.” (Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §342)²

Our point of departure, a line running throughout Jacques Rancière’s catalogue essay on James Coleman, perhaps the very force of what he says there: that justice “stems from the warranty of the visible”.³

The articulation of the two sides of the visible, what we can see *of* the visible and what we can see *in* the visible, forms a central problematic of Rancière’s on-going inquiry into contemporary art: in general terms what is the relation, the disjunction and conjunction, between image and text, and what makes the two, disjunction and conjunction, possible? In Coleman’s art the problem takes the form of the dissociation of image from voice: “the necessary form of an art persistently stressing that ‘speaking is not seeing’ and that no image bears its meaning written on its face”.⁴

On the one hand, the question appears to be how to represent the relation the voice that reads, or in Coleman’s case the breath that reads, has to the way in which what is read disperses the body; the relationship between how the body in its very breathing engages the written word, and how the written word informs the body and its relations to another.

But it is not simply a problem of representation in the sense of ‘how’. Nor is it a matter of the unrepresentable in the representable (the “dramaturgy of the unrepresentable”), because to characterise it in these terms is to have already negated the problem, is already to have settled the question as one which is restricted to, or one which is primarily of, the visible, even if cast in terms of the invisible in the visible – where at best word or text would be restricted to or fall only on the side of the invisible.

The problem of representation is that representation is itself made up both of image and text, and that there would not be representation without text, without word.

It is more than a problem of representation then, not because text can also be ‘represented’, but because there would not be the representing image without text.

And the putting into question of representation is itself another mode of the relation between the visual and the written.

If the work is a representational work, words ‘amend’ its surface by causing another subject to appear under or through or alongside the representational one.

They do so in two different ways, either by ‘making themselves images’, or by ‘visibilising’ speech.

In either case the essential operation would be one of conversion, from word to image.⁵ Words happen to the image in such a way as to question what appears to be represented there, but not simply to draw out something hitherto and otherwise unseen, or by revealing what is or can be said, whether that be said by persons or by things or events. It is that what is said about a work can give rise to the de-figuration (to use a term Rancière borrows from Deleuze, and in the process giving it a different sense) of what is represented, or we might say words de-representationalise the image, even if that image be on the face of it a representational one.

And words de-materialise the image also, by questioning the propriety of the medium in deciding what the work essentially is.

We see the words in the picture, their legibility being not a description of what can be seen represented or a description of the materiality of the work, but the condition of possibility of seeing.

To do this there must not be, has not to be, a correspondence between what is seen on the surface and what is said about it.

It is only through a disjunction between image and text that the conditions for the chance of conversion between the two is established.

Thus a critical text will seek to rearrange the relationship between the seeable and the sayable by altering what is visible, by bringing the surface of words to bear on the surface of what is seen, not so much to re-surface the work as to sur-face it, to face-to-face it with something other than what is seen, to allow something to come through the surface or be pulled through from without, and at once to reveal the surface as the site of an exchange and therefore as something not certain, not fixed, not intact.

This work of word will visibilise the work of art as much as does the artwork ‘itself’.

Writing about art is no less a labour of making visible than is the work which is written about.

Though insofar as what is visibilised is still ‘of’ the artwork, the ‘itself’ of the artwork will have radically shifted.

The artwork will have been given a new visibility, reconfigured through the work of words.

Enabling the painting itself to become newly visible, words reconfigure the visibility of what an artwork does – and can do, and enable new ways of seeing the artwork.

We – and this includes the artist – would not see what art does without critical discourse assisting the eye in seeing.

Rancière says ‘training’ the eye, which is misleading in that it gives rise to a correspondence one stage further back.⁶

There is no discipline involved here, unless it be to see ‘in’ the artwork from without what the artwork itself cannot see; or rather, unless it be to liberate the artwork from a representation and a description which blinds it to itself, which if it is a training is training the eye not to see.

The work of word will obviously deem fragile what the image shows. But it will deem it fragile not because what is seen there is not true, but because the truth of the image is as much what is not seen there as what is.

We remarked earlier on how the question of the warranty of the visible is for Rancière a matter of justice.

Now we are in a position to see why: the critical function is to return the image to a fragility which would allow something to emerge on its surface which is not immediately visible or easily represented:

“surfaces of cinematic projection in theatres or museums might exert a critical function with respect to the depth of the media, by returning the image to the fragility of its surface and letting it linger over fragments of the world and discourse about the world where conflict and injustice take time to appear and express themselves.”⁷

An example of this fragility would be the ‘physiological truth’ of which Tarkovsky speaks in relation to his film *Andrey Rublyov* (1966), set in the early 1400s, the truth of artifice opposed to the archaeological or ethnological truth of historical representation: “Had someone from the fifteenth century suddenly appeared to witness it, he would have found the filmed material a strange enough spectacle; but no more so than us and our own world.”⁸

The truth of history, in this case the conflict between the artist Rublyov’s art as it is taught and art as it is learnt, as it were, in the disjunction between art and life, is not a matter of historical representation.

