THE SPECTRE OF RADICAL AESTHETICS IN THE WORK OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE

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Summary

This study aims to determine what is left of the philosophical belief in art's potential to bring about social emancipation and change early in the 21st century. It does so by critically assessing one of the most elaborate, emphatic and influential contemporary re-assertions of this potential by French philosopher Jacques Rancière. It focuses on three components of Rancière's writings on aesthetics and politics that are key to such an evaluation. First, his affirmation of an emancipatory core at the heart of Idealist-Romanticist aesthetics, the aesthetic works of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schiller in particular. Second, his reconceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of political art in the modern era. Third, his critical analyses of dominant tendencies within political art from the 1960s until today and his own proposals for a truly emancipatory contemporary art practice.

With regard to the first component, the project problematizes Rancière's return to aesthetics mainly by comparing it with theories recently articulated by other radical Leftist thinkers. It concerns theories that emphasize the contradictory political status of aesthetics as both reactionary and liberating (Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson) or point to a constitutive, original violence at its heart (Dave Beech & John Roberts). Based on this, I argue that Rancière's redemptive approach toward aesthetics is too one-dimensional, resulting in an overly positive assessment of the emancipatory value of traditional conceptions of aesthetics.

In relation to the second key aspect of Rancière's political aesthetics, I demonstrate how he offers a typically third way solution to the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy. He does so by integrating some of the most complex twentieth century theorizations of both autonomous (Theodor Adorno) and heteronomous positions (Peter Bürger) into a dialectical working model. I argue that, regrettably, Rancière hereby also takes on board deeply tragic views on art's political potential, resulting in an overcautious stance towards radically heteronomous art practices. Apart from critiquing him on this score, I point to alternative conceptualizations of art's autonomy and heteronomy more suited to thinking the key characteristics and political potential of contemporary radicalized art.

As to Rancière's critique of recent political art practices and his proposed alternative, I find it to be driven by a misguided attempt at conceiving the radical political potential of art in purely aesthetic terms to the neglect of other functions traditionally taken up by political artists such as representation and activism. I contend that not only can such a purist view on art's politics not be upheld in fact - which even holds for Rancière's own, alternative aesthetic politics of art - neither is it desirable if one wants to devise a robust and versatile theoretical framework for thinking contemporary politicized art. I do so by pointing to the radical political value of representational artistic strategies, as well as artistic practices that engage in activities beyond those traditionally associated with art.

Key terms

Jacques Rancière / philosophical aesthetics/ radical political philosophy / political art / modern art / contemporary art / autonomy of art / heteronomy of art / history of art / art theory

Abbreviations

AD: *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Rancière 2004/9; the second page reference is to the original French edition: *Malaise dans l'esthétique*).

ARO:"The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes. Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy" (Rancière 2002a).

D: *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Rancière 1995/9; the second page reference is to the original French edition: *La Mésentente. Politique et Philosophie*).

PA: *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (Rancière 2000/4).

__Introduction:__ The promise of Jacques Rancière: reconnecting artistic and political radicalness

Synopsis

The introduction starts (Section I) by briefly stating the main focus, aim and problematic of this study: to critically examine French philosopher Jacques Rancière's reaffirmation and reconceptualization of the connection between art and radical politics in his work of the past twenty-five years. I then (II) offer a brief biographical and bibliographical overview of Rancière and his work and point to an important, general feature: its cross-disciplinary character. Next (III), I specify what sets Rancière's work on art and politics apart from that of some of his main, fellow radical philosophers. In the next section (IV), I offer a brief overview of what I call the radical political turn in contemporary art. This refers to a tendency among some of today's artists to realign their practice with the new, global, radical social movements that have been manifesting themselves since the end of the 1990s. I do so both in order to demonstrate the urgency of Rancière's work on art and transformational politics, as well as to specify the kind of politicized art practices I want to use as a benchmark in my assessment. Next (V), I specify the general approach of Rancière in his work on politics and aesthetics - geared primarily toward the clarification of key concepts and their conditions of possibility -, as well as one of its general aims - to open up new avenues for art's politicization. The next section (VI) explains how Rancière does not consider the relation between aesthetics and politics to be one of two clear, distinct entities but, on the contrary, holds them to be always already entangled, with politics having its own aesthetics and aesthetics its own politics. Lastly (VII), I elucidate the study's general structure which consists of three parts that each deal with a key component of Rancière's political aesthetics. It concerns, first, his identification of a radical political content in German Idealist theories of aesthetics, especially those of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller; second, his remodelling of the relation between art's autonomy and heteronomy; third, his critical analyses of recent political art and formulations for an alternative, truly emancipatory art practice. I briefly describe the main tenets of these three components, specify their key problematics and indicate how I shall proceed in addressing them.

I. CONCEPTUALIZING THE RADICAL POLITICAL POWER OF ART AND AESTHETICS

This study undertakes a critical investigation into the work done by contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière on the interrelations between aesthetics and radical politics. This work - mainly produced over the past twenty-five years - can be seen as one of the most elaborate and influential contemporary conceptualizations of art's potential to bring about social emancipation and change. Rancière hereby follows the footsteps of a long line of mainly modern European philosophers who as far back as the 18th century have affirmed the emancipatory power of art (Bernstein 1992, Bowie 1990). Through an overview, analysis, explication and critique of the main components of Rancière's political aesthetics, this study wants to determine what is left of this philosophical belief early in the 21st century, a time of economic and political upheaval and renewed, broad-based demands for fundamental societal change. Posed in its generality, the key question is thus whether the emancipatory potential of art can still convincingly be thought in today's context, and if so, how. More specifically, this study wants to determine whether Rancière's radical aesthetic succeeds in offering such conceptual account.

II. THE WORK OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE: DEFYING PHILOSOPHICAL BOUNDARIES

Considering the main focus on Rancière's thinking on politics and aesthetics, I shall first offer a brief account of his life and work in general. Born in 1940 in Algiers, Algeria - then still part of France -, his philosophical career took off in the 1960s as a participant in French philosopher Louis Althusser's project of reconceptualizing Marxism in structuralist terms. Apart from Althusser himself, he was one of four authors that contributed to one of the landmark studies of what was dubbed 'structural Marxism': the volume *Lire 'le Capital'* (Althusser et al.:1965; Rancière 1965/76).

Rancière, however, soon broke ties with Althusser due to a disagreement on the correct stance towards the radical civil protests in France in 1968 (1974a/2011, 1974b). In brief, and somewhat simplifying things, one can say that Althusser, a card-carrying communist, towed the party line regarding the revolution, condemning it on scientific-Marxian grounds and arguing that socio-economic conditions were not yet ripe for a fundamental overhaul of the existing order. Consequently, he believed that the protesters were setting themselves up for failure. Rancière, in contrast, chose the side of the revolting students and workers and accused orthodox historical-materialist interpretations for, among other things, misrecognizing the true significance of

the movements of May 1968 as a radical political event and genuine attempt at emancipation. In retrospect, this falling-out and break with Althusser and Marxism in general, both in its orthodox and structuralist forms, can be seen to have determined some of the core motivations, interests and claims of Rancière's work as a whole.

In the 1980s, Rancière published a few innovative studies on the history of the working class, including his doctoral thesis *The Nights of Labour* (1981/9) and *The Philosopher and his Poor* (1983/2003). Briefly stated, his main aim in both studies is to demonstrate the failure of conventional Marxist or Marxist-inspired approaches to conceive and appreciate the properly political dimension of emancipatory struggles of the exploited and marginalized. Further, by doing so, the associated thinkers are also reproached for committing a secondary, theoretical violence on these groups, as well as hindering - even if non-intentionally - their true liberation. Still in the 80s, he published a book on pedagogy (1987/91) in which he articulates some of the key propositions of his theory of emancipation.

From the 1990s onward, Rancière started to make explicit and systematize some of the implications of his previous writings for understanding politics and its radical democratic variety in particular (1990/2007, 1995/9). I shall not expound on this part of his work because I offer an extended summary of its key features later in this study (Chapter One).

In the late 1990s Rancière turned to writing on aesthetics although, as I shall elucidate later, it is more correct to say that he developed in more detail aesthetic aspects and themes already present in previous works. While first focused on writing, literature and poetry (1996, 1998a,b), the scope soon broadened to include visual arts and philosophical aesthetics in general (*PA*, *ARO*, *AD*). Despite the wide array of subject matters - he for instance also wrote a book on film (2001b) - these works on aesthetics can be seen to elaborate a few central claims, especially concerning the radical political potential of modern literature and art.

These shifts in focus throughout Rancière's career - say, from socio-historical to political to aesthetic issues - should not be thought to constitute a series of separate, clearly distinct phases, each engaged with a particular discipline and subject matter. On the contrary, an important general feature of his thinking is to defy, blur, complicate and contaminate philosophy's customary disciplinary borders. In this study, it mostly concerns the distinction between political and aesthetic philosophy. Bruno Bosteels hence identifies as one of the main effects of Rancière's work, the creation of "an irreparable disturbance in the fixed demarcation of disciplines" (2009:160). Solange de Boer for her part describes Rancière as a "grensganger" (2007), a Dutch word

that, translated literally, refers to "a person walking across borders or frontiers". The term is often used for people in the European Union who live in one member country and work in another and can thus also be translated as 'cross-border worker'. Rancière himself states that he "write[s] for those who are also trying to tear down the walls between specialties and competences" (2007a: 257). This reflects his general view of philosophy which, according to him,

> ... does not have divisions that lend themselves either to the basic concept proper to philosophy or to areas where philosophy reflects on itself or on its legislation. Philosophy has peculiar objects, nodes of thought borne of some encounter with politics, art, science, or whatever reflective activity, that bear the mark of a specific paradox, conflict, aporia. (*D*ix/11).

As will become abundantly clear in the following chapters, Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics can also be seen to be rooted - thematically as well as conceptually - in such an encounter with the 'paradoxes, conflicts and aporia' presented to thought by modern aesthetics and radical politics.

To offer one typical instance of the deeply transdisciplinary character of Rancière's work, we can take one of his early works *The Nights of Labor* (1981/9). In narrow, disciplinary terms, this book can be classified as an archive based, socio-historical study into the activities and self-representations of early working class movements in 19th century France. However, as we shall see in detail in Chapter Three, its central focus and key claim concerns the intricate connection between aesthetic preoccupations and emancipatory politics. Put briefly, Rancière exposes how, after working hours, workers went out of their way to prove that they possessed the same aesthetic sensibilities, capacities and aspirations as their bourgeois 'betters', for example by writing and discussing poetry. Based on this, he maintains that an essential part of early working class mobilization in the modern era consisted in taking on their masters at an aesthetic level. He thus describes the basic achievement of this early work in terms of "restag[ing]... the birth of the so-called 'worker's movement' as an aesthetic movement" (2005:13). Of his historico-political work more in general, Rancière says that it points towards a fundamental aesthetic operation at the heart of politics. In light of this, we can also understand his claim of being "no more a political philosopher than... a philosopher of art" (18).[1]

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[1] Rancière, however, is still mostly presented as predominantly a political philosopher. This is no doubt due to the fact that his work came to be recognized globally in the 1990s, when the main focus of his work was on politics and radical political philosophy was on the rise (with thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek). To somewhat correct such dominant representations , it is significant that Rancière says that "Writing on politics as such came rather late in my career, just before writing on aesthetics as such" (2005:18).

III. FROM THE POLITICO-AESTHETIC TURN IN RECENT RADICAL PHILOSOPHY...

Rancière is surely not alone among contemporary philosophers to reaffirm and reconceptualize the radical political potential of art. Over the past twenty-five years or so, several of his fellow radical thinkers - such as Alain Badiou (1998/2005, 2003/6), Antonio Negri (2009/11, 2008), Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Giorgio Agamben (1994/9) - have done something similar. Common to these philosophers is that in their vehement opposition to the existing order and search for radical alternatives, art is presented as an essential and powerful ally. This has prompted one commentator to speak of a "turn to art" among contemporary radical philosophers (Roberts 2009). Taken together, the works of the thinkers listed contain the promise of a renewed engagement between art and transformational politics at the turn of the century.

There are several good reasons to focus on Rancière's radical aesthetics in particular and devote a full-length study to it. First, there is the sheer volume of his writings on aesthetics which includes several monographs and many articles and interviews. What makes it stand out in more qualitative terms is, first, the way in which engagement with politics and aesthetics forms a central pillar of his philosophy as a whole, going back as far as his earliest works, as I mentioned earlier.

Second, in Rancière's work, the rethinking of aesthetics on radical political grounds is done most explicitly and ambitiously. It is driven by the aim to countervail what he perceives as the "post-utopian" consensus within contemporary thinking on art's political potential. This refers to the dominant belief in the end of the "idea of artistic radicality and... [art's] capacity to perform an absolute transformation of the conditions of collective existence" (*AD*19/31). As such, it undertakes the "undoing" of the "alliance between artistic... and political radicality (21/34). Rancière resists such attempts by re-affirming the deep connections between aesthetics and radical politics.

