Rancière's Aesthetic Revolution and Its Modernist Residues

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I.

The success of Rancière's interpretation of modern western aesthetic tradition among curators, art critics and artists is surely at least partly due to its avowed anti-modernism. He is able to redeem a whole tradition of thought which seemed to many in the artworld as hopelessly flawed. In Rancière's hands aesthetic theory becomes again an important tool of art interpretation. But however fascinating Rancière's redemption of aesthetics for contemporary art is, his vocal anti-modernism should not blind us to a certain modernist trait implicit in his own aesthetics, which is at odds with its general outlook and thus leads to potential incongruities. Rancière is very sceptical that the obsession of modernists with breaks, clear starts and formal revolutions capture anything of essence about what he calls 'the aesthetic regime of the arts'. For Rancière, this fetishism of the new obfuscates the real programme of the modern 'aesthetic revolution', which consists in a re-thinking of what is to count as a work of art. This re-thinking looks back at the history of the arts to redeem a new way of life that is promised through art. My point will be that Rancière's downplaying the centrality to the aesthetic regime of the urge to find ever new expressions at the expense of the old is at odds with his conception of a 'redistribution of the sensible' triggered by art at its best.

Rancière is convinced that artistic modernity/modernism – intriguingly, he does not differentiate between the two notions – is a biased term. It connotes a linear teleology of a progression towards improved forms of artistic expression and a radical brake with the past forms of art. According to him, modernist interpretations of the fate of art, faced with the inherently contradictory configuration of the aesthetic regime, try to 'make the story straight', so to speak, thus inevitably reducing its complexity. Moreover, Rancière implies that such misinterpretations are somehow intentional distortions. In *Le partage du sensible* he claims that the notion of modernity 'diligently works at masking the specificity of this regime of the arts' ('*s'applique á occulter la spécificité de ce régime des arts*', Rancière 2000: 33–4), 'seems to have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear understanding of the transformations of art and its relationships with the other spheres of collective experience' ('*semble ainsi comme inventée tout exprès pour brouiller l'intelligence des transformations de l'art et de ses rapports avec les autres sphères de l'expérience collective*', ibid.: 37). But what motivates modernist critics and thinkers to *intentionally* distort the complexities of

modern aesthetics? Rancière does not feel the urge to explain himself here, but based on the broader context of his writings on the subject one can draw a conclusion that he is accusing modernists of trying to avoid the implications of a full recognition of the egalitarian nature of the aesthetic regime. By stressing the exclusivity of modern artistic achievements, modernists have been involved in the agenda of suppressing the broader context of the aesthetic regime. To quote Rancière: 'The idea of modernity is a questionable notion that tries to make clearcut distinctions in the complex configuration of the aesthetic regime of the arts. It tries to retain the forms of rapture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by separating them from the context that allows for their existence: history, interpretation, patrimony, the pervasiveness of reproduction' ('*L'idée de modernité est une notion équivoque qui voudrait trancher dans la configuration complexe du régime esthétique des arts, retenir les formes de rupture, les gestes iconoclastes, etc., en les séparant du contexte qui les autorise : la reproduction généralisée, l'interprétation, l'histoire, le musée, le patrimoine...* ', ibid.: 37). In a sense, this is an all too familiar critique of aesthetic modernism and Rancière's defence of the legacy of aesthetics is in line with similar contemporary efforts across the Channel as well as across the Atlantic to rescue aesthetics from the Greenbergian burden of an excessively narrow formalism.[1] But unlike these efforts, Rancière's endorsement of aesthetics does not involve – at least not to my knowledge – any substantial discussion of the topic central to Western aesthetic theory, that of aesthetic judgement and the related notion of aesthetic value. And it is this silence of Rancière's that I will argue leads to potential problems.

II.

In this section, I will try to reconstruct Rancière's general conception of aesthetics in the light of his opposition to modernism. I will be drawing on several of his publications that treat the problem of the 'aesthetic regime of the arts', namely on Rancière 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004a. The aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of his position, something Rancière certainly does not facilitate by his equivocal use of central terms[2] and by continually varying his treatment of the same subject with a resulting sense of elusiveness.[3]

1 The past decade witnessed a rise of interest in aesthetic theory as a relevant tool for the interpretation of contemporary art and culture in the Anglophone academia. For a representative collection of essays on the topic, see Halsall et al. 2009.