The implication is that justice is intimately connected to what may not immediately be apparent or visible in what is seen, and that bringing words to bear on the visible affords it a time in which justice may emerge.

“The difficulty with justice and with its correlative virtue, courage, is that they are allied, in effect, with a certain invisibility, with a non-being and non-visibility that oblige one to make a choice, to take a step forward into darkness. The question of justice begins there where one ceases to read an open book, where one can no longer identify the concept with existence.”⁹

So the courage of the critic would be to produce words and the artist word-signs which would de-form the image, not to leave it deformed but to open it to a sensibility not its alone; where the sensibility of the image, its signification, would be a question not of the visible solely, but of a doubled visibility, where what is not immediately seen is afforded the chance of speaking its invisibility, where what is seen is able to be brought into conjunction with what is at odds with it, what is other than it, precisely because of the disjunctive relation what is said of what is seen can have to what is seen.

This would certainly not equate simply with showing, for example, the injustice of this or that social or political situation.

On the contrary, it would be to take step back from doing so, into invisibility, into not showing, not representing, not explaining, into what is prior to explanation and redress, into the chance of a space where the viewer, the critic, the artist him or herself can step

forward and raise questions, a space made political precisely because of its resistance to the 'just' representation of injustice.

This is what Rancière is adverting to when disclaiming the presumption that politics is the public discussion of injustice, and we might add the possession of the community; on the contrary, something is political when the question of how to distinguish the one speaking from the one 'speaking' is at issue, where he who is excluded by the community – community always excludes, it is founded on the very principle of exclusion and at once excludes this foundation from representations of itself – might be shown or heard not to have a voice:

“there is a preliminary matter of justice: How do you recognize that the person who is mouthing a voice in front of you is discussing matters of justice rather than expressing his or her private pain? Politics is in fact about that preliminary question: who has the power to decide about this?”¹⁰

It is not that “justice and correctness are bad ideas”, as Deleuze argues, it is in the linking of them that the problem lies.¹¹

And it is through breaking the link between justice and correctness, de-naturalising the 'and' between justice and its correct representation, that the question of justice is allowed to emerge as one that is always to be decided.

In order that it be protected from the judgement of correctness, justice can only be expressed as a question.

One way of putting justice into question is to disjoin the relation between words and their propriety, not just to their proper use or reference but their relation to 'the proper' itself, to put words into the public domain without proper sanction, without waiting for the warranty of propriety of those authorities and interests in a position to 'decide'.

Deleuze avers Jean-Luc Godard's *dictum* “Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image”, a handwritten image from the Groupe Dziga Vertov film *Le vent d'est* (1970).¹² A just image would be one which conforms to an accepted or dominant meaning or to an established precept, whereas to present just an image would be to counter the demand of representation.

When the Groupe Dziga Vertov (Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin) write images they do so in the names of criticism (the question guiding the film being 'Que faire?', 'what to do?') and struggle (the intertitle in question is moments later shown with the word 'repression' scrawled all over it), as part of a child-like play with ideas (“Sorry for disturbing your class struggle... which way to political cinema?”), and out of a concern with the pedagogy of the image (“Fiat is my university”) and the question of how to read images, all involving the disjoining of image from text, the visible from the audible, voice from identity, and the name from object and act, only to conjoin these differently where what is correct is correct in practice for this film.

And whilst *Le vent d'est* is concerned to open the image to the voices of minorities, it does not seek to propose words for their correct expression, on the contrary it ironises what we might expect them to say.

By 'just an image' is not meant an image detached from text; the texts of this film are so-called revolutionary tracts as a way of questioning the interests which lie behind representation – and as well to raise doubts as to who mouths the counter slogan and why

– but the filmmakers’ insight is that there is no text which is not mediated by words (“An image is nothing... no image exists in itself”).

Representation too is an arrangement of image to text; but not just any arrangement. Godard argues that so-called dominant modes of cinema hold sway precisely because they sacrifice the pictorial in favour of the textual, in the sense of the already written. At the same time, then, the use of text is to produce an excess of text, and text outside of use, over against the way in which it plays a determinant role in the meaning of the image, and is thus itself part of Godard’s on-going *polemos* with his ‘royal enemy’, the ‘number one enemy’, text.¹³

To produce words in excess then of use, in the name of an indiscipline which would both pose itself as a question to correctitude, and afford the viewer and the critic the space of an hypothesis, a speculation, an alternative, a decision.

“Humans are political animals... for two reasons: first, because we have the power to put into circulation more words, ‘useless’ and unnecessary words, words that exceed the function of rigid designation; secondly, because this fundamental ability to proliferate words is unceasingly contested by those who claim to ‘speak correctly’ — that is, by the masters of designation and classification who, by virtue of wanting to retain their status and power, flat-out deny this capacity to speak.”¹⁴

A capacity to speak which does not let itself be identified within that of which it is otherwise a part, which resists identification in the form of naming, of community.