A third distinguishing feature of Rancière's work is the intensive and extensive engagement with artistic practices and theories, both past and present. This stands in stark contrast to the often purely philosophical, speculative approaches of his contemporaries in which 'really existing' art works, movements and discourses are either entirely absent or used as mere illustrations or applications of theoretical claims.

Despite these unique features, an extensive, critical assessment of Rancière's political aesthetics is still to be done. The key aim of this study is to make a start with this. It can be said that, all in all, Rancière is still a rather

marginal and eccentric figure within the global philosophical order. This is no doubt due to the wide scope of his work and the difficulty in classifying it according to established philosophical disciplines. There has, however, been a steep increase in interest in his work from the mid-1990s onward. Several special journal issues have been devoted to his work, containing essays that deal with its different aspects and themes. More recently, several monographs and book volumes have been published that offer introductory overviews of his work (Tanke 2011, Davis 2010, Deranty 2010, Rockhill & Watts (eds.) 2009). One monograph has also focused exclusively on Rancière's political thinking (May 2008). Although these sources mostly contain essays and chapters on his writings on aesthetics, these are as a rule rather summarily, focusing on only one or two aspects. As such, they do not consider the vastness and complexity of this aspect of his work. They also often lack solid critical engagement.

By undertaking an extensive and properly critical account of Rancière's writings on politics and aesthetics, this study attempts to fill the lacuna in the growing commentary on his work. This is all the more important, given the central importance of aesthetic themes in Rancière's work as a whole - i.e. including his social-historical, pedagogic and political thinking. As such, the study aims to contribute to creating a deeper understanding of those other aspects of his work and the intricate, mutual interconnections between them.

IV. ... TO THE RADICAL POLITICAL TURN IN CONTEMPORARY ART...

Rancière's affirmative engagement with the radical political power of art no doubt explains the enthusiastic reception of his work in the contemporary art world. Benjamin Noys, for example, describes him as the "current theorist-darling of the art world" (2009:383). His radical aesthetics resonates well - at first sight at least - with current attempts by artists to politicize their practices and look for ways to contribute to on-going social struggles. I shall briefly characterize this important tendency within contemporary art in this section. I do so, first, because it lends urgency to Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics, as well as the more general question of this study as to whether and how the connection between art and radical politics can be conceived in the current era. Further, it also specifies the type of art practices I shall use as benchmark in later parts of the study.

The resurgence of politically radicalized art practices over the past twenty years can be regarded as one of the most remarkable and pronounced developments in contemporary art. It forms a renewed attempt to enlist art in the radical transformation of the world in the here and now, with artists

refashioning themselves as revolutionary agents. This 'radical political turn' in contemporary art, as I call it, often occurs in response to what are considered to be fundamental flaws of the existing order - although not always explicitly.[2] In their commitment to radical transformation of this order, today's radicalized artists often co-operate closely with broader social-revolutionary movements, from the alter-globalist movements to the Occupy movement.

This radical tendency in contemporary art has been variously registered in art theoretical discourse and commentary. Some theorists have stressed its strongly activist character (De Cauter et al. 2011, Boie & Pauwels 2007 & 2010, Lambert-Beaty 2008). Others have declared - once again, one might say - the rise of a new avant-gardism, even if still in its early beginnings, (Léger 2011 & 2012, Roberts 2010b, Begg & Vilensky 2007). Rancière, for his part, detects a "hypercommitment to reality" (2010:148) in contemporary art, with art conceived of as "a form of direct social action" (146).

Even if the radical political turn might overall be a relatively marginal phenomenon in quantitative terms, qualitatively it forms a very influential strand, setting the tone of, and being at the forefront of debates and discourses on contemporary art.

In order to make this radical political turn more concrete, I offer the following descriptions of a selection of recent art actions.

- An art collective stages the hanging of a migrant worker in a supermarket in protest against the racist stances of the sitting mayor.
- A theatre maker organizes a Big Brother show starring illegal immigrants who are voted out of the country by the local population, thereby placing the spotlight on the increasing manipulation of anti-immigrant sentiments in electoral politics.
- Artists and politicians camp out in an art gallery for several days in search of a shared progressive political agenda.
- An art collective mounts an abortion clinic on a boat and sails in international waters in order to facilitate abortion in countries where it is outlawed.
- An artist imports consumer articles as art works, taking advantage of the lower import tariffs for art in order to sell the goods at rock bottom prices in an art gallery.

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2   The 'existing order' is variously defined by art theorists in general terms such as "the age of globalization" (De Cauter et al. 2007), the "end of history" (Boie & Pauwels 2007), a "time of emergency" (Miles 2009) and the "post 9/11" regime (Raunig 2007).

- A group of artists organizes conversations on themed boat trips between different parties to resolve the problem of homeless prostitutes in a city.[3]

These examples allow us to articulate some more specific characteristics of contemporary radicalized art practices. First, insofar as they offer any aesthetic experience at all, this is quite minimal, as well as subordinate to social or political aims. Traditional, aesthetic aspects mostly concern the design of the setting in which the actions take place. This has led John Roberts to speak of a "prevailing nonaesthetic orthodoxy" (2010b:728) among contemporary engaged artists.[4]

Also, and closely related to the above, it is clear that traditional conceptions of the autonomy of art are here either entirely abandoned or used in a merely opportunistic way to realize extra-artistic goals. In this sense, one could further specify the radical political turn as a *heteronomous* turn. This is also reflected in the unconventional roles taken up by the artists - from reality television host to social activists - exceeding the disciplinary limits of art. In this regard, Brian Holmes also speaks of an "extradisciplinary art" (2007).

To be sure, although these features - nonaestheticism, heteronomy, extra-disciplinarity - have their champions, they are not uncontroversially thought to contribute to art's radical political potential, on the contrary even (see Roberts 2010b, Zepke 2011, Martin 2007, Bishop 2004). They do, however, provoke a series of issues such as those of the political status of aesthetic experience, the autonomy of art, as well as its specific social efficacy. The latter will be central to this study and key to a critical assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics.

V. ... AND BACK

It is tempting to see the current political radicalization of considerable sections of the art world as counterpart of the turn to art in contemporary radical philosophy. The existence of such an alliance seems to be confirmed by the fact that philosophers like Rancière and Negri, for example, feature

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3   In order of appearance, the art actions listed are by the Russian art collective Voina (*In memory of the Decembrists - A present to Yuri Luzhkov*, Moscow, 2008), German theatre maker Christoph Schlingensief (*Bitte liebt Österreich*, Vienna, 2002), Dutch artist Jonas Staal (*Allegories of Good and Bad Government*, W139, Amsterdam, 2011), the NGO Women on Waves, formed by Dutch medical doctor Rebecca Gomperts (2001-2004), Danish artist Jens Haaning (*Superdiscount*, Fri-Art, Fribourg, 1998) and the Austrian art collective Wochenklausur (*Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*, Zürich, 1994-1995).

4   In this regard, Stephen Zepke perceives in much of contemporary political art an "avant-garde affirmation of non-art as art's only possible political trajectory" (2011:206).

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prominently in the discourse of both theorists and practitioners involved in the radical political turn in contemporary art.

Despite such prima facie interconnections, I consider the radical political turn in recent art and the politico-aesthetic turn in contemporary radical philosophy to be far from a perfect match. The exact relationship between the two is still pretty much up for grabs. One of the aims of this study is to make a start with this for Rancière's case by asking whether his conceptualization of the connections between art and radical politics succeeds in capturing the specificity and force of today's radicalized art practices.[5]

At the outset, I want to mention one reason why one should exert caution with elevating Rancière into the philosophical advocate of today's renewed alliance between art and radical politics. This will also help to specify the more general, methodological approach of his political aesthetics. Despite the latter's ambitious programmatic aims, Rancière's approach is rather modest, technical-philosophical and non-partisan. He, for example, stresses how he does not want to "defend" aesthetics in any way (*AD*14/25-26) which, considering the fact that he holds aesthetics to be intrinsically political, also means defending the *politics* of aesthetics. Rather than holding a passionate plea for the radical political force of art, he distances himself explicitly from any "desire to take a polemical stance" (*PA*10), stating that he "will not lay claim yet again, in the face of postmodern disenchantment, to the avant-garde vocation of art or to the vitality of a modernity that links artistic innovation to the conquests of emancipation" (idem).

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5   This is not to say, however, that this study undertakes a full-blown comparative analysis between Rancière's radical aesthetics and today's politically radicalized art practices, for instance, determining the 'fit' between both. The main focus is a philosophical one, both with regard to its research objects (philosophical theories, concepts, problematics) and its methods (conceptual analysis, critique, model-building). Still, analysis of philosophical models and their critical evaluation on conceptual-theoretical grounds cannot occur in a vacuum. This is neither possible nor desirable. Some kind of feedback between conceptualizations of art's radical political potential and 'really existing' radical political art practices is inevitable, with the second functioning as context or critical yardstick. At least, if one wants to avoid sterile, inconsequential and self-absorbed philosophizing. But again, confrontation between theory and practice is here necessarily limited due to the extensive, empirical and theoretical research into the mentioned art practices this requires, including field work and discourse analysis. This would not only constitute a study of its own, but also exceed the limits, even if taken widely, of philosophical research. It is also important to stress that the mentioned art practices are not upheld as unproblematically 'good' of 'desirable' forms of radical political art, as 'best practices' or 'gold standard' to which philosophical models are to stay conceptually true, adequately capturing their specificities and potential in a theoretical framework. The supposed worth of these practices would first need to be demonstrated which would, again, require extensive research. So again, although reference is made to concrete art works, the main focus is on the philosophical arguments levelled for or against their radical political potential, particularly those of Rancière.

Instead, his self-declared aim is to "clarify" what the term aesthetics fundamentally means (*AD*14/25-26). And indeed, the bulk of his writings is devoted to clearing out what he holds to be conceptual and historical misconceptions concerning aesthetics and its political status and, inversely, tracking its exact meanings and offering more accurate definitions. As such, he is mainly concerned with laying bare the "conditions of intelligibility" (*PA*10) regarding art's politicity. Rancière thus does not proclaim that art *should* engage in radical politics out of political allegiance, ethical duty or social responsibility.[6] As we shall see, his main claim is that if one understands the key concepts and texts of modern aesthetics correctly, one cannot but conclude that art is *inherently* radical politically in ways that will be specified and critically assessed in this study.

Rancière's approach toward art's revolutionary potential can thus be characterized as modest, reluctant even. As Bettina Funcke puts it, "Rancière prefers to calmly pose the questions rather than definitely answer them" (2007:341). His stance might also be understood in line with his theory of emancipation and its strong aversion to pedagogic models in which a 'knowing master' offers 'lessons' to the 'ignorant' (1987/91). We can thus say that the last thing Rancière would want is to be forced in the role of philosophical guru whose every word is taken by artists as directives and recipes for making their practice political.

Having said all this, Rancière's work does carry within it a clear promise of a renewed exchange between philosophy, radical politics and artistic practices. Interesting in this regard is how Rancière himself presents one of the main reasons behind the art world's interest in his work. He attributes it to his success at "creat[ing] a little breathing room" (2007a:257), as he puts it, with respect to some of the dominant conceptual categories in which the politics of art has been thought both philosophically and historically in the modern era - notions such as modernism, post-modernism and the avant-garde. As we shall fully explain later in this study, Rancière dismisses the validity of these terms, accusing them of having confused the debate surrounding the politics of aesthetics and deadlocked its current development.

Again, Rancière's aim is to clear the conceptual terrain in order to unblock the situation, to open up previously foreclosed avenues of politicization for art or, as he puts it, to "reestablish an element of indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political

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6   Note the difference in this regard with the claims concerning art's politicity of Alain Badiou, one of his main radical philosophical contemporaries. The latter simply declares that "*We should, and therefore we can*, proclaim the existence in art of something that, for the poor century now under way, no longer exists: monumental construction, projects, the creative force of the weak, the overthrow of established powers" (2003/6:133, emphasis mine).

subjectivization" (idem). In this sense, he wants to rid contemporary political art "from the atmosphere of guilt wrought by the historical mission of art - a mission at which it would necessarily fail - or, alternatively, from a utopia of art that would have led to totalitarianism" (idem). One of the ultimate aims of this study is to determine whether Rancière can make good on this promise.

VI. WHY THE RELATION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IS NOT THE ISSUE

Before I offer an overview of the main thematics and problematics of this study, I have to voice an important reservation about describing its main aim in terms of a critical overview of the relation between politics and aesthetics in Rancière's work, as I have done earlier. This is somehow to start off on the wrong foot since Rancière would object to what is thereby implied, namely, the existence of aesthetics and politics as two clear and distinct entities, of which it is a matter to determine how they are, or ought to be, connected. This runs counter to one of the key endeavours of Rancière's political aesthetics, namely, to deconstruct the notion of politics and aesthetics as two separate entities or processes. In line with this, he explicitly states that his goal is *not* to conceptualize the relation between art and politics (*AD* 25-6/39-40).

