

***The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière,  
translated by Gregory Elliott**

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Jacques Rancière's recent publication, *The Emancipated Spectator*, brings together five texts that have been incarnated in various forms over the past four years. What this collection promises is to follow-up on Rancière's previous work *The Future of the Image* (2007) and to take forward his continued preoccupation with a politics of aesthetics, underlined by a concern with the position from which we speak, see, and act in a distribution of the sensible.

The opening chapter from which this book takes its name, 'The Emancipated Spectator,' begins to formulate Rancière's intentions via a reflection on the spectator through an interesting synthesis with an idea he previously developed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991). Indeed, the emancipatory role of the spectator is woven through this debate on performance, theatre, and intellectual emancipation by placing the spectator in the place of a paradox at the heart of art and politics. What Rancière assesses is the network of presuppositions that formulate the spectator/actor relationship, opening up a number of key concerns that will be reiterated throughout the book's five texts. These concerns include the negative connotations of spectatorship and, specifically, the spectator's role as either passive or active by virtue of an opposition to the knowing performer. It is on these grounds that Rancière begins his deliberation into the allotment of time and space to the role of active participants and passive voyeurism.

The idea of intellectual emancipation occurs in this discourse as a method of reformulating the logic of theatre based on the pedagogical relationship between the 'schoolmaster' and the 'ignoramus'. The attempted abolition and subsequently necessary re-creation of a gap of knowledge between these two positions are, therefore, demarcated by one's '*knowledge of ignorance*'<sup>1</sup>: a knowingness that places the 'labour of translating' signs at the heart of an intellectual emancipation that verifies an 'equality of knowledge'. Yet the challenge that is thrown down to the opposition between viewing and acting is also an acknowledgement that activity is present on both sides of this equation; that viewing and acting, the actor and spectator, each in turn occupy these grounds. The goal of emancipating the spectator is not to transform ignoramuses into scholars, as Rancière puts it, nor even spectators into actors, but to understand the specificity of the knowledge and the activity already at work in the spectator and the ignoramus alike.

Chapter 2 'The Misadventures of Critical Thought' acts to clarify the field of this enquiry by engaging with a 'genuine critique of critique'. Through an analysis of the critical tradition as it is operative in politics, art and theory, Rancière begins this engagement through the image's critical relation to atrocities of war. In these images Rancière specifically describes the inherent tensions between political content and artistic form. Reading between

Martha Rosler's response to the Vietnam War and Josephine Meckseper's contemporary response to American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Rancière arouses the spectator as a critical figure whose action is measured as a response to the reality they are made to see. Yet, because what the spectator does not want to see might only be reproducible through the logic of its own spectacle, Rancière here touches on the disjunction at the heart of the spectacle's critical paradigm; that it 'can mock its illusions, but it reproduces its logic'.<sup>2</sup> In response to the history of critique and emancipation Rancière therefore proposes that a genuine 'critique of critique' cannot work from a standpoint of attacking its logic, and neither does he intend 'to add another twist' to such critique. Rather, what Rancière suggests is a need for a directional shift in approach, one that aims to uncouple two logics; 'the emancipatory logic of capacity' and 'the critical logic of collective inveiglement'.<sup>3</sup> What is suggested is a re-organisation of the sensible that neither proposes the existence of 'a reality concealed behind apparatuses,' nor 'a single regime of presentation and interpretation' but rather a sensible that aims to open every situation 'from the inside'<sup>4</sup>.

The central premise of the essay 'Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community'<sup>5</sup> continues by investigating notions of community and separation with specific reference to four words, 'Apart, we are together', taken from Mallarmé's poem 'The White Water Lilly'. The common thread Rancière weaves between the prose poem of Mallarmé and contemporary political art revolves around the social bond that arises in the solitude of the art work and the human community. What is transferred in this bond is 'sensation'. In particular Rancière means to elaborate on how human action is tied together through a common sensory 'fabric' that arises from a shared distribution of the sensible; which, to use his words, 'defines their way of being together'<sup>6</sup>. The paradoxical position of being apart-together thus seems to find an apparent resolution in a common 'community of sensation' and in equating the individuality of art with the commonality and multiplicity of life. Nevertheless, because the social bond of art is what Rancière suggests speaks only as 'the voice of a people to come,'<sup>7</sup> it is a voice that is always in the future, or a deferral to the future (a gap that will later reappear in the chapter 'The Pensive Image'). The apparent resolution of a community of sensation therefore turns out to be precisely a 'process of dissociation' or a break in that all important relationship between 'sense and sense'.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as dissociation operates by way of a shift from one sensible world to another, Rancière shows how the shift really 'defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance'<sup>9</sup> – a theme developed in his next chapter, 'The Intolerable Image'.