2 Take the term 'regime': sometimes it seems that its meaning is akin to that of the Hegelian artistic epoch, especially when one takes into account Rancière's triadic classification of the artistic regimes. On the other hand, Rancière is reluctant to periodize these regimes (the ethical, the representative, the aesthetic) even though he identifies the ethical with Plato's censoring approach to images, the representative with Aristotle's *Poetics* and its neo-classical interpretations and the aesthetic with the appearance of modern aesthetics. No wonder the 'Glossary of Technical Terms' appended to Rancière 2004b is introduced as 'providing pragmatic indications' rather than 'establishing a systematic lexicon' (80).

3 This sense of elusiveness perhaps stems also from the fact that, as Mark Robson notes, in Rancière 'it is not always possible to separate paraphrase from "commentary"' (Robson 2005: 81).

According to Rancière, the modernist narrative – with its veneration of radical breaks and experimentation – misconstrues the meaning of the aesthetic revolution already foreshadowed in the pioneering work of Giambattista Vico, introduced by Kant, subsequently developed by Schiller and successfully put into practice by – among others – the great French novelists Flaubert, Balzac and Zola. The example of literary realism is crucial for Rancière (as it will be for me, though for a different reason), as it serves to bring home the important point that the 'aesthetic regime of the arts' inaugurated by the aesthetic revolution does not abandon representation in favour of non-figuration and abstraction, but rather abandons a hierarchical configuration of representations typical of classical or Aristotelian poetics ('representative regime of the arts'). What the great realists have dropped is a set of rules that organize the hierarchical structure of the representative system, which governs relationships between the realm of reason and the realm of the senses. The meaning of the aesthetic revolution resides (as Rancière demonstrates in the eponymous section of his *L'inconscient esthétique* [Rancière 2001]) in a new understanding of the specificity of artistic production. This specificity is no longer codified in a poetics, that is, in a rational set of rules that mark off the realm of the mimetic arts from other techniques. It is from now on understood as involving a specific kind of experience, the aesthetic experience. Though Rancière occasionally uses this term, he prefers to talk of a sensibility, a 'sensorium' that stands out from the normal regime of the sensible.[4] In this aesthetic sensorium, there is no clear distinction between objects of thought and sensuous objects. What is presented to the senses (pathos) is already invaded with thought (logos), and what is a product of thought is already invaded by pathos (Rancière 2001: 31–38). This is the constellation of what Rancière calls the aesthetic unconscious, that is, the idea that the sensuous cannot be separated from the rational, that they are always already intermingled. The first descriptions of this idea Rancière finds in Vico's historicist interpretation of Homer not as a sovereign master of tropes, but as a genuine voice coming to us from a distant past, in which words were sung and there was no clear distinction between poetry and regular communication (ibid.: 28–30). The source of poetry is identified not with acquiring a technique governed by fixed rules, but with a natural source of language that is beyond the rational mastery of a particular individual. But it is Kant's aesthetics and its conception of genius as a natural source of aesthetic ideas, and its further development in the writings of Schiller, Schelling and other German Romantics and Idealists, that gives full expression to the new regime of the arts, which endorses the aesthetic unconscious as informing artistic production and abandons the conventions of fictional representation that were based on fixed relations and distinctions between the realm of thought and the realm of the senses. The distinctiveness of art as that which is free from all hierarchical

4 See e.g. Rancière 2002: 135.

orderings that are external to the workings of the aesthetic unconscious is made possible by blurring the dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious, between spirit and nature, rational will and bodily desire. This blurring, as Rancière tries to show, opens a new political as well as aesthetic perspective, according to which it actually represents a reconciliation of the realm of reason and the realm of the senses, a desired state of humankind to be achieved. Crucial for Rancière's argument is that this perspective is also strictly egalitarian: it involves no hierarchical distribution of places and roles and, as a consequence, no delimitation of proper as opposed to improper media and means of expression. Thus a contradictory tension between autonomy (i.e., art being free from any external determination) and heteronomy (art exemplifying a kind of life to be achieved) is constitutive of the aesthetic regime (Rancière 2002). This new egalitarian perspective is however distorted by the ever new attempts to divorce the sensuous and the rational, as is in Rancière's opinion demonstrated by virtually all the versions of hermeneutics of suspicion, which seek to isolate a hidden rationale behind appearances, or hidden irrationality at the heart of discursive practices (most of Rancière 2003 is devoted to discussing the various guises of an iconologic version of the hermeneutics of suspicion). Either way, Rancière accuses these theories of reintroducing hierarchical divisions the aesthetic revolution sought to dispense with; that between those who are in the know and passive recipients as well as that between the privileged forms of expression complying with a rational system or an essential goal and the forms which fail to rhyme with the essence. Modernism is a case in point. It tries to separate good forms closest to the essence of art from bad forms by upholding either the autonomous side of the aesthetic regime, or the heteronomous.