As we shall see in the first two chapters of this study, one of Rancière's founding insights is that aesthetics and politics, most typically and explicitly in the modern era, contain the other as a constitutive dimension. They are thus thought to be *inherently and immanently* linked, to be "consubstantial" (30/46). He holds that in the modern age, aesthetics *cannot but be* political, inevitably harbouring the promise of a more emancipated existence. This would form an essential part in how modern art is defined, recognized and practiced. The inverse, however, also holds for him. That is, that a socio-political order is founded on an *aesthetic* order, an ordering on the level of our sensible existence and, consequently, that a better life or society cannot be realized without a prior or parallel aesthetic revolution.[7] Rancière's work thus offers much more than a political theory of aesthetics. It also develops an aesthetic theory of politics.

The first way in which Rancière complicates, but also specifies the problematics of the relationship between art and politics is thus by demonstrating that the two are always already mixed and confused with one

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7   This forms the conceptual basis of Rancière's rejection of theories of the aestheticization of politics in the modern era - whether in totalitarian regimes or post-modern societies of 'spectacle' (*AD* 25/39). Both presuppose the existence of some pure, authentic essence of politics, the efficacy of which is thought to be augmented by adopting aesthetic formats and appendages.

another. In this regard, he speaks of a "plurality of ways in which they [i.e. politics and aesthetics] are linked" (46/66). The crucial conceptual task is then no longer that of conceiving the ways in which aesthetics and politics are to be linked, but rather to think through how they are *always already entangled* with one another, as well as to explain the oddity of common presentations of aesthetics and politics as separate conceptual entities. In this regard, we can understand Rancière when he states that "what interests me more than politics or art is the way the boundaries defining certain practices as artistic or political are drawn and redrawn" (2007a:257).

Gabriel Rockhill considers this reformulation of one of the key problematics of modern aesthetics to constitute nothing less than Rancière's "Copernican revolution" (2004:75). He describes this achievement as follows:

> Rather than presupposing the exteriority of two distinct domains and searching for the pineal gland where they meet and interact, he begins by analyzing the partition of the sensible as the aesthetico-political framework that organizes the visible and the sayable. The problem is not how art and politics interact, but rather how a particular regime of the sensible makes it appear as if they are actually distinct" (idem).

In the chapters that follow, I shall elucidate and critically evaluate the key Rancièrean notions, ideas and arguments referred to in this quote. Questions of validity aside, however, Rancière's approach can be seen to offer a strategic advantage. If politics and aesthetics are conceived as separate entities, their connection will always be secondary and therefore somewhat forced, dubious and controversial. If, on the contrary, their relation is thought of as primary and constitutive of both, it offers a more firm, undeniable foundation and makes a stronger case.

To be sure, by rejecting a neat distinction between politics and aesthetics, Rancière is not saying that they are simply the same or operate in completely similar ways. We shall see how the problematic of the relation between aesthetics and politics is not so much eliminated but reformulated in a less absolute and, arguably, more accurate and complex way. It now concerns a relationship between two 'internalized others', as one could call it; between, on the one hand, the *aesthetics of politics* - referring to the aesthetic operation at the heart of politics - and, on the other hand, the *politics of aesthetics* - i.e. the political dimension of aesthetics. As Rancière puts it: "On the one hand, politics... has its own specific aesthetics...[,] [o]n the other [hand], aesthetics itself has its own specific politics" (*AD*46/66). His political aesthetics can be seen to undertake the task of articulating these less obvious, more subtle, composite entities, as well as their interrelations, differences and even oppositions.

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One of the consequences of this re-articulation is that a critical overview and assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics cannot simply or immediately begin with what he considers to be the emancipatory core of art and aesthetics. We first have to offer a detailed discussion of his prior claim of the aesthetic dimension at the heart of politics which is itself based on a more fundamental aesthetico-political notion: that of the division of the sensible. This is undoubtedly the most central and original concept in Rancière's work as a whole and extremely important for this study since he identifies it as the "common, shared element" (2005) of both his political and aesthetic work. As he also explains this, "I never switched from politics to aesthetics. I always tried to investigate the distribution of the sensible which allows us to identify something that we call politics and something that we call aesthetics" (23-24).

VII. STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The general structure of this study is determined by what I take to be the three key components of Rancière's theory of radical aesthetics that are crucial for a critical examination. First, and most fundamental, there is his attribution of a radical political core to aesthetic experience as theorized by German Idealist philosophers Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schiller (Chapters One to Three). Second, and based on the previous, there is Rancière's conceptualization of the nature of, and relation between the two most dominant forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era: those affirming art's autonomy and those affirming its heteronomy (Chapters Four and Five). Thirdly and lastly, there are his analyses and assessments of contemporary political art, including his own alternative suggestions of a truly emancipatory art practice in today's context.

In what follows, I shall briefly introduce each of these three themes and their corresponding problematics and indicate how I proceed in addressing them. I shall not offer a too detailed overview of each chapter. For this, I refer the reader to the extensive synopses included at the beginning of the chapters.

I also want to note from the outset that due to the originality, complexity and somewhat fragmentary nature of Rancière's political-aesthetic theory, as well as the lack of a comprehensive study on the topic (as mentioned earlier), a considerable part of this study will be devoted to exposition. As the study progresses, however, there will be increasingly more problematization and critique, more other thinkers will be involved in the discussion and, content-wise, the focus will shift from general aesthetic concepts to concrete art practices.

First problematic: the radical political status of aesthetics

The first three chapters - and also the largest part of this study - deal with what is undoubtedly the most central philosophical move of Rancière's radical aesthetics. It concerns the way in which he recuperates German Idealist aesthetics - especially the work of Immanuel Kant and, in extension, Friedrich von Schiller - for radical political purposes, taking it to harbour a "utopian content" (1983/2003:198). Any critical consideration of Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics has to begin by addressing this remarkable, provocative even, move.

It is, however, important to understand that Rancière's redemptive reading of Idealist aesthetics is not only central to his claims of the radical political status of aesthetic experience, but also to that of radical politics *as such,* and further, that the latter offers the key to the former. I thus begin, in the Chapter One, by looking into what he calls the aesthetics of politics and the key contention that radical politics is fundamentally structured in an aesthetic way, with the struggle for social emancipation and equality modelled on Kant's core conceptual determinations of aesthetic judgments. I shall also look into his prior claim that every socio-political order is fundamentally an aesthetic one, with the most fundamental social hierarchies based on what he calls a division of the sensible. Here also, Kant's thinking on aesthetics serves as key philosophical reference.

One of the aims of the first chapter is to bring out this deeply aesthetic nature of politics as a fundamental and unique feature of Rancière's political aesthetics. This is rarely done in other accounts, where it is mostly mentioned as a secondary aspect. I, on the contrary, shall make explicit the often cursory and implicit references to Kant's aesthetics, elaborate them further and show how it allows for a deeper understanding of key aspects of Rancière's conceptualization of the nature of radical politics.

Apart from this, Chapter One will also offer necessary insight into some of the core themes, notions and claims of Rancière's work as a whole, such as his notions of equality and emancipation. The latter are key to understanding and critiquing his claims concerning the radical political nature of aesthetics in later chapters. Although mainly expository and interpretative in nature, the first chapter will also look into some of the most important objections levelled at Rancière's theory of radical politics, as well as problematize the presumed centrality of aesthetics to politics which, to my knowledge, has never been criticized as yet.

Having explained how Kantian aesthetics is redeemed by Rancière based on its shared conceptual logic with radical politics, Chapter Two then looks into the way in which aesthetic experience in the strict sense is awarded an emancipatory potential. As already suggested, this specific order of

proceeding is not just a matter of chronology, i.e. because Rancière's writings on politics have preceded those on aesthetics. On the contrary, it follows his claim that it is on the basis of the aesthetics of politics that the politics of aesthetics can and must be thought.

Rancière's key contention here is that aesthetic experience as theorized by not only Kant but also Schiller, crucially involves a mode of being that is inherently liberating because it is based on a non-hierarchical and non-instrumental mode of interaction between the basic drivers of human and social life such as, for instance, reason and emotion or order and improvisation. As such, it is thought to oppose and invalidate the type of sensible divisions and hierarchies imposed by social orders in their efforts to maintain and legitimize inequalities, hierarchies and domination. Inversely, aesthetic experience is taken as operator of a specific, although fundamental human equality on the level of sensory experience. Rancière's further claim then is that the enactment of such egalitarian and liberated way of life forms the key criterion for the determination of what is considered to be art in the modern era.

After the mainly expository first and second chapters, the third chapter turns to a critical consideration of Rancière's key notions of the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics developed thus far. A leading question here is how Rancière's all and all rather straightforward re-affirmation of canonical idealist conceptions of the aesthetic can be maintained in light of the sustained, radical critiques of philosophical aesthetics by fellow ultra-leftist theorists, from the end of the 1960s onwards. In particular, I confront Rancière's approach and key claims with important critiques of the aesthetic by Pierre Bourdieu (in terms of class), Terry Eagleton (in terms of ideology) and Dave Beech and John Roberts (in terms of cultural violence). The chapter hereby wants to determine how Rancière's conceptualization of the radical nature of art and aesthetics fares in comparison; i.e. whether its affirmative stance toward aesthetics' emancipatory status can be maintained over and against sustained critiques of the aesthetic.

Second problematic: the autonomy and heteronomy of art and aesthetics

As already indicated, I take the second key component of Rancière's radical aesthetics to be his reconceptualization of a key problematic within modern aesthetics: that of art's autonomy and heteronomy. With this, the focus of the study shifts from the question of the radical politics of aesthetic experience in its generality to that of the political-artistic strategies that have been thought most appropriate to realize this potential. Central here is the question as to whether art's political potential resides primarily in confronting society with

something radically different, with art asserting its independence from society (autonomy). Or, inversely, whether it should be situated rather in the direct application of its creative power in transforming society, thereby surrendering its autonomy (heteronomy). Even though affirmation of either of these options is rarely straightforward or unqualified, most theories of art's politics display a clear preference for one of these two positions.

Chapter Four offers a detailed account of the way in which Rancière offers a typically third way solution to the problematic of the autonomy and heteronomy of art. He endorses both as valid, efficacious forms of aesthetic politics while, at the same time, identifying an internal limitation to their application over and above which they become self-defeating with regards to their radical political aims. He further holds that it is by maintaining a productive tension with their opposites that both major forms of aesthetic politics protect themselves from transgressing their inherent limits to achieve emancipation. My main work in this chapter is to extract and piece together the main conceptual structure and logic of this highly dialectical, bi-polar model of art's autonomy and heteronomy based on Rancière's rather elusive account.

Chapter Five then goes further to identify several problematic aspects of this account. On a conceptual level, I question some of the implications of Rancière's third way model with regard to its valuation of radically heteronomous artistic strategies, as well as its ability to challenge the largely post-utopian, tragical mood concerning art's politicity prevalent in the second half of the previous century. As we saw, it was one of the most general aims of Rancière's political aesthetics to offer a counterweight to such pessimistic estimations. Finally, I also look critically into some of the underlying historical claims that lie at the basis of Rancière's alternative theorization of art's autonomy and heteronomy.

Third problematic: the aims and ways of a truly emancipatory contemporary art practice

A third important component of Rancière's writings on politics and aesthetics consists of his elaborate analyses and critical evaluations of political art practices of the recent past - say from the 1960s onward. The final, sixth chapter of this study is devoted to a critical consideration of this aspect of his work. Rancière here comes closest to conducting art criticism as he engages with a range of contemporary art works, practices, exhibitions and trends. He even goes as far as to sketch out the key features of what he considers to be a truly emancipatory art practice.

My first aim here is to offer a clearer overview of Rancière's idiosyncratic and at times inconsistent and cryptic readings and criticisms of recent

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constellations in political art. Similar work is needed for a good understanding of his alternative politics of art which is articulated in rather dense formulations, as well as in relation to particular contemporary art works. With regard to the latter, it is a matter of fleshing out some of the general features of Rancière's position, as well as draw out some of its implications, for instance, regarding the roles, aims and strategies of a truly transformative art practice. In the end, I bring out some of the problematic features of Rancière's rather one-dimensional alternative in relation to constructing a versatile and robust conceptual framework for oppositional art.

