



Rancière directs this analysis at some of my favourite French theorists from Guy Debord to Pierre Bourdieu. Debord's 1967 'Society of the Spectacle', and its idea of a world transfixed by consumption, was something I almost revered in my twenties. In spite of the academic groundwork done in the previous 20 years that I was aware of, reading Rancière's analysis felt like shaking off a long dead leech. Rancière is perhaps the first higher ranking philosopher to dare confront icons of the Marxist radical left with their, and our, own classism.

The criticism of Pierre Bourdieu that follows in chapter 2 is something similar to what I wrote less elegantly, back in 1993. Bourdieu does not understand how the stratification of taste that he measures as cultural norms is negated by the actions of autodidacts and other outsiders who do not figure in his sociological surveys. Bourdieu only recognises individual cultural agency by young bourgeois.

The suggestion in Emancipated Spectator is that things like participation art only reinforce the idea that the audience are usually passive receptacles. Rancière points out that predetermined outcomes cannot be emancipatory because for an artwork to be emancipatory the viewer has to be making judgements based on their own knowledge and experience. (referring back to The Ignorant Schoolmaster).

Dissensus is almost our natural condition as autonomous individuals in a dynamic state of communication about their inevitably different subject positions. Emancipation is then down to \"collectivising our capacities invested in scenes of dissensus\".

In chapter three he uses a phrase from Mallarmé, 'Separes est on ensemble', to explore how we can be both individuals that think for ourselves and achieve a liberating 'solidarity' that doesn't flatten our differences. He goes on to discuss how this idea relates to our contemplations on art. He is emphatic that the sensory world of the artist is separate from that of the viewer and that there is no right way to think about art and never has been. Some of the most influential conventional writing about art has been a celebration of interpretation set free of any originally intent, use or context. Things that are not used for their intended purposes.

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Rancière would say that any situation is readable in an emancipatory fashion if we don't bow down to the strategies of abrutir but engage our minds in an effort to deconstruct the forces that would limit and channel our thinking. This is not easy to do as a lone mind, and I find it happens better in discussion with others.

In the final chapter he considers an idea of the 'pensive' image. It seems related to Barthes earlier idea of the third meaning. The Pensive image provides a zone of indeterminacy in relation to which emancipatory thought is

possible. This is a more positive way of thinking but is still tentative and incomplete.

What is missing is the idea that it is the exclusive selection of art that leads to particular constellations being brought to public attention. Any set of interests will be unlikely to present art that allows a critical appraisal of its own core supports to be revealed to the public. The sets of interest that present art most widely and influentially are the state and the larger globalised commercial galleries. It is difficult for most of us to see how these interests are manifest within the particular selections of any show. It is difficult for us to see what has been left out from the totality of the field from which the selection is made. It is often through quite subtle absences which we could never be privy to.

Ranciere takes exception to the idea of the passive spectator in the world of aesthetics. He posits a power of the spectator that is reactivated in performance (he gives the example of theatre). Intelligence that constructs the performance for the spectator generates energy and thus reformulates a concept of theatre where the spectator becomes an active participant. "...

This paradigmatic shift is also opposed to three currents of thought on aesthetics, namely modernist, post-modern, and the sublimation of the aesthetic. He criticizes them for not adequately treating what he calls the "aesthetic break", where there is no boundary between concepts realm of art and the realm of the real. He draws on everything from photography and painting to literature, from the fine arts to the performing arts. The spectator is then understood to act like the pupil or scholar (his previous book discusses this relationship and this forms the derivative of concepts in this volume) where he/she observes, selects, and compares this with what he/she has seen in other places, on "other stages".

Applying this to poetry, the spectator can be understood to producing a new poem by participating in its performance. "Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation". With this concept, Ranciere challenges communitarian logic of the spectator, the activity particular to it is constructed through transference and becomes a spectator in the simultaneity of the performance and the performance of the spectator his/herself.

Ranciere tries to connect 3 different corners of the same spectrum: art, politics and the spectator; and he does that with such a brilliant way of writing, going through several references since Walker Evans till the portuguese director Pedro Costa. What lacks in literary accessibility spares on literary intelligence.