In *Le partage du sensible* (Rancière 2000), his probably most influential work on aesthetics, Rancière puts the term modernity/modernism under scrutiny. What Rancière finds most questionable about modernity is its one-sided interpretation of what truly constitutes the aesthetic regime, the true modernity, if you may, of art. The starting point of his criticism is his rejection of the dichotomy of the old and the new, the traditional and the revolutionary in arts predicated on an identification of historical epochs with dominating artistic forms and on a resulting linear teleology of history. What unites most of the modernist accounts of art's destiny, according to Rancière, is a linear, reductive story-line about the fate of modern art, which begins with the rejection of the mimetic function of art. This break-up with mimesis, understood by modernists as the principle of naturalistic representation ('*figuration*'), is supposed to enable arts to pursue their anti-mimetic essence. The experimental nature of much of modernist and avant-guard art is explained as the search for this essence.

Rancière talks of two basic, equally one-sided versions of artistic modernity/modernism (Rancière 2000: 30–35). The puristic modernism, most familiar in its Greenbergian guise (Rancière 2003: 27),

sees modern arts as pursuing the aim of reducing their means of expression to what is most essential to them, which is to say to their respective media, stripping them of any residues of mimetic illusionism or indeed of anything alien to their essence. The second version, labelled by Rancière as '*modernitarisme*', interprets artistic practices as means on the road to social reconciliation or political emancipation. Both of these one-sided readings of the aesthetic regime inevitably conclude their narratives by declaring that the project of modern/modernist art has entered into a crisis, generally denoted by the term 'postmodernism'. The purists have condemned the mixing of media and the invasion of *objets trouvés* into galleries, while the modernitarians, having to deal with the apparent failure of the artistic and political avant-guards in finding common ground, have either denounced the political revolutionaries as traitors of the '*promesse de bonheur*' emanating from art, or declared the communion between progressive art and progressive politics as just another example of modern grand narratives oblivious of the demands of the Other, of the irreducibly Different. The purported failure of modernist art to achieve its proper essence, which, as Rancière says in *Le destin des images* (Rancière 2003: 27–29), both modernisms identify with either turning reality into art (purism), or with subjecting art to the demands of reality (modernitarism), finds its sequel in the postmodernist melancholy which condemns representation as a fascist aestheticization of reality at the same time as it modestly declares representation indissoluble, but at least open to a kind of negative theology of presence.

But, Rancière claims, there is in fact no crisis of art going on. What is in crisis are the modernist approaches towards art, which reached dead end. Modernist purism reads art history as the progression towards the hidden essence of art, the pure form, thus it cannot but declare the increasing overlaps of art and non-art, the mixing of media, etc., going on in the artworld as happening outside of the sphere proper to art. Modernitarism, on the other hand, with its progressivist, avant-guardist conception of the final merging of artistic and political history must cope with the failure of its project; it reads the overlaps of art and non-art, the mixing of media as a nihilistic, postmodernist reaction to the failed grand narrative of modernity. Both purism and modernitarism press for a reading of art, which sees the mixing and the blurring going on in contemporary art as un-aesthetic, while the fact of the matter is, Rancière argues, that this blurring and overlapping have been from its very inception the symptoms of the aesthetic regime, which levels off all the hierarchical distinctions between proper and improper media and forms. If the aesthetic regime of the arts is '*le nom veritable*' of modernity, it is because it shows the inherently anti-hierarchical nature of the aesthetic sensorium and also reveals the origins and shortcomings of the partial modernist accounts of art.

III.

One of the modernist myths Rancière aims to reject is the idea that there is a rapture in the history of art that marks the beginning of modern art, which is somehow more true to art's essence than the pre-modern art. What the aesthetic revolution inaugurates in Rancière's view is not a new stage in art production, but a re-evaluation of the arts in terms of aesthetic sensibility. Vico reinterprets Homer (Rancière 2001: 28–30), Schiller reinterprets Juno Ludovisi (Rancière 2002: 140–141), Hegel reinterprets Dutch painting, etc.

Of course, Rancière is not denying that it is this re-evaluation that enabled the new artistic practices modernism is so fond of. What he is rather saying is that the driving principle of the aesthetic regime is not experimentation with forms in search of the essence of the medium coupled with a rejection of the 'illusionistic' art of the past, but rather an egalitarian re-destribution of the sensible. Yet, I think Rancière here underestimates the importance of the obsession of modernism with breaking-away from the tradition, its urge to give new, more true expression to reality. His rejection of experimentation and of the urge to break conventions as not constitutive, or not crucial aspects of the aesthetic regime is strangely at odds with his conception of the 'distribution/partition of the sensible' that aesthetic art instantiates.