Chapter 1: The aesthetic core of politics

Synopsis

The first chapter looks into the cornerstone of Rancière's political aesthetics: the modelling of radical politics on the mould of aesthetics as theorized by Immanuel Kant. It starts (Section I) by elucidating how Rancière uses Kant's notions of time, space and sensibility - as developed in the Critique of Pure Reason *- to articulate one of his most important and innovative concepts: that of the division of the sensible. This is the idea that every social order, as a hierarchically structured system of different groups of people each with their specific place and function, is founded on and legitimized by a corresponding ordering and valuation of the alleged sensible properties of these groups. Next (II), I turn to a second key notion in Rancière's work, that of equality thought of as a presupposition, and show how it forms the counterpart to his notion of the division of the sensible. I then (III) make explicit how his conceptualization of equality is heavily indebted and structurally homologous to Kant's concept of a commons sense in the* Critique of Judgement. *I then (IV) show how the two key notions developed so far form the basis of the key distinction in Rancière's political thought between politics proper and what he calls the police order. The second notion refers to systems based on an unequal, hierarchical ordering of society, the second to practices that contest the police order in the name of equality. The following four sections (V to VIII) cover the key characteristics of such radical political contestations and point out out resemblances with the main conceptual features of Kant's taste judgements that are either not theorized at all by Rancière or only summarily so. The penultimate section of this chapter (IX) offers an overview of some of the most important criticisms levelled at Rancière's political theory, most of which relate to the distinction between politics and the police. I end with two own points of critique directed at the specifically aesthetic determinations of Rancière's notion of politics: that of the sensible realm as primary level of social strife (X) and the subsequent determination of radical political struggle as concerned mainly with sensory divisions (XI)*

I. THE DIVISION OF THE SENSIBLE

The key to Rancière's reconceptualization of the relation between aesthetics and politics lies in the first place in his notion of the aesthetics of politics or what he also variously calls the "aesthetics at the core of politics", "primary aesthetics", "'aestheticity' of politics" or "aesthetic dimension of... political experience" (2005:13). Rancière develops this idea most systematically in *Disagreement* (1995/1999), which I will use as main source for my account.[8] One of the central claims in this work is that a socio-political order is always fundamentally based on what Rancière calls a 'division of the sensible'.[9] As we already remarked, this notion must be considered as the most central and original notion of Rancière's work. It is also the cornerstone of his thinking on aesthetics and politics.

I shall first elucidate the concept's two key terms, starting with 'the sensible'.[10] Rancière here also often uses the term '*aesthesis*' instead, speaking of the "division of an *aesthesis*" or claiming that every social order is a "divided *aesthesis*" (*D*2/20). He indicates that the sensible is to be understood - albeit loosely - along the lines of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1989:153-92), referring to "a priori forms of sensibility" and "time and space" (2005:13). Instead of the sensible, Rancière also sometimes speaks of the "field of experience" (*D*35/59). The term aesthetic can thus be seen to refer to the original Greek meaning of the word, that of "relating to perception by the senses", rather than its later 18th century meaning of "relating to beauty" (*Oxford Dictionary*).

The French term for division - 'partage' - is somewhat difficult to translate in English due to its double meaning in French. There, it can refer both to sharing or distributing something amongst a group of people, dividing something into different parts, as well as establishing a break between two entities. In English, these different meanings are usually indicated by the prepositions used in combination with the noun or verb: dividing *amongst* (e.g. a particular good amongst a group of people), dividing *into* (e.g. a whole into parts), dividing *of* (e.g. a piece of land) and division *between* (e.g. between two enemies). In what follows, I shall use the term division (or dividing), taking its meaning of 'sharing' to be implied. The most common terms that Rancière

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8   This is not to be taken so that Rancière first came up with this notion in his later, more explicitly political works such as *Disagreement*. As Rancière indicates (2005:14), this book systematizes some of the key insights of his first, empirically grounded study *The Nights of Labour* (1981/9) published fifteen years earlier.

9   In French: "partage du sensible".

10   Instead of 'the sensible', translators and commentators also use 'the sensory' and 'the perceptible'.

uses interchangeably with division (dividing) are: configuration (configuring), order (ordering), framework (framing), distribution (distributing) and apportionment (apportioning).

If we put the two terms together, we can now understand the basic claim behind Rancière's notion of the division of the sensible, namely, that the sensible is "the space of distribution ['partage'], of community, and of division [separation]" (*D*43/71,26/48-49). Or, as he also puts it, "between individuals and humanity, there is always a partition of the perceptible, a configuration that determines the way in which the different parts have a part in the community" (125/171). Or, in another formulation, it concerns the "system of sensible evidences that reveals both the existence of a communality and the division that define in it respectively assigned places and parts" (2000b:23). The division of the sensible thus refers both to a shared, common sensibility or time-space - in this regard, Gabriel Rockhill speaks of the "perceptual categories of a community" (2004:59) - *and* to divisions and hierarchies between different types of sensibilities or time-spaces. Note, however, that division is not only or primarily defined as that between an inside and outside, but also as that of the inside itself, as internal differentiation. So again, Rancière's basic claim is that every social order is at heart founded upon a division on the level of the sensible or, as we already quoted Rockhill in this regard, an "aesthetico-political framework that organizes the visible and the sayable" (2004:75).

We can give some substance to these claims by covering some of the key sensible registers where divisions are made according to Rancière.

(i) *Space & time*. With regard to space, the division of the sensible determines and fixes the rightful place in society of different population groups and their activities, experiences and mutual relations. One can see this reflected in common-sensical expressions such as 'the rightful place of women is at home' or 'the factory is a place of work not politics'. This fixing of an appropriate place for particular activities and groups also mostly involves the simultaneous determination of an appropriate time for these activities and interactions. Think of a statement such as 'there is a time for work and a time for play'. These partitions of time and space - Rancière also speaks of 'time-space' - have a strong ordering effect, neatly separating practices and categories of people, preventing them from mixing or intermingling, thereby averting what are considered to be improper or confused situations. An assertion that is inherent to these strict divisions of space and time is then also that one cannot 'be at two places at the same time' or 'do two activities at the same time'. Think for instance of the conservative view that women cannot both take care of the children *and* be engaged in politics. If Rancière often uses the verb 'to frame' to describe the specific operation of the division of the sensible, we can

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thus understand this in the sense that it forces the lives of people into certain spatio-temporal frameworks or straightjackets.

(ii) *Subjects: sensibilities, capabilities, bodies*. A second important aesthetic dimension that is the object of division is that of human beings' sensibilities, i.e. their abilities to sense or experience something in certain ways. In this regard, Rancière also frequently uses the terms 'capacities' and 'bodies'. The division of the sensible involves a differentiation and classification of people based on their alleged sensibilities, as well as a pronouncement on which sensibilities are required or suited for what types of human activities, functions and experiences. In this regard, Rancière also characterizes the division of the sensible in terms of a relation between modes of being, saying and doing (*D*28/50). In line with Rancière's reference to Kant, we can understand this in a transcendental sense as pertaining to the a priori conditions of possibility for having certain experiences or participating in certain practices. Here, one can think of statements such as 'black people are more physically inclined', 'there are people who are good with working with their hands and people who are good in using their mind' or 'some people have a sensibility for beauty, others just don't'. On the one hand, the carving up of humanity based on supposedly different sensible capacities has an inclusionary effect: it creates communities of people or better, communities of sense, based on certain shared potentials. On the other hand, it has an exclusionary effect, barring certain people from particular activities based on the assumed lack of aptitude for it. Think of the racist statement that 'because black people are more physically inclined, they rarely make good scientists and should therefore not bother trying to become one'.

(iii) *Objects: the private and the common*. The division of the sensible does not merely concern space, time and subjective capacities - all of which determine, as Rancière puts it, "the way in which one partakes ['avoir part'] in the sensible" (2/20) - but also the objective realm. In other words, it determines which spheres of life or experience are, for example, of common concern to the community and thus subject to public deliberation and decision making and which aspects of society are not and are therefore consigned to the private sphere, left strictly up to the discretion of individuals. The example that features prominently in *Disagreement* is that of the political status of the economic sphere which was excluded from political life for the largest part of human history, whether in Ancient times - where it was considered to be part of the household -, 19th century liberal capitalism or even today according to neoliberal world views.

We can further specify Rancière's key notion of the division of the sensible by looking into the way in which it is aesthetic not only because of creating divisions with regard to some of the most important sensible co-

ordinates of a social order, but also because of *the way in which* these divisions are made. Helpful in this regard is Rancière's characterization of the core operation of the division of the sensible in terms of a "material and symbolic distribution" or "inscription" (22-3/44-5). Based on the previous, we can understand this so that a socio-political order is founded through a process of symbolization in which specific meanings and values are awarded to certain places, times, bodies and spheres of life. Think of certain population groups being signified as rational beings or particular aspects of the community being earmarked as political. Rancière conceptualizes such symbolization process in terms of a "double count", pointing to the fact that in a social order, persons or things are always counted twice (26/48). Rancière's key example here is that of the connection between speech and rationality. Of the latter he claims that:

> ... logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the account [compte] that is made of speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signalling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt. (22-3/44-5)

In other words, the first count is that of the non-symbolized entity as such - in this case, a body making a sound - while the second count is the properly symbolic one that signifies the entity in question as something specific - in this instance, the body's sounds as rational. Rancière thus claims that something as seemingly self-evident and natural as human speech is not perceived as such. It is always mediated through a sensible-symbolic order that determines what first counts or can be recognized as speech.

An important implication of this, is that there is in fact no natural identity or status of things and people. They only receive certain qualities in being inscribed in a socio-symbolic order, which is thus always a somehow random and artificial event. To be sure, every social order will present its specific symbolizations and sensible divisions as self-evident, as merely offering a description of reality, of the way things are, thereby obfuscating the fact that it is actually something entirely created and fictional. This can be seen to constitute another way in which every socio-political order is inherently aesthetic, founded on artifice.

II. NATURAL ORDER OF DOMINATION VERSUS PRESUPPOSITION OF INEQUALITY

The symbolization processes at the basis of the division of the sensible have huge consequences. They determine the visibility or invisibility of persons, practices, experiences and issues - or, in a different sensory register: their

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audibility or inaudibility. Rancière for instance says that through its symbolizations, a social order "doom[s]... the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence" (22/44). An obvious example of this would be the invisibility of women in the public arena for the greater part of human history. Their predominant inscription in the social order as primary caregivers operating on the basis of emotion rather than rationality, condemned them to leading secluded, private lives outside the public sphere, 'chained' to 'home and hearth'. The division of the sensible is thus all but a neutral or inconsequential process. As Rancière puts it, it inscribes "the forms of domination... within the very tissue of ordinary sensory experience" (*AD*31/47). The stakes of the division of the sensible are thus highly political: the apportioning of certain places, amounts of time or sensitivities to groups in society delivers a verdict on their rights to participate in the life of the community and their degree of inclusion or exclusion.

This is also what was at stake in Rancière's argument concerning the difference between speech and *logos* mentioned earlier. This is based on his reading of a key distinction made by Aristotle in his *Politics* (1999:5-6; Book I, Part II) between voice (*phônè*) and speech (*logos*) (*D*1-2/19-20). He points out the fact that whereas Aristotle identifies the first with the ability to express pain or pleasure, the second is presented as the ability to express what is useful and harmful, good and bad, just and unjust. In Rancière's words, speech involves the ability "to voice... [one's] experience as common experience in the universal language of public argumentation" (2005:13) and thus forms a crucial, aesthetic prerequisite for participation in political life. He further points out that while Aristotle holds voice to be something shared by both man and animal, speech on the contrary is considered to be the sole prerogative of man or, and herein lies the catch, of *certain* men, excluding - in Aristotle's time - women, slaves or even common people.

If, as we already saw, every socio-political order is in essence an *aesthetic* order, founded on certain divisions established with regard to sensible properties, it is clear that this order is *inherently unequal*, based on hierarchies and exclusions. As Rancière puts it, "the legitimacy of domination has always rested on the evidence of a sensory division between different humanities" (*AD*31/47). Aesthetic division thus founds and legitimates social division. The system of distinctions and rankings with regard to people's aesthetic properties serves as basis of a social order that attributes different worth and importance to different groups of people and treats them accordingly.

Rancière uses the term "the part of those who have no part"[11] (*D*9/28) to refer to those sections of the population which, although living in the community, are not counted as full members due to their assumed lack of key aesthetic properties, whether it concerns sufficient spare time to attend collective meetings or intellectual abilities to participate in them. On this basis, the groups in question are relegated to an invisible, mute existence in society's margins. Due to the fact that they are not 'counted' or, at least, not *fully* counted by the existing order, Rancière also refers to the part of those who have no part as a "surplus subject" "whose count is always supernumerary" (58/89). For Rancière, the production of such 'uncounted' population groups constitutes the fundamental 'wrong'[12] or injustice at the heart of every division of the sensible. As such, as we shall see, it forms the primary target of radical political contestation.