Rancière's aim in this chapter is to take a fresh look at what images are, do, and their effects. He asks us to assess what makes an image in fact intolerable. Rancière examines this task in relation to the appropriateness of monstrous events, including Auschwitz and the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (as depicted by Alfredo Jaar). This discourse primarily concerns the acceptability of the image and the nature of the intolerable image itself – as experience of pain and indignation – and how these are brought into the spectator's present. The intolerable dissociation of the spectacle arises, then, as a distinction of a shift that takes place from 'the intolerable *in* the image to the intolerable *of* the image.'<sup>10</sup> This is an argument that not only forces us to consider how 'spectators of a life spent in the image'<sup>11</sup> might be caught between the guilt of not acting – for example in response to Rancière's oft used example of Martha Rosler's 'Bringing the War Home' – and the spectator's inclination to actually 'never act'. What comes to the fore is a matter of how, first, we witness images and reality and, secondly, how the witness is brought into the sensible realm through the authority of the image which commands or obligates a certain connection with history.

Rancière's critique of images 'counter-poses the authority of the voice that alternatively renders one silent and makes one speak,'<sup>12</sup> not simply by the duplicity of a representation but by a 'complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the

said and the unsaid'.<sup>13</sup> The images of art are not here held up as truths but fictions; yet fictions that do not pose the problem of fictionality but the common-sense to which they hold a voice of authority. However, the woven nature of the image constructed in a common sensible space nevertheless remains uncertain because its effect as a politics of aesthetics maintains an antagonistic resistance to anticipation. Rancière's parting example of the series of work titled 'WB' by Sophie Ristelhueber, like all examples Rancière utilises throughout the book, aptly illustrates his point, highlight how images might obtain a political dimension and change the possibilities for our landscape of the gaze, but only if meaning and effect are not anticipated.

The concluding chapter of the book, 'The Pensive Image,' contemplates pensiveness insofar as Rancière is interested in the idea of a 'fullness of thoughts'. In particular, the encroachment of the pensive upon a 'certain passivity'<sup>14</sup> again brings about the indeterminacy of a gap between active and passive that has been sustained throughout these texts. The perspective of the pensive un-thought thought thus begins by problematizing the gap between the image as depiction of a thing and the image as an 'artistic operation'. In a move toward a kind of resolution Rancière proposes a change of regimes: from a representative regime that expresses image as compliment, a story, or action made into a composition, toward the aesthetic regime of 'presence or presentation'.<sup>15</sup> The emancipation of the aesthetic regime thus moves the 'unifying logic of action' toward 'a new status of the figure,'<sup>16</sup> which Rancière initially traces in reference to Roland Barthes and a coinciding site between the image subject (the character of the identity), the photographer (who intentionally makes a plastic arrangement of that body in a space), and the spectator (who faces what is shown without knowledge of its deliberateness).

Pensiveness acts, Rancière explains, as not an end but the extension of the end: 'On the one hand, it extends the action that had come to a halt. But on the other hand, it puts every conclusion in suspense.'<sup>17</sup> Thus the disruption of pensiveness takes place between narration and expression, in the relationship between two operations that, on one side, are determined by the artist and, on the other, the spectator who acts to fix the relationship and impart a certain reality. To conclude, Rancière turns to an analysis of how Godard's detaching of the metaphor in film creates new or different histories in filmic imagery; pointing to how, at the heart of art's relational mediation to itself, we find a necessary 'mediation of another'.<sup>18</sup> The resistance of the pensive image is therefore ultimately testified to in the resistance of thought, both of the one who creates it and the one who seeks to identify it. Coming full circle back to 'The Emancipated Spectator,' the fashioning of knowledge in the image is thus a fashioning of knowledge for ourselves, but also the fashioning of new connections and possibilities.

Rancière has left us in these texts with only a 'provisional conclusion' on the subject. But, provisional or not, this book forms a crucial interconnected point of reference between much of his previous work. For these reasons *The Emancipated Spectator* should certainly be read not only by anyone interested in Rancière's thought, but also by anyone interested in conceptualising a path between art and politics today.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Translated by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009),p. 9

<sup>2</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*,. p. 45

<sup>3</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*,p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> This essay was first published in *Art&Research*, Vol.2 No.1 Summer 2008

[www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html](http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html). One noteworthy change from the original text published in *Art&Research* is Rancière's treatment of Pedro Costa's work within this argument, extended to incorporate a brief reading of the films *Down to Earth* and *Colossal Youth*.

<sup>6</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 55-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p.75.

<sup>9</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 84. (Emphasis added)

<sup>11</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p.92.

<sup>13</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p.93.

<sup>14</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p.107.

<sup>15</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p.121.

<sup>17</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 131.