What I found in the first essay was a work that essentially deals with interpretation. There will never be a direct line of transmission from the mind of the artist to the mind of the viewer, it will always allow for a personal reading based on expectations, personal narrative, education, and prejudices and so on. Rancière is correct on this, however, I find that to be a very obvious thesis. What is offered, what is most beneficial, is an extensive look at how this plays out in the mind of the spectator. My favorite part is how this essay ends, stressing the importance of realizing a spectacle is just a spectacle, and how that will allow us a better understanding of how those spectacles can change our world.

Ranciere critiques art that is too telling since truthful art perpetuates passivity. Ranciere encourages the spectator to embrace critical thinking and the ability to analyze a work of art in solitude which will ultimately facilitate a connection with the collective.

Ranciere is particularly convincing challenging the pervasive belief that images are somehow lies, and are not suitable for depicting certain things. Ranciere's belief that spectators are at the forefront of political action in relation to art is extremely exciting.

Ranciere does not see a structural opposition between collective and individual, image and lived reality or, activity and passivity. Consumerism may be banal but it does not follow that consumers are powerless idiots. Collectives are made of individuals, images are always a part of the use of our sensory abilities, and contemplation may look 'passive' but it is always mentally active.

He sees these left-field theories as perpetuating the idea of a public that are presumed to be 'ignoramus' by an intelligensia. If *The Society of the Spectacle* tells us anything at all, it is to underline the message about our own inability. "It thereby constantly confirms its own presupposition: the inequality of intelligence".

"Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting: when we understand (that) the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing, themselves belong to the

Viewing is a routine human activity, an activity comprising of selection, comparison, interpretation and of making connections. And it is part of a process that inevitably leads to the viewer creating something of her own, even if it is a negation; a turning away, yawning or choosing another path. As he says spectators are \"only ever individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them.\" p.16

He surmises that by the Sixties the use of Marxist ideology had led to two requirements from its adherents:

1. To teach an understanding of the system to those (ignoramuses) who suffered from it in order \"to arm them for struggle\".
2. Ironically the elite Marxist scholars and cadres were themselves ignorant of the struggle; so they have to go amongst the workers, who they regard as ignoramuses, in order to educate themselves.

Ranciere who was part of this '68 generation comments: \"For me, as for my generation, neither of these endeavours was wholly convincing\" p.18. However, his own version of 'going amongst the workers' was to research working class activity and writing of previous century. He did glean some useful education about workers from these archives and his findings are published as 'Proletarian Nights: the workers dream in C19th France'.

\"These workers, who should have supplied me with information on working conditions and forms of consciousness, provided me with something altogether different: a sense of similarity, a demonstration of equality.\" \"They disrupted the distribution of the sensible which would have it that those who work do not have time to let their step and gazes roam at random; and that the members of a collective body do not have time to spend on the forms and insignia of individuality.\" p.19. He realised above all that \"there was no gap to be filled between intellectuals and workers\". p.20. [3]

He accuses Pierre Bourdieu of typifying workers as fully occupied by their struggle against economic misery and fragmenting community whilst the \"individualist desire for autonomous creativity\" is only attributed to young bourgeois. p.35. What he had learnt from the archive was the untruth of such stereotypes. Ranciere is all for 'disordering' the semiotic class distributions mapped by Bourdieu in his influential 1979 study; 'Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste'. He thinks that this kind of norm finding sociological research will reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge them. The process of cultural emancipation starts with individual or small groups of artists who do anything but obey these norms of taste. It is in the fracturing of the patterns of class identification by those who do not fit the norms, that emancipation may be found. Although it is often made more complex and opaque by an aspirational semiotics that is discussed in more detail below.