Having said this, the status of this injustice is somewhat ambiguously theorized by Rancière, something that has been noted by several commentators (Nancy 2009, Michaud 1997). On the one hand, Rancière seems to regard aesthetic divisions - and the order of domination based on them - as the original, natural state of human societies. He for example speaks of the "'natural' logic of domination" and "the natural laws of the gravitation of social bodies" (2000b:6,21). This suggests that there is some kind of natural inevitability for human beings to organize themselves socially in unequal, hierarchical ways. Such a view is supported by the way in which some commentators have interpreted the division of the sensible in Kantian, transcendental terms as something 'universal and necessary' for human beings rooted in the conditions of possibility of experience. Based on this, one could argue that social orders based on division and domination are firmly rooted in the human condition.

One can think for example of Yves Citton's definition of the division of the sensible as "the most basic system of categorization through which we perceive and intuitively classify the data provided to our senses" (2009:120). The necessity of such system is said to be due to the fact that "there are too many data in our sensory input for us to give an exhaustive account of all the features. Not everything can count; any given state of things carries an excess, which our perceptual and intellectual faculties do not allow us to absorb and digest in its multifarious wealth, and most aspects of a situation must be discounted" (137). Because of having to manage such "a situation of excess", representation is said to be inevitably "selective" (idem). According to Citton, both politics and aesthetics "rely" on such selective representation and are

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11 In French: "le part des sans-parts".

12 In French: 'le tort'.

"rooted" in "the gap between the superabundance of features provided by any state of things and our limited capacity (and need) to count some in" (138).[13]

On the other hand, however, the fact that in the previous, penultimate quote of Rancière concerning the logic of domination, the word 'natural' is put between parentheses, can be interpreted as an indication that he does not mean this literally. Although he might regard domination to be society's initial or dominant state, he does not seem to regard this to be necessarily so, based on some presumed condition of human nature for example. There is also textual evidence that supports this interpretation. At one point in *Disagreement*, Rancière for example speaks of the "the *fiction* of inequality" (*D*58/34, emphasis mine) and, further on, he says that the "naturalness" of domination is forever "lost" (*D*4/99). Somewhere else still, he states that "there is no natural principle of domination of one person over another" (79/116). Based on these statements, the status of domination in Rancière's account could be better characterized perhaps as *quasi*-natural. Although domination is considered to be the prevailing form of human societies since the beginning of time, it doesn't hold there to be any essential, necessary grounds for this.

At stake in this interpretative problem is the question of how Rancière on the one hand can regard social division and domination - and the underlying aesthetic divisions - to be *quasi*-natural while, on the other hand, estimating them to be *always illegitimate* and therefore to be opposed. The question in other words is, as Yves Michaud puts it, "[h]ow... to institute [the equality of men] on the basis of the inequality at the beginning?" (1997:427, translation mine).

Key to answering this question is Rancière's idiosyncratic notion of equality. The latter can be seen, both in *Disagreement* and in his work as a whole, as conceptual counterpoint to his notion of the division of the sensible. While the latter is identified with inequality, hierarchy and domination, equality, in contrast, is associated with emancipation, community and politics. One of the unique features of Rancière's theory of equality is that it is conceived of as a *presupposition* or, as he also puts it, an axiom and point of departure. What is presupposed more specifically is the equality of all human beings qua beings of language (*D*49/78) and possessors of intelligence (1987/91:147). It is essential to have a good understanding of Rancière's concept of equality because it forms the foundation of the radically egalitarian

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13 Todd May offers a similar type of description of the division of the sensible when he explains how "some of the features of the situation that were present at the level of our sensory inputs are selected as relevant and manage to define the nature and quality of our behavioural output... while other features are rejected as irrelevant or simply ignored" (2008:136). Jean-Louis Déotte presents the division of the sensible in a similar way when he describes it as an "identification mechanism" that places "an interpretative grid over any event, assigning identifying limits" (2004:81).

tenet of his theory of politics and aesthetics. I shall also explain how it is explicitly modelled on one of the most important concepts and claims of Kant's analysis of judgements of taste.

As Todd May explains it, Rancière's theory of equality differs fundamentally from others that primarily conceive of equality in terms of equal distribution of and/or access to some primary good (2009:108-9). The differences between such theories mainly concern the identification of this good (e.g. liberty, economic opportunity, etc.), the way in which it is to be distributed (e.g. homogeneously or in a way that maximizes the situation of those worst-off), as well as the agency responsible for the distribution (e.g. the government, market, civil society). Another key difference between Rancière's theory of equality and its distributive counterparts highlighted by May is the second's focus on outcomes or, as May puts it, the fact that they "put equality at the end of the process" (110).

According to May, Rancière's main issue with such accounts is that they imply "political passivity" because of their focus on "what people receive" in terms of goods as opposed to "what they [themselves] do or create" (idem). In contrast, to make equality into "the presupposition of political action" as Rancière does, would treat it as "a wellspring, a motivation, a value through which we conceive ourselves and our political interventions" (idem). It implies that "equality... no longer concern[s], at least... no longer primarily..., what governments or institutions do" but instead becomes "a matter of what people... do" (idem). In a similar vein, Rockhill presents equality in Rancière as "an activity rather than a state of being, an intermittent process of actualization rather than a goal to be attained once and for all" (2004:59).

No longer referring to goods, Rancière's conception of equality applies to the intelligence of people, which he considers to be closely linked to human beings' linguistic capacities. One of the only empirical proofs that he offers for the equality of intelligence - and a rather anecdotal one - is the acquisition of one's mother-tongue (1987/91). Because everyone acquires his or her first language without any prior knowledge of another language, so Rancière argues, it is an exclusively individual achievement of which all people are equally capable, exceptions notwithstanding. Among the skills for learning one's first language with which people are thought to be equally endowed, May lists abilities such as "attend[ing] closely to what [one]... is doing" and "engag[ing] with the material" (2009:111). Such capabilities are then believed to enable people equally "to creat[e] a meaningful life" (idem).

The above proof, however, should not be taken to mean that Rancière asserts that all people are *in actual fact* equal intellectually. For him, equality is neither a given fact, essence or goal (*D*33/57) or, as Rockhill puts it, equality's "universal status is derived neither from human nature, nor from any other

founding principle" (2004:73). Rancière does not assert equality in any of these ways, but rather as a presupposition "to be maintained under all circumstances" (1987/91:229) and this "in order to see where [it]... might lead" (May 2009:112). Or in his own words, "we don't know that men are equal. [w]e are saying that they *might* be" (1987/91:73).

One could say that the question of factual equality becomes irrelevant here. Instead, it is a case of treating people as equals regardless of any evidence to the contrary and thereby offering them a chance to live up to their presumed equality; to *become* equal. So again, Rancière doesn't seem to contest the fact that people might be endowed with different aptitudes or temperaments. He rather takes issue with overemphasising these natural differences, with exaggerating their impact on the lives of the bearers of these differences so as to exert a definitive, unsurmountable effect on their life potential. Instead, one's achievements in life are thought to depend on other factors such as the already mentioned focus of attention and engagement with the material, with which all people are considered to be equally equipped from birth. On this basis, people are thought to be able to achieve things they were not assumed to be capable of, when given the opportunity and confidence. We can thus understand Rancière when he states that "the egalitarian axiom is not based on a common, natural attribute... The equality of speaking beings intervenes as an addition, as a break with the natural laws of the gravitation of social bodies" (2000b:6).

III. SENSUS COMMUNIS AS SUPPORT AND RUIN OF AESTHETIC DIVISION

How then are the two central notions in Rancière's work - the division of the sensible and the presupposition of equality - to be connected conceptually? It should be clear that the proclamation of "the pure and simple equality of anyone with everyone" (*D*79/116) goes against the core operation of the division of the sensible to establish a natural hierarchy between people with regard to their aesthetic properties. It does so by granting those at the lower ranks of the social ladder the opportunity to prove their sensible equality to those situated at the higher ranks, thereby invalidating the very existence and legitimacy of sensible division.

Still, the fact that success of this proof of equality cannot be established a priori but is something that might or might not materialize, can be seen to leave the solid belief in a supposedly natural order of social bodies and capacities embodied in a division of the sensible relatively unshaken. For Rancière, however, the presupposition of equality is not a hypothesis external to a hierarchical social order based on aesthetic division, which the latter can ignore

without being in any way affected. Instead, he considers it to be a *prerequisite* for the functioning of such an order, as key to its efficacy in maintaining its relations of domination. This can be seen to be Rancière's second key argument in favour of equality besides the empirical one based on first language acquisition mentioned in the previous section.

Rancière presents this second line of argument as a logical one. It is based on the presupposition that "in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you should obey it" (16/37). In other words, for the social hierarchies of a division of the sensible to be effective, those of the presumed higher order of sensibility have to assume that those of the presumed lesser order can at least understand the fact that their sensibility is inferior and are therefore not allowed to participate in the life of the community to the same degree as their superiors. Rancière's argument thus exposes and exploits the pragmatic necessity for a hierarchical social order to at least presume equality of communicational and cognitive capacities of the very same people it considers to be fundamentally unequal in this regard.

This constitutes what Rancière calls the "primary contradiction" of a social order, namely that "In the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality" (17/37,49/78, 1987/91:147). For this reason, he calls the presupposition of equality the "final secret" and "support" of every unequal social order, as well as, at the same time, its "ruin" (*D*79/116). In short, the presupposition of equality, rather than an injunction imposed on a hierarchical social order from the outside, leaving the efficacy of its procedures of domination relatively unaffected, is in fact always already contained in it as a repressed condition of its efficacy. Every division of the sensible thereby contains the germ of its own demise inside itself in the form of the performative paradox by which it necessarily has to presuppose that which it vehemently denies any reality and validity. Exploitation of this inconsistency for the purpose of realizing equality thus forms an ever-present possibility. As Michaud sums it up, "If hierarchies exist, it is because people are able to understand these hierarchies, but it is also because they can understand them that they can contest them - in the name precisely of their equality" (1997:429-430, translation mine).

We should however stress that Rancière regards the above proof not as proof of *factual* equality but *transcendentally*, one might say, as proof of the necessity to presuppose it. Still, one might argue that if it were the case that people are *in fact* unequal, presupposing equality would not help a hierarchical social order much in securing its functioning in the way in which Rancière explains it. It would not be able to make inferior people understand its low ranking in society's hierarchies, as well as explain the grounds for it. In other

words, even if Rancière does not draw out this implication of his argument, it does support claims - but again, mainly based on logical deduction - for an at least *relative* empirical equality of human beings.[14]

For our purposes, it is important to understand how Rancière's second argument in favour of equality is developed in close analogy to Kant's key argumentation concerning the existence of a *sensus communis* in the "Analytic of the Beautiful" in his *Critique of Judgement* (1789/2000:89-127), even though only cursory reference is made to this. For a thorough understanding of the aesthetic dimension of politics it is important to make explicit Rancière's use of this important aspect of Kant's conceptualization of judgements of taste, of which I shall first offer a brief account.

One of the particular characteristics of judgements of taste according to Kant is that aesthetic satisfaction in a particular object is thought to be universal, valid for everyone. We shall specify further how it concerns a specific type of universality that is different from that of cognitive and practical judgements. Kant deduces the existence of a universal claim inherent to judgements of taste from what he considers to be another key feature of the satisfaction proper to such judgements, namely the fact that they are disinterested.[15] Kant bases this on his conviction that in experiencing beauty, the subject "cannot discover as grounds of the satisfaction any private conditions, pertaining to his subject alone" (97). Consequently, he argues that the subject "must therefore regard it as grounded in those that he can also

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14 Related to this, Rancière mentions a distinction made by Aristotle of people possessing "the capacity to understand a logos without having the capacity of the logos" (*D*17/38). Although Rancière rejects such distinction as part of the presupposition of human inequality typical of a division of the sensible, the alleged distinction between what one could call a passive and active relation to logos could be seen to somewhat nuance his argument developed above in the main text. Based on this distinction, a hierarchical order could argue that the people with the presumed lesser sensibility could be made to understand their resultant inferior place in society because they can understand the voice of reason without, however, being able to speak in this voice themselves.

Another possible counterargument is that people who presumedly lack the ability of reason can be made to understand their inferior place in society through sheer physical force, which would be in line with viewing such people as little more than animals which only understand the language of pain and pleasure. On the other hand, regimes based on such brute force are not the most stable ones, precisely due to the lack of a form of rational legitimation.

15 In Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" (1789/1914) determination of the satisfaction proper to judgments of taste as disinterested constitutes the 1st moment of Kant's analysis according to "quality" (§§1-5). Determination of the universality proper to this satisfaction takes place in the 2nd consideration of judgements of taste according to "quantity" (§§6-9). Also relevant is the 4th moment of the "Analytic" where judgements of taste are considered according to "the modality of the satisfaction in the object" and where their satisfaction is specified as "necessary" yet not based on any concept (§§18-22). It is here that the notion of *sensus communis* is developed explicitly.

presuppose in everyone else" (idem). This then leads him to state that in judgements of beauty "one believes oneself to have a universal voice" (101).