A 'distribution of the sensible/perceivable' (*partage du sensible*) is understood by Rancière as a configuration of (the exclusion or inclusion of) perceivable units on a given plane of perception (be it political/social or artistic). It is a crucial term that links aesthetics to politics. Artworks in the aesthetic regime are involved in redistributing what is perceivable, visible, sayable. In this respect, art is like democratic politics 'whose effect is to upset any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being' (Rancière 2004a: 14). The aim of democratic politics is to 'subjectivize', that is, give political voice to those outside of the policing order in a society, i.e., the order that legitimizes a status quo.[5] Accordingly, the aim of aesthetic art is to break away from the representative or ethical regimes[6] of the arts, which occasion a hierarchical partition of the sensible.

Now, sometimes Rancière writes as if the representative and ethical regimes of the arts where different historical configurations of approaches towards the arts. However, not only should we avoid accrediting Rancière with the view that to each historical epoch corresponds an exclusive attitude towards the arts (which would be to commit him to a modernist bias by his lights), but it is also clear that these three different regimes of the arts can coexist in a given historical setting. Extending the parallel with the realm of politics, we can say that as politics must constantly fight

5 The distinction between politics and police is discussed in Rancière 1995.

6 The ethical regime of the arts, or rather of images, classifies images according to their truth content and their moral message.

the tendency to codify the given distribution of the sensible into a policing order, art is also committed to fighting down this tendency in the realm of the arts. In other words, the aesthetic regime of the arts can exist only where it has a competing 'policing' regime against which it can intervene.

That there is a danger of relapse into the representative and ethical regimes is supported by Rancière's own criticism of the interpretative practices that were made possible by the aesthetic revolution. Thus his criticism of the modernist/postmodernist reading of art history accuses it of applying criteria, which are at home in the representative or ethical regimes of the arts (this criticism is aimed especially at Lyotard's influential anti-aesthetics of the sublime [see the chapter '*S'il y a de l'irreprésentable*' in Rancière 2003] , but also at Freud's interpretation of dreams [Rancière 2001], and generally any hermeneutics of suspicion that tries to reveal a hidden agenda behind mute images).

If that is the right conclusion to make, then, arguably, only by finding ever new ways of expression (new 'distributions of the sensible') can art stay out of the trap of falling back into the representative or ethical regime of the arts. Take Rancière's favourite example of Schiller's aesthetic appreciation of Juno Ludovisi (Rancière 2002). This antique sculpture surely does not present a new revolutionary artistic output, and yet it serves Schiller as the core example of an aesthetic work of art. What makes it such a good example of aesthetic art in Schiller's eyes, as Rancière shows, is the tension it creates (as an aesthetic object) between its autonomous beauty and a heteronomous promise of aesthetic reconciliation of humankind. Nevertheless, this example can easily lend itself to prove the crucial role artistic experimentation plays in the aesthetic regime. What makes it a work of art in the sense bestowed on it by the aesthetic regime is its irreducible singularity, what Schiller would call its beauty, and we may call its aesthetic value. Any artwork that would simply try to slavishly copy its formal features would just be contributing to a new representative regime by fixing its partition of the sensible and destroying the productive tension embodied in the statue. Schiller marvelled at the statue as a singular product of artistic genius, at its 'aura', to use Benjamin's terminology. It is this singularity, and therefore its newness as well, that opens the subversive potential of a work of art, since any re-distribution must present a radical break with the ruling order. Rancière claims that 'the aesthetic regime of the arts does not contrast the old [*l'ancien*] with the new [*le moderne*]' and that 'it is within the mimetic regime that the old stands in contrast with the new' (Rancière 2000: 35). Rancière's use of the opposing terms *l'ancien/le moderne* is apparently an allusion to the famous *querrelle des anciens et des modernes.* He probably means to suggest that the question whether or not should the ancient masterworks be taken for insurmountable models to be copied ceases to make any sense once the representative regime is

abandoned and the question of proper objects of imitation is made obsolete. If this is what he is suggesting, then one may ask why should that necessarily lead to the conclusion that the opposition of the ancient/old and the modern/new is not constitutive of the aesthetic regime *in some other sense*? I have tried to rescue this other sense from Rancière's own treatment of Schiller's re-evaluation of the ancient sculpture.