A capacity which does not recognise the bounds of a proper speaking subject, but which opens into an image to liberate object and place from representation, voice from body, and speech from the burden of proof of that which is represented.

When speaking of how Coleman’s art expresses the potential of the body to strip itself of the naturalness of its condition, Rancière argues that there is no such thing as a person’s ‘own words’ that would be adequate to the ‘authenticity of being’, for every voice is subject to playback.

If the problem and the task is to “choose the right one”, then for Rancière it is a matter of “poetic justice” that voices be allowed to resound both in the present and outside of any time determined by the present.¹⁵

So the space for choice must be worked open, and such work would consist in the de-working of the artist’s materials, to resist putting material to work in the sense of a function or a utility socially determined.

It would be to resist subjugating materiality to use, in the case of speech and text in favour of proliferating useless words able and unable to be spoken and the positions capable of and susceptible to speaking them.

It would be to materialise the word in such a way that it demand designation, and thus and in turn new words.

Coleman’s 1977 16mm film loop *Box (ahharetturnabout)* stages this demand in the form of a voice, more a breathe, an ache, an imploration, emerging from somewhere within what is seen in such a way that we are never sure we are listening to one of the boxers, to his trainer, or to a spectator of the fight urging the fighter on.

In any case, it is a body speaking, no mere ‘formal exercise’ as Rancière would have it, but closer to what Godard calls for in the filming of sport: “showing the work of the body

without interruption”, but in this case voice as the movement of bodies for whom the word is itself a blow and a move in the fight or the expression of one of these needed or missed or inexplicably held back or mistimed or once able to be called upon, or the very address to the fight to open itself and give a space in which to work one’s way into it.¹⁶

The space worked by the excess of words or their excessiveness is an interval in or a separation within the reality of what is represented – a gap between what we can see of the visible and what we can see in the visible.

It is not the space of an absence or a lack or an incompleteness to be made good by the insertion or recovery of something missing.

It is rather a useless space, a space which has no use reducible to what is seen represented in the work.

It is the inscription of a necessary distance between what is seen in the work and what can be said about it.

When Rancière names the ‘excess of words’ literarity we cannot help but feel a resonance with Blanchot’s conception of literature as *désœuvrement*, unworking, workless.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy characterise Blanchot’s unworking as a ‘nothing’, a nothing which is at once nothing more than an interruption of that of which it is a part.¹⁷

It is the point where in seeking to close itself, say everything about itself and at the same time say nothing but what it is, the work interrupts itself.

It is therefore something that the work itself *knows*.

So this ‘nothing’ is not exactly nothing, it is rather no thing present in the work, and it is rather some thing about the work’s materiality – it just is its materiality – which would allow for something else to be said about the work.

As a space for what can be said it is then nothing more than the space of ‘junction’, the play of conjunction and disjunction between what a work or an image presents and what can be said about it.

A work has propriety over what it says and what can be said about it, but what that saying is is always to be properly decided, not least because the work could not have said anything without there having always already been an excess of words about it.

The task for the artist is how to give this space which would not exclude, without giving in to knowing that at the same time such a space can only exclude.

¹ These notes, the second of three parts, formed the basis of a presentation to *Knowing Not to Know (Rancière and Representation)*, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 6 April 2009, a symposium accompanying the exhibition *James Coleman* organised by the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Project Arts Centre, and the Royal Hibernian Society. The first, ‘Notes for discipline’, was presented to the conference *Arts Research: The State of Play* organised by Gradcam, 9 May 2008, also at Project Arts Centre, and published in *Art&Research*, 2 (2), Spring 2009. The third part is forthcoming in *Art&Research*.

² “..but we awaited you every morning, relieved you of your overabundance, and blessed you for it.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 195.

³ Jacques Rancière, ‘From the Poetics of the image to the tragedy of justice’, translated by Charlotte Mandell, in *James Coleman* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2009), pp. 11-32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, 'Art of the possible', in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, *Artforum*, March 2007, p. 267.

⁸ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, new edn, translated by Kitty Hunter Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), pp. 78-9.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, 'Overlegitimation', translated by Kristen Ross, *Social Text*, 31/32, 1992, p. 255.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, 'The politics of aesthetics', *ARTicles*, May 2005, www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877.php

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 9.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, 'Three questions about *Six Fois Deux*', in Raymond Bellour (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard: Son+Image 1974-1991* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 35.

¹³ Jean-Luc Godard, 'La curiosité du sujet', *Art Press*, Special Issue 4 – 'Godard', December 1984-February 1985, p. 5.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'Dissenting words', a conversation with Davide Panagia, translated by Davide Panagia, *diacritics* 30 (2), Summer 2000, p. 115.

¹⁵ Rancière, 'From the Poetics of the image to the tragedy of justice', op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, 'Movies lie, not sports', in *The Future(s) of Film: Three Interviews 2000-01*, translated by John O'Toole (Bern: Verlag Gachnang & Springer AG, 2002), p. 70.

¹⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, translated by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 57.