This claim to universality is however only subjective. Even though one speaks of beauty "as if... [it] were a property of the object and the judgment logical" (97), according to Kant this is not actually the case. In this regard, he states that in judgements of taste "nothing [i.e. in terms of objective properties] is postulated *except* such a universal voice" (101, emphasis mine), with this universal voice being only an "Idea" (idem). The universal satisfaction attributed to beautiful things thus does not concern their objective qualities and the fact that they can be subsumed by everyone under some general concept of beauty, as is the case for cognitive and practical judgements. In this sense, we should understand Kant's claim that "The judgement of taste... does not itself postulate the accord of everyone...; it only ascribes this agreement to everyone, as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts but only from the consent of others" (idem). In appreciating the beauty of something one thus expects everyone else to appreciate in the same way, yet this cannot be demanded as is the case in cognitive or ethical judgements.

What is it then that Kant presupposes to be present in all human beings and that forms the grounds for aesthetic judgement's claim to universality? This concerns "the subjective conditions of the judging of objects" (103) and more specifically "the universal capacity for the communication of the state of mind in the given representation" (102). This state of mind or also "mode of representation" specific to the experience of beauty is more specifically determined as one in which the cognitive and representative faculties - i.e. the imagination and understanding - are in a state of "free play", with "no determinate concept restrict[ing]... them to a particular rule of cognition" (idem). This mental state of free play in the contemplation of the beautiful is said to be universally communicable in a subjective sense "because cognition, as a determination of the object with which given representations (in whatever subject it may be) should agree, is the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone" (103).

Kant then goes on to say that the "universal communicability" of the free play of the faculties experienced in the contemplation of beauty presupposes the existence of a *sensus communis* or common sense (§21). This refers to "the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else's way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole" (173). In judging something as beautiful, one thus expects that others will judge it in the same way - Kant also expresses this expectation in terms of a "should" (123) - based on the presumption of the universality of the subjective conditions of

<div align="center">37</div>

judging. Or again, when others contemplate an object or representation that one personally experienced as beautiful, it is safe to assume they will experience the same free play of the faculties one experienced for oneself that formed the basis of one's judgement. So while the universality involved in knowledge judgements is based on the existence of a general concept, with the subject having to correctly subsume a particular object or representation under this concept, the universality of aesthetic judgements is founded on the *transcendental conditions for judging itself*, which are thought to be equally present in human beings.

It doesn't take much to see how Rancière's notion of equality is analogous to Kant's notion of the presupposition of a sense equally shared by all people. In judgements of taste, necessary agreement is expected, based on the supposed universal communicability of the feeling on which it is based - that of the free play of the faculties - which itself relies on the presumption of a transcendental apparatus equally shared by all human beings. In similar vein, in Rancière's claim of a primary contradiction at the heart of every hierarchical social order, those who regard others as their inferiors have to presuppose that the latter are equally endowed with the capacities for understanding, at least if they want to get them to understand the terms and conditions of their inferiority. They thereby have to believe - even if it is suppressed - in the idea of the 'universal communicability' of their legitimations and commands which, again, only makes sense if one presupposes all men to possess equal communicative and intelligent capacities. As Robson puts it: "it is precisely such sensation [i.e. of a *sensus communis*] that Rancière discovers at the root of communication, and it is precisely such sensation that leads him to the goal of an equality" (2005:84). Similarly, Michaud identifies "the position of an aesthetic common sense that promotes equality" or still, "a community of tastes" (1997:433, translation mine) as one of the two routes taken by Rancière towards thinking equality. Déotte for his part expresses the connection between Kant's judgements of the beautiful and political equality as follows: "Whatever 'I' find beautiful, everyone else *must* find beautiful. This is the fundamental acknowledgment of equality in its modern expression" (2004:85-86).

In short, against the presupposition of a 'divided sense' that forms the cornerstone of social orders based on inequality and domination, Rancière models his notion of equality on the presupposition of a 'common' or 'shared sense' in a way similar to that posited by Kant as foundation of judgements of beauty. Another similarity between the latter and radical claims of equality is that both are thought as intrinsically subjective. As we already showed, Rancière holds equality to be nothing but a presupposition that is neither

grounded in a fact of nature or a general concept that can serve as basis or criterion for judging its application in particular situations.

IV. AESTHETICS OF THE POLICE VERSUS AESTHETICS OF POLITICS

We can now further specify Rancière's claim of an aesthetics at the core of politics. On the one hand, this refers to the sensible division at the heart of any social order, a carving up of society into different categories of people based on their assumed different sensible properties that determine their place and function in society (Section I). On the other hand, politics can be said to be aesthetic at heart based on the way in which Rancière conceives of the manner in which such sensible divisions are proven to be ultimately invalid. That is, based on the presupposition of the equality of all men that functions analogously to the presupposition of a shared sense in Kant's conceptualization of taste judgements (Sections II and III).

Note how both major presences of aesthetics in Kant's critical philosophy, i.e. the "Transcendental Aesthetic" of the *Critique of Theoretical Judgement* and the "Analytic of Beauty" of the *Critique of Judgement*, are used by Rancière to articulate politics' key aspects. The first text is used to theorize the different registers of aesthetic division on which social orders of domination are based. The second text supplies Rancière with the concept that proofs the untenability of aesthetic divisions due to the necessity for those who maintain these divisions to presuppose their opposite: aesthetic equality.

These two aesthetic determinations of politics lie at the basis of the key conceptual opposition in *Disagreement* between what Rancière calls 'politics proper' and 'the police'. The division of the sensible and presupposition of equality respectively form the main principles of these two fundamental notions. The concept of the police refers to the agent or order that enforces a division of the sensible and its unequal social relations (*D*27-9/50-2). Michaud describes the police in terms of "everything that concerns the distributions of places and functions and the system of legitimation of this distribution" (1997:437). In this sense, the police has to be conceived of as a practice that maintains order, manages and controls population groups and their activities, and offers rationalizations for all this.

The term 'politics proper' is reserved for instances in which existing social and aesthetic divisions are opposed by insisting on the fundamental equality of all human beings (*D*28-9/51-2). Politics is thus the "process" of equality (30/53) in which the latter is "actualized" (31/55). Or still, it is a practice in which "the logic of the characteristic of equality [trait égalitaire] takes the form of the processing of a wrong, in which politics becomes the argument of a

basic wrong that ties in with some established dispute in the distribution of jobs, roles and places" (35/59). May for his part views politics in terms of the demos or common people "acting upon the presupposition of equality" (2009:113). As such, politics is said to give a place to the conflict between the police and the egalitarian logic (*D*32/56), affirming the latter in order to oppose the former. Rancière even says that in order for politics to exist, there has to be an encounter between the two heterogeneous processes of the police and equality (30/53).

Rancière presents politics and the police as two types of division of the sensible, two modes or logics of "human being-together" (27/50), that are radically heterogeneous, antagonistic and incommensurable (29-30/52-3). If the default mode of the police is to divide the sensible, politics, on the contrary, driven by the presupposition of equality, aims at nothing less than undoing these divisions, as well as re-dividing the sensible in more equal ways. Politics for Rancière thus consists of a double operation, a destructive and constructive one, which is clearly reflected in the two sets of verbs that Rancière uses to describe the basic operation of politics. The first series, expressing what one could call the negative component, includes verbs such as to suspend, break, rupture, displace, undo, unsettle, subtract. The second set, articulating politics' positive aspect, includes such verbs as to reconfigure, refigure, recompose, recarve, rearrange. In this regard, Yves Citton also calls politics "the active side of the *partage du sensible*,... our capacity to repartition it along slightly altered lines" (2009:136).

Such a presentation, however, bypasses some of the ambiguities in Rancière's account of politics proper. Against his characterization of politics as itself a type of division of the sensible and - to a lesser degree - a redividing of existing divisions on a more equal basis, he emphasizes that politics does not of or for itself constitute a social order, entirely separate from that of the police. On the contrary, it would only consist of a specific *operation on* existing divisions of the sensible. May expresses this idea when he defines politics as "refusal to recognize the existing order of things, *not in the name of another order*, but in the name of equality" (2009:113, emphasis mine). Again, this implies that politics' activity of redividing the sensible is not to be understood in terms of *itself* constituting a division of the sensible. As main reason for this, Rancière mentions the fact that the moment politics "inscribes" itself as "a social bond" it changes into its contrary, into a police order (*D*34/58). This is also to say that politics always and again has to be reiterated, taken up anew. In this regard, he calls politics "a one-off performance" or "act" that "cannot consist in any social bond whatsoever" (idem). Or, as he also phrases it, politics and the police "must remain absolutely alien to each other" (idem), their conflictual relation being "infinite" (39/64, 90/129). The reason given for

this is not only that the 'wrong' constituted by every division of the sensible - the differentiation and hierarchization of humanity on the basis of their supposed different natural sensibilities - is infinite, but also the "principled" resistance of the police order against political processes that expose its fundamental wrongfulness (39/64).

Instead of itself constituting a division of the sensible, politics is conceptualized by Rancière as something "superimposed" (35/59), "inscribed on", "pressed upon" (57/88), "acting upon" (32/56) an existing police order and thus always "bound up with" the latter (31/55). As May explains this characteristics: politics can only occur "from a certain (inherited) configuration of the *partage du sensible*, a 'state of things' that preexists and largely predetermines our possible work of reconfiguration" (2008:136). One of Rancière's main reasons for this is the fact that politics "does not have any objects, questions or places of its own", which would even hold for the principle of equality (*D*31/55,33/57). According to him, politics uses the same places or words as the police does, but then for radically different purposes, those described above in terms of a double operation of undoing divisions and redividing (33/56). Politics thus always parasitizes on an existing police order; it needs it as material support for its subversive operations. Based on this dependency relation, we can understand that Rancière presents politics as essentially antagonistic (2000b:17).

But again, Rancière is not entirely consistent in this regard. At one point, for example, he describes politics not just in terms of a "reconfiguration of the field of experience" but also as "the production of a new field of experience" (*D*35/59). This seems to suggest that politics does not merely involve a cancellation or redivision of an existing sensible order but also - perhaps more ambitiously - the creation of a new one. In a later section (IX) we shall see how different commentators have taken issue with this specific aspect of Rancière's political theory. Still, one can conclude this issue by saying that all in all he regards the act of dividing *as such* - regardless of the specifics of the division - as the distinguishing feature of the police, as well as the *anti*-political gesture par excellence. Inversely, he presents the act of undoing divisions and redividing existing divisions as paradigmatically political gestures.[16]

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16 Another way to interpret this ambiguity is to say that insofar as Rancière presents politics as itself a division of the sensible, it concerns a very specific, paradoxical type of division: i.e. one in which all divisions are suspended. At one place he for example calls politics a "suspended form of division of the sensible" (*AD*25/39) which could be understood as a division of the sensible *in a state of suspension*. Or still, it concerns a division of the sensible whose key principle of division is non-division. Think also of the way in which Rancière opposes "political disorder" to the "police order" (*D*37/61), again suggesting a paradoxical type of order based on disorder.

These last formulations can be seen to form the core of what Rancière considers to be 'the political'. This concerns a conflict or encounter between the logic of the police and the egalitarian logic (32/56). Politics is here not understood in conventional terms as forms of governments, party politics, ideologies and so on. Instead, politics in the true sense is thought as a more general logic or operation, one that is not exclusive to politics in the narrow sense. As Rancière describes it, "the political always comes into play in questions of divisions and boundaries" (2000b:4). As such, a domestic dispute concerning gender roles can be as 'political' as a conflict between the legislative and executive branches of government over their respective powers and privileges in determining policies.

Finally, I want to briefly explain Rancière's key conceptual opposition between police and politics in terms of another key opposition: that between consensus and dissensus. These pairs of conceptual opposites can be seen to be equivalent. This can be understood in line with Rancière's theorization of the fundamental operation at the heart of a division of the sensible in terms of a process of symbolization and the double count inherent to it (see Section I). This implies a differentiation between two levels of sense: between "a sensory presentation" and "a way of making sense of it" (2010:139) or still, between 'raw' sensation and its signification or symbolic inscription.

Agreement or consensus can then be seen to refer to a situation in which there is a general coincidence or tight correspondence between the two levels of presentation and representation or, at least, in which such correspondence is posited. In this regard, Rancière says that consensus rests on the belief in "one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification" (2010:144). This constitutes the basic logic of the police or division of the sensible: the granting of specific sensibilities to specific sets of 'bodies' based on their alleged natural properties. These are then further linked, again in self-evident fashion, to specific positions and functions within the social hierarchy.