To consider another favourite example of Rancière's, take the realist novelists. Their practice of juxtaposing everyday and extraordinary objects and events with apparent irreverence to the latter may well be a good example of how aesthetic regime brings down hierarchical orderings of a narrative at home in, e.g., French neo-classical tragedy (Rancière 2001: 18–30, 2004a). Yet, it also shows the modernist nature of the genre of the novel: The great novelists part company with the narrative norms of the past in order to give a more genuine expression to the lived reality of their times. Such a point of view does not necessarily presuppose just another essentialist reading of the modern aesthetic enterprise, this time along the lines of someone like Lukács. Modernist realism may just as well stem, as Cora Diamond and Stephen Mulhall have recently tried to argue in relation to J. M. Coetzee's novel Elisabeth Costello, from the recognition that reality is inherently difficult and the old, worn-out, petrified ways of dealing with it fail to satisfy the modernist requirement of staying true to its difficulty (see Diamond 2008 and Mulhall 2009). If time allowed, much more would have to be said on this notion of modernist realism, but let me just say that in my opinion, the modernist commitment to the difficulty of reality is compatible with Rancière's treatement of the aesthetic regime and with Rancière's egalitarian notion of the distribution of the sensible. However, it brings to the fore the crucial role the break with tradition has for the aesthetic regime, a role Rancière is reluctant to recognize.

IV.

I will close by briefly speculating on why Rancière undervalues the importance of the modernist break with tradition. The reason, I think, resides in the fact that the question of value and judgment plays no role in Rancière's reading of Kantian aesthetics and its legacy. That it constitutes a blind spot is conceded even by such an enthusiastic advocate of Rancière's work on aesthetics as the art critic Claire Bishop who feels the urge to supplement Rancière's conception by noting that 'it would be wrong to deduce that for [Rancière] *all* art is automatically political; rather, good art is necessarily political in its redistribution of sensible forms that have a dissensual relationship both to the autonomous world of art and to the everyday world we inhabit' (Bishop 2009: 249). If only good art enters the realm of aesthetic sensorium, then what is the effect of bad art? As I have suggested, the only answer one can find in Rancière must be borrowed from his political writings:

inauthentic artworks are like the policing practices Rancière castigates. That the question of value is not addressed by Rancière can perhaps be explained by the generally egalitarian character of his aesthetics, for which any hierarchical distribution is to be dissolved. Introducing artistic excellence and good taste smacks of hierarchies and canons. This resistance to aesthetic evaluation is vividly expressed by another contemporary influential art theorist, Boris Groys, for whom

'absence of any immanent, purely aesthetic value judgment [...] guarantees the autonomy of art. The territory of art is organized around the lack or, rather, the rejection of any aesthetic judgment. Thus the autonomy of art implies not an autonomous hierarchy of taste – but abolishing every such hierarchy and establishing the regime of equal aesthetic rights for all artworks.' (Groys 2008: 13–14)

Groys's suggestion is not as simple-minded as it might seem. He is not saying that any distinctions between bad and good art should be abolished. He is rather suggesting, that good art is only that art which aims at securing the aesthetic equality of forms. To put it in Rancière's terms, good art is only that art which negates the hierarchical structuring of the distribution of the sensible. And the implication is (at least for Groys) that good art requires that its rights be defended by cultural institutions against the easily manipulated taste judgments of the masses. What we do not learn from Groys is what and who marks out the difference between good and bad art: what makes certain artworks better promoters of aesthetic equality than others? Obviously, a judgment must be passed. By whom, and under what criteria? Unlike Groys, Rancière is aware that what constitutes the ability of artworks to redistribute the sensible is the specificity of our encounter with the artwork, which sets it off from our usual experiences. Though he makes much of the paradoxical nature of aesthetic experience, he ignores one crucial paradox: that the egalitarian redistribution taking place in the aesthetic sensorium becomes accessible only through an evaluative experience that elevates certain artefacts above others because of their very possibility to have such an effect on us. To quote Adorno, '*wertfreie Ästhetik ist Nonsens*'.

As I already noted, Rancière does not apply the notions of aesthetic judgment and aesthetic value, though both are implicit in his writings. My suggestion is that Rancière's decision to redeem the western tradition of aesthetic theory by subjecting it to a selective reading that remains silent about these perhaps less 'attractive' notions of judgment and value, which are yet central to that tradition, prepares the ground for his assault on modernism. But the assault proves disingenuous once these notions are made explicit in Rancière's own aesthetics. Rancière's hostility towards the modernist obsessiveness with the new, his mysterious hints at a deliberate reactionary agenda fuelling it, may

just be signs of his desperate effort to dissociate himself from a current of thought, which is closer to his position than he would ever be willing to acknowledge.

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