He describes the hard left argument that denounces democracy as a market affair and comes to the conclusion that such political critiques of neoliberalism have \"little impact on patients whose illness consists in not knowing themselves to be sick\". p.40. \"The current disconnection between critique of the market and the spectacle and any emancipatory aim is the ultimate form of tension which, from the start, has haunted the movement for social emancipation,\" p.42. The left is fixated on particular ontologies of work and the worker that suit the market down to the ground. \"Social emancipation signified breaking this fit between an 'occupation' and a 'capacity'.\" p.42. He does then make positive suggestions of new directions for left activity. Social emancipation might be achieved by \"the dismantling of the old distribution of what could be seen, thought and done.\" p.47. The capacities we would like to evolve do not 'belong to any class, but... belong to anyone and everyone.' p. 43. He argues that Marxists too often operate within the humanist machinations to reproduce ignorance and powerlessness and treat people as imbeciles. \"To treat incapacities, they need to reproduce them indefinitely\" p.47/8

Ranciere points out the Left's dream of a community in harmony, as against the goal of a community of dissensus and struggle, is a utopian one. Dissensus here is the inevitable 'conflict' or 'tension' between the essentially different sensory worlds of two or more individuals. This has been forgotten by 'the modernist dream of a community of emancipated human beings' p.60. The 'intertwining of contradictory relations' can itself produce community. \"The paradoxical relationship between the 'apart' and the 'together' is also a paradoxical relationship between the present and the future.\" p.59

The radical tradition from Rousseau to Debord has seen a gap at the heart of 'the mimetic community', a gap between stage and audience, between spectacle and consumer. Ranciere's way of neutralising the gap is to hold out

that any reader has a unique subject position and so will make a specific interpretation which is all her own. This produces a necessary distance between the intention of the artist and the interpretation of the reader or viewer.

"Free appearance is the product of a disconnected community between two sensoria - the sensorium of artistic fabrication and the sensorium of its enjoyment". p.64. He analyses this disconnection between the object as intended and its appreciation in J.J. Winckelmann's classic 1764 discussion of the [Belvedere Torso](#) and the paradoxes it throws up. p.64. [5]. A similar engagement is made with Schiller's thoughts on the freedom possible with art, in his contemplation on the incomplete classical sculpture [Juno Ludovisi](#). p.69. "We abandon ourselves in ecstasy to her heavenly grace, her celestial self-sufficiency makes us recoil in terror" [6].

"An emancipated worker is a dis-identified worker". It seems to me that giving up on a working class identity is often confused by the false dis-identifications of upward mobility which are caused by the success of oppressive messages which have made the identity of being working class unbearable. Not only due to present conditions of immiseration, but because the definitions of becoming that it allows are constrained to the 'shoulds' from our presumed souls of iron. It is not a matter of finding an alchemical solution to this de-valuation, like magically becoming middle-class gold-stars through educational certification, more it is the realisation that all human intelligences are of equal.

Although Ranciere critiques class while rarely mentioning the word, he stops short of any insight into the affective dimension of class, by which I understand as the emotional toll exacted by class oppression. He does not go into that kind of knowledge or the way that trauma can be a barrier to knowledge. Affects that impact on people fundamentally tend to happen at an impressionable age - and the false idea of an inequality of intelligence and status fostered by the school system is one of the most poisonous. I recently heard this described by a middle class woman as a daily pencilling of the lines that separate, until the division was etched into her being.

Ranciere insists, as we have heard, that art cannot be designed to emancipate and that emancipation cannot be prescribed. Emancipation must be self-wrought or it is not emancipation. The aim of political art is often taken as the creation of "an awareness of political situations leading to political mobilisation." p.74. However Ranciere claims that "there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action." p.75.

What I see in Ranciere is a persistent gnawing away at classism whilst also carefully keeping his place in the dominant stage with neo-classical references and clever word play. When Bourdieu admits that extreme expressions of class disgust had been censored from *Distinction* he says: "one cannot objectify the intellectual game without putting at stake one's own stake in the game -- a risk which is at once derisory and absolute" (p.163).

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A basic assumption that I make is that the system must manage the media and state cultural institutions well enough to insure that challenges to its survival do not de-stabilise its grip on power. The way this hegemony is maintained is widely known as Ranciere points out. Gatekeepers or managers, patrons and politicians, all contribute to maintaining a status quo, a class system. At the same time they must provide the system with sufficient criticism to inoculate it.

Ranciere takes a radically different approach to this attempted emancipation. First asking exactly what we mean by political art or the politics of art, he goes on to look at what the tradition of critical art, and the desire to insert art into life, has achieved. Has the militant critique of the consumption of images and commodities become, ironically, a sad affirmation of its omniscience?