On the contrary, disagreement or dissensus refers to situations in which the levels of sensory presentation and its signification are dissociated. It thereby exposes the arbitrary, contingent nature of the police order's equations between bodies and sensibilities, cancelling out their seemingly natural self-evidence. Dissensus thus enacts a "questioning and re-working" of "the relations between sense and sense" (Rancière 2010:145) or still, it is "a specific type... [of conflict]... between *sense* and *sense*" (139), which is equated with the basic operation of politics proper. In this sense, we can understand Rancière's

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claim that "politics is first of all a battle about perceptible/sensible material" (2000b:9). [17]

V. POLITICS AS VERIFICATION, SUBJECTIFICATION AND INVENTION

In the previous two sections I explicated how politics, in its general definition as practice of equality, is too a large degree rooted conceptually in Kant's analysis of the beautiful. In the following sections, I shall continue by demonstrating how Rancière's further specifications of politics regarding the specific ways in which equality is put into practice, are either explicitly modelled on key characteristics of Kant's taste judgements or, if not explicitly stated, can be shown to bear a close resemblance to their conceptual particularities. In order of appearance, I shall look into the following key determinations of politics proper: the specific type of universality involved, i.e. one that is singular and polemic (this section, (i) and (ii)), its highly subjective character (this section, (iii)), its poetic and performative nature (Section VI and VII) and its affirmative stance toward form and appearance (Section VIII).

(i) Rancière's conceptualization of the specific type of universality involved in politics closely follows from his notion of equality (see Section II). Because equality only exists as an assumption, a hypothesis even, its factual truth is always in need of verification or demonstration - to use his terms. This is all the more so because of the counterfactual status of equality. As I already discussed (in Section II), for all his commitment to equality, Rancière himself realistically admits that throughout history, societies have been predominantly inegalitarian in nature. He also states that those considered inferior as a rule have not challenged their superiors' commands. History, in other words, speaks more in favour of a natural state of inequality with, as Citton remarks, politics being "relatively rare", "the exception, not the rule" (2009:132).

Verification or demonstration of equality is thus vital because it has to "show a result [conséquence] that is not at all apparent" (*D*49/79). The result or consequence in question is the primary contradiction at the heart of every hierarchical social order previously mentioned (Section III). As shown, such

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17   Although Rancière does not explicitly articulate this, we should not take him to plead for a return to the supposedly 'real' reality behind societies' symbolizations and fictionalizations, in an attempt to undo and correct their unequal nature. His position can perhaps be summed up best in the following way: given the inevitability for human beings to symbolize (which can be understood in Kantian transcendental terms, see earlier) the task of politics is to contest the seemingly natural, self-evident character of dominant symbolizations in an attempt to force a re-symbolization or re-fictionalization on a more equal basis.

an order can only function by presupposing that which it denies: the equality of all men. But again, although the latter might serve as logical proof of the fact that inequality can always be challenged, Rancière himself concedes that the marginalized have generally not done so.

Based on its counterfactual status, Rancière not only stresses the need for equality to be demonstrated but even claims that it only exists in or through such verifications. As he puts it, being nothing but a presupposition, equality "needs to be discerned within practices implementing it" (33/57). Equality, in other words, only exists *in actu*, in the very act of its demonstration. One could also understand this in Kantian, transcendental terms: the fact that throughout the ages people have challenged political regimes based on inequality and domination - even if this is exceptional - can only be explained if one presupposes as condition of possibility of such rebellions that the people in question considered themselves to be their masters' equals and acted on this conviction. Equality is thus always and *existentially* so "tied to" particular, local conflict situations in which individuals and groups claim their equality (39/64). It does not exist as a principle or law derived *a priori* that can serve as basis for applications in particular instances. It only exists when, as an abstract universal, it takes on the specific form, figure, name or case of a particular wrong and is thereby 'singularized' into what Rancière calls a "singular universal" (idem). And politics, as practice of equality, is the process in which those "ties" or knots between equality and particular instances of its verification are created. Rancière thus defines politics as "the art of the local and singular construction of cases of universality" (139/188).[18]

We can recognize the radically embodied, particularized mode of existence of equality as an instance of what Bosteels calls the "nominalist tendency" in Rancière's work which he specifies as follows: "the universal exists only in the singular - that is, in the plurality of particular modes, places and operations" (2009:163). Rockhill, for his part, calls equality a "*relational*

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18 It is, however, not just a case of the universal being singularized. The inverse also holds: i.e. the singular is 'universalized'. In relation to the claims to political participation by the demos in Ancient Greece - presented as first, archetypal instance of radical politics - Rancière says that they were not based on any particular characteristic or quality of its members, but merely on the "brute fact" of being born in Athens (*D*7/26). Or still, considering the common people as "undifferentiated mass" (8/27), he considers it to be based on the lack of any positive qualities. he also says that precisely because of the lack of any specific, positive attributes the common people possess liberty as their only trait or quality (27). And further, that it was on these grounds that it claimed to speak for the whole of the community, "attribut[ing] to itself as its proper lot the equality that belongs to all citizens" (8/27). As Rancière sees it, the demos "identifies its improper property with the exclusive principle of community and identifies its name... with the name of the community itself" (8-9/27). In relation to this act of identification, Žižek speaks of "the singular/excessive part of the social edifice that directly gives body to the dimension of universality" (1999:228).

universal that only exists in concrete acts of struggle rather than an abstract universal resting on a priori foundation" (2004:73, emphasis mine).

Although not explicitly theorized by Rancière, the type of universality proper to equality closely resembles that of Kant's judgements of taste. I am specifically referring to Kant's presentation of the beautiful as that which pleases universally "without concept".[19] Based on our previous explication of Kant's deduction of the notion of sensus communis (Section III), we can understand this aspect of taste judgements to concern their difference from theoretical and practical judgements. In contrast to the latter, judging beauty is not a matter of the application of a universal concept (e.g. the concept of Beauty) or the correct subsumption of a particular instance under a general rule, whether cognitive or moral. Such a procedure is inimical to the experience of beauty. As Kant puts it, "If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost" (1789/2000:101). The beauty of a particular thing can thus not be deduced from a universal, *a priori* concept of beauty, which is also to say that "there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful" (idem). Rather the reverse is the case: the claim to universality of the beautiful - Kant also speaks of "aesthetical universality" (idem) - firmly rests on particular taste judgements that are presented "*as a case of the rule* with regard to which it expects confirmation... from the consent of others" (101, emphasis mine). Hence, Kant considers judgements of taste to be "singular" (100).

We can thus detect a structural homology between politics and aesthetics with regard to the relation between the universal and particular. In both instances, the universal - equality and beauty respectively - only exists or can only be verified in particular, concrete instances - whether in protests against inequality or the experience of the beauty of a specific object - which function as instances of the general rule they themselves postulate in their singularity.

(ii) We can draw a further homology between politics' mode of universality and that of aesthetic judgements - again one that Rancière does not explicitly theorize - by looking into another important determination of political processes of verification: the fact that they necessarily take on the form of disputes or disagreements. This can be seen as another consequence of the counterfactual nature of equality mentioned earlier. This causes affirmations of equality to be necessarily controversial, contested, disputatious, scandalous even. If we already established the radically singular character of the

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19 Kant develops this aspect of judgements of taste in the 2nd and 4th considerations of judgments of taste in his "Analytic of the Beautiful" (1789/2000).

universality proper to egalitarian politics, we can thus further specify it as highly polemical (Rockhill 2004:73).

Here as well, there are close resemblances with Kant's conceptualization of judgements of taste. I already mentioned the fact that because the claim to universality inherent to judgements of beauty is not based on the application of an a priori concept of beauty that could serve as a general rule or criterion for assessing particular objects, Kant has to admit that such judgements are always contested or, as he puts it, that their universality is "often enough rejected" (1789/2000:99). This is not to say that Kant discards any claims to universal validity pertaining to experiences of beauty. For him, disputes concerning taste judgements concern only the "correct application" (idem) in specific instances of the faculty of aesthetic judgement, not the possibility of the claim to universal validity inherent to taste judgements *as such*. Hence, in cases of incorrect applications, Kant speaks of "erroneous" judgements of taste (101). But again, these errors of judgement are not to be seen as the result of wrongfully subsuming a particular object under a general concept - as in the case of cognitive judgements for example. Rather, they are caused by the subject's faulty assessment of the mental state experienced in his or her contemplation of the object.

(iii) Another key aspect of Rancière's notion of radical politics - again one that closely corresponds to a key property of Kant's judgements of taste - is that in the verification of equality, subjects play a key role - in this regard, he also speaks of dispositives and modes of subjectification. This even to the degree that processes of verification are said to only exist through such subjectification processes and vice versa: subjects are constituted through political processes of verification. Rancière explains the first relation of dependency so that verification processes necessitate "the constitution of specific subjects that take the wrong upon themselves, give it shape, invent new forms and names for it, and conduct its processing in a specific montage of *proofs*" (*D*40/65). In other words, in order for equality to be verified - and thus for there to be politics - the wrong constituted by impositions of inequality needs to be subjectified. Accordingly, Rancière speaks of a "subject of wrong" and says that the process of subjectification is identical to that of "expounding a wrong" (38/63).

But if politics is irrevocably subjective, subjectification is inversely conceived of as political through and through, constituted in and through politics. As Rancière puts it, the subject is "indissolubly" linked to "a series of operations implying the production of a new field of experience" (35/59), deriving its consistency from this series. The subject is "defined solely by the set of relations and operations in the demonstrative sequence" (59/90). In this

regard, May defines subjectification as "the active creation of a particular type of political subjectivity by those engaged in it" (2009:115). In reference to 'the poor', for example, May says that they "come to exist as an entity, as a collective subject only with the emergence of politics... it is the product of "political struggle", a "subjective emergence... that arises alongside that struggle" (idem).

There are several ways in which Rancière's subjective conception of politics or political conception of subjectivity can be seen to be highly aesthetic. First, in strictly Kantian terms, we can draw an analogy with another key specification of the type of universality proper to judgements of taste, namely their "subjective" character, which is closely connected to their a-conceptual character discussed earlier. The irreducibly subjective experience of beauty is expressed well in the following statement of Kant in which he says that in judgements of taste "I must immediately hold the object up to my feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and yet not through concepts" (1789/2000:100). This leads him to claim rather dramatically that "beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject" (103). One can detect a similar relation of dependence between equality and those attempting to prove it in political practices. In this instance also, it can be said that equality is nothing without its being experienced by a political subject.

The opposite relation of dependency - i.e. the subject being dependent on the political process of verification - also has its counterpart in Kant's theorization of the experience of beauty. As Déotte indicates, "The model for Rancière's agitator is Kant's aesthetic subject, who did not exist before his encounter with something particular" (2004:86). Or still, "The political subject does not exist before the action, just as the aesthetic subject does not exist before the work of art, since he emerges from an awareness of the communicability of his feeling" (idem).

Another aesthetic feature of processes of subjectification as Rancière conceives them - 'aesthetic' here defined in a more general, not strictly Kantian sense - is their highly creative, constructive character. We already saw how politics involves the invention of new shapes, forms and names. Rancière even goes as far as to identify invention as what is "proper" to the subject (*D*89/127), defining its political declarations in terms of "an arrangement of words, a montage of gestures, an occupation of spaces" that shares key characteristics with "an artistic form" (2007a:264). May affirms this resemblance between political and aesthetic processes when he states that it is precisely the creation "of something that did not exist before" that makes politics "irreducibly aesthetic" (2009:115). He further specifies the inventive act inherent to politics as follows: "A collective subject is produced from the

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material of a hierarchical social order - one that, like other artistic productions, creates new ways of seeing and being seen" (idem).

Rancière also specifies the essentially creative act of politics in terms of putting together things that in the existing sensible order are thought not to belong together and are therefore neatly kept apart, like an artist does in a collage or montage. Inversely, politics' inventiveness is located in its disconnecting of what is considered to be closely related. The political subject is thus characterized as somebody who "connects and disconnects different areas, regions, identities, functions and capacities" (*D*40/65) and politics is defined as "the art of warped deductions and mixed identities" (139/188).

This links up to another key feature of political subjectification: its opposition to identity claims or identification processes, which Rancière regards as key mechanisms of a police order. On the contrary, political subjectification would involve a *disidentification* of any identity markers - he also speaks of a "gap" between subject and identity (59/90, 36/60, May 2009:114). Michaud defines disidentification as a "severing of the natural and 'given' character of places, as opening of a space of freedom and emancipation, as production of a subject that is neither defined nor determined" (1997:438, my translation). He further defines the subject in terms of the "power of illimitation [and]... displacement" (434, my translation). Rancière regards this as a modus opearndi shared by both modern politics and literature, with political subjects being formed through what he calls "'literary' disincorporation" rather than imaginary identification (*PA*40).

VI. THE 'WORLD-CREATING' ACT OF POLITICS

The deeply creative nature of politics is further articulated in Rancière's conceptualization of politics as an essentially poetic, metaphoric act. Once again, we shall see how this determination is closely linked to a key characteristic of Kant's judgements of taste, this time explicitly by Rancière himself. He articulates the above claim through a critique of a distinction and hierarchy made by Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985/7) between two types of language acts (*D*55-6/85-6).[20] On the one hand, Habermas distinguishes poetic language and fictional discourse, which he specifies in terms of their "disclosive function" and "world-generating

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20 Habermas does so in criticism of Jacques Derrida's work, in the excursus to Lecture VII, Sections III & IV (1987:199 and further). The general object of Habermas' criticism is what he considers to be the levelling of the distinction between literature and philosophy, of which he considers Derrida's work to be an exemplary instance. Habermas condemns the mixing of the two as sign of a fatigued or exhausted modernity and as symptomatic of the (post) modern "aestheticization" and "spectacularization" of politics.

character", referring to their ability to open up new, fictitious realms of being. On the other hand, he distinguishes prosaic, inner-worldly, intramundane language, which refers to our normal, everyday use of language. Habermas pleads for maintaining a strict distinction between the two. Moreover, in relation to politics, Rancière holds Habermas to favour the second, "rational order of argumentation" above the first, "irrational", poetic one, stressing the need for the second to legitimate and validate itself in terms of the first (56/86).

More specifically, Habermas' claim is that poetic language acts lack illocutionary force and that because of this, their claims to validity are "bracketed" (1987:201). His plea for a clear separation and hierarchy between the two language acts concerned can further be seen as part of his well known conception of politics as a dialogic exchange in which the rationality of the arguments made serves as guiding criterion for consensus building (1981/7). Politics is here conceptualized as an essentially argumentative process, a weighing of the logical validity of different claims.

Against this, Rancière first holds that some fundamental issues need to be addressed before such exchange of arguments can run its normal course, issues that concern the division of the sensible and are hence held to be more deeply and properly political. Secondly, he argues that such deeper issues can only be addressed through an aestheticized understanding of politics, in particular one that affirms politics as an essentially poetic, world creating practice. With this, Rancière rejects Habermas' hygienic distinction between aesthetic and political discourse.

With the first claim, Rancière takes aim at some of the non-theorized preconditions of Habermasian-style consensus politics. It concerns matters that are usually determined prior to the argumentative process which, as he maintains, in fact constitute the real subject of political discussion and if not addressed, result in what he calls an "exclusive consensus" (*D*60/91). Jean-Louis Déotte summarizes this objection to Habermas' consensus model of politics as follows: "there can only be debate between those whose positions are known from the start, in a social distribution that has already determined those who count and those who do not" (2004:78). As such, Habermas' political model is found wanting because it "does not explain how those who do not count are going to gain access to the public forum where the debate takes place, how conflicts other than the probable litigation can appear, how the improbable can occur" (79).

What Rancière considers to be absent from the Habermasian dialogic process is, first, what he considers to be one of the primary objects of political disputes: the question of "what understanding language implies" (*D*48/77). He takes Habermas' model to presuppose an agreement among social actors

on "a *telos* of mutual understanding" (idem). He himself, however, considers such "assumption of understanding... [to be] in dispute" (57/87) in properly political conflict situations, there being a "gap between two accepted meanings of 'to understand'" (44/72). We could say that it here concerns a disagreement between two notions of what constitutes good, convincing arguments, two sets of standards, modes or criteria for argumentation, with the exclusive validity of one being contested. As a result, Rancière considers every argumentative situation to be split or divided into two - at least, if it is a properly political one. This makes politics all but an unproblematic affair of exchanging and weighing different arguments based on their consistency and merit. It first concerns addressing disagreements on what is understood to constitute a valid argument or, even more fundamentally, on the value of rational argumentation as such.[21]

This issue is extremely consequential because it determines to a large degree who is regarded as legitimate discussion party to political deliberation processes. For Rancière, it decides whether "the subjects who count in the interlocution 'are' or 'are not', whether they are speaking or just making a noise" (50/79). For this reason, politics cannot simply be about searching for an "agreement between partners on the optimal allocation of parts" (44/72). Which populations groups are considered to be legitimate discussion partners to begin with is always contested in truly political situations. Politics proper thus concerns a fundamental disagreement on the "existence of parties as parties" (26/48). Due to the division of the sensible at the heart of every social order, there are always groups in society that are either excluded from the Habermasian process of political discourse or are only allowed to play a secondary, marginal role.

Apart from the mode of discourse of political processes and the included parties, Rancière considers some other fundamental matters to be in dispute in political situations. These include the object of the dispute - not only what the latter is, but even *that* there is one to begin with - and the place where the dispute is to be addressed. Of all these, he says that they "are themselves in dispute and must in the first instance be tested" (55/85). If not, they preempt political processes by excluding certain ways of speaking, groups, topics or public fora from the deliberation process. For Rancière, fundamental disagreement on one or more of these aspects - that is, whether there is a

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21 Habermas' discourse ethics has often been criticized on these grounds. His emphasis on rational debate has for example been dismissed as based on typically 'Western', 'male' prejudice. Think for example of the influential work of Iris Marion Young. Through a critique of the various exclusions in Habermasian-style consensus politics, she pleads for recognition and validation of multiple forms and modes of communicative interaction in deliberative politics, against the supremacy of Western or masculine forms (1996).

dispute, what it consists of, who is allowed to participate in it, how it is to be discussed and where such deliberation is to take place - is what makes a situation properly political or, as he says, makes that there is effectively something to discuss (idem).

Rancière's criticism, in sum, is thus that because all these aspects are excluded from what Habermas calls the 'ideal speech situation' in which consensus building is to take place - a situation that is actually "quite exceptional", as Déotte remarks (2004:78) - he completely bypasses the truly political dimension of collective decision-making. In line with this, Rancière considers the guiding criterion for political processes not to be that of the most rational argument, at least not in the first instance or most importantly. Crucial, rather, is "the optimal way [in which the] partition [of the sensible] is staged" (*D*44/72). In other words, what needs to be made visible are the sensible divisions that preempt collective decision-making processes by predetermining the fundamental aspects of a properly political dispute.

I now turn to the second claim made by Rancière in criticism of Habermas which, as already said, draws out the consequences of his first point for politics as practice. The core argument here is that if it is so that fundamental issues are overlooked in mainstream political processes, the only option for those disadvantaged by this, is to "simultaneously produce both the argument and the situation in which it is to be understood, the object of discussion and the world in which it features as an object" (57/87). Just as a poem, novel or art work brings to life a world that features hitherto unrecognized forms of sensibility, the excluded too have to create a world for themselves where their voices and ways of speaking are fully recognized, where their issues are considered to be valid and profound ones and where the fora in which these issues are discussed are regarded as appropriate. As Rancière puts it: they have to enact "the world where [their] argument can be received and have an impact" (56/86). Against Habermas' claim that normal, intra-worldly argumentation should be taken as exclusive guideline for political processes, he thus argues that politics proper concerns a prior "argument about the very existence of such a world" (idem).[22]

In this regard, Déotte draws a parallel between the "unheard-of work of art" and the "improbable political action" (2004:85). In their struggle "against

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22 Although Rancière hereby inverts the hierarchy between argumentative and poetic language acts, he does not say that the first plays no role whatsoever in politics. Rather, politics is said to involve "acts that are at once argumentative and poetic" and is defined as "the nexus of a logical utterance and an aesthetic manifestation" (*D*59/90). He also presents the two types of language acts as two modes of political "invention", the one logical, the other aesthetic (89/127). He for instance says that "The argument linking two ideas and the metaphor revealing a thing in another thing have always been in community" (56/87), consequently speaking of a "community of the argumentative and metaphoric capacity" (60/91).

established opinion and statistics", both have to create their own communication, arouse an audience and "sensitize" public opinion (idem). He also says that they "cannot appear... in a pre-existing public forum; [but]... must invent their own site... the scene of this exhibition" (idem).

In line with its world-creating capacities, Rancière also likens politics with "mise en scène" (D55/85) and "dramaturgy" (88/127), with an activity that not only involves the setting of a stage but also the choice of actors, plot, style and discourse of acting. This aspect of his conceptualization of politics has been remarked upon by several commentators. Referring to Rancière's "theatrical conception of political agency", Yves Citton says that political subjects are conceived as "actors" doing "gestures" on a "stage" (2009:128-130). Peter Hallward, for his part, characterizes Rancière's notion of politics as essentially "theatrocratic" (2006).[23]

One of the consequences of politics' world-creating dimension is that politics proper is never a "simple dialogue" (D48/77). This is another criticism by Rancière of Habermas' favouring of person-to-person communication between parties involved in political discussion. Due to its direct, unmediated character, such communication is considered to be most authentic by Habermas. On the contrary, Rancière holds that political disputes - again, insofar as they are properly political - cannot but take the form of a monologue, if only for the basic fact that one or more parties are not yet recognized by the established order as appropriate, worthy, capable, legitimate discussion partners. As Déotte phrases it: "those who speak out 'politically' do not exist politically before this act of speaking out" (2004:79). Politics proper thus escapes the normal rules of dialogical encounters, involving rather "'abnormal' communication situations", which Rancière identifies as another common feature between politics and modern art (D56,86).[24]

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23 Hallward distinguishes seven ways in which Rancière's conception of equality can be regarded as "theatrocratic": because it is spectacular, artificial, privileges multiplicity over unity, is disruptive, contingent, tends towards improvisation and operates within a liminal configuration (2006:116-122).

24 Apart from the monologic mode of politics proper, Rancière also lists some other 'abnormal' features. These include the speaking in the third person and the "multiplication of persons" (D47-8/76-7). In this regard, he says that "Politics' penchant for dialogue has more to do with literary heterology, with its utterances stolen and tossed backs at their authors and its play on the first and third person" (59/90). Consequently, he also speaks of "the heterological mode of political subjectification" (126/173). One of the key examples here is the way in which the revolting students during May '68 used the slogan "we are all German Jews" in response to police crack-downs. The heterological aspect is said to consist in the appropriation of a stigmatizing phrase of the adversary.

VII. THE PRACTICE OF 'AS IF'

Rancière explicitly connects the world-creating dimension of properly political gestures to Kant's theorization of the "requirement of universality" (58/88) inherent to judgements of taste.[25] As explained earlier, this refers to the contention that the beholder of beauty holds that every other person will judge the object or representation in question in the same way. At least, as Kant states, if this person applies her faculties correctly. In this regard, we saw that he holds that in judging beauty, the subject believes to speak with a universal voice. Such conviction is held despite the lack of any objective grounds for it. Hence, its merely subjective status or its existence as an idea only.

A similar claim can be seen to be made in situations in which the marginalized, in defying the existing order, speak and act as capable subjects endowed with the same sensory properties deemed necessary for political participation. By doing so, they pretend that a "common world" for argumentation exists (*D*52/81). They "posit" the existence of such a world (53/82) and act as if they are equal to those who regard them as inferior.

In this regard, Rancière also speaks of "the practice of the *as if*" (90/128), which again affirms the highly performative nature of politics, as well as the central role of fiction. Robson explains this practice in terms of "the constitutive possibilities of a kind of fiction" (2005:90). As Déotte comments on this aspect of his work, "it is the phrase... that literally institutes a universe which, without it, would never have existed", constituting "an audience, a destination, a meaning, a referent, all emerging from the fact of this phrase" (2004:79). And further: "The political order, instituted by such phrases and sentences, is a purely artificial device,... a product made by the apparatus and the industry of the symbolic" (idem).

Instead of pretending as if a common world of argumentation exists, Rancière also speaks of "instituting" or "opening up" an aesthetic-political community (*D*27/49,90/128). The terms 'world' and 'community' are used quite interchangeably in his work. He for instance also speaks of "worlds of community" (58/89). The key properties of such community are defined on the basis of the logical feature of taste judgements mentioned above. That is to say, political community is conceived of as an "aesthetic community [that], in Kantian fashion... demands the consent of the very person who does not acknowledge it" (90/128). Or still, formulated in terms of the 'practice of the as if', it concerns "a kind of community of sense experience that works on the mode of assumption, of the *as if* that includes those who are not included by

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25   The relevant "moments" in Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" are the 2nd one, where the beautiful is determined as "that which pleases universally" and the 4th moment where it is determined as "the object of a necessary satisfaction".

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revealing a mode of existence of sense experience that has eluded the allocation of parties and lots" (58/88). The mode of sensory existence referred to - Rancière also speaks of a "virtual or due [exigée] community of sense experience" (idem) - corresponds to that of *sensus communis* which, as explained in Section III, functions as analogue to the political community of equals. It is based on this similarity between radical politics and Kantian aesthetics - that forms one of the most explicit connections made by Rancière between politics and aesthetics in *Disagreement* - that he claims that politics in the modern age is "aesthetic in principle" (idem).

The affirmation of an aesthetico-political community based on a common or shared sense - as opposed to the 'divided sense' typical of hierarchical police orders - is not to be understood as an endorsement of a consensus model of politics. As Rancière emphasizes, the adjective 'common' is not to be taken to mean 'consensual' (58/89) and a politico-aesthetic community is not to be mistaken with a "community in which everyone is in agreement" (*AD*37/52), quite the opposite even. The reason for this is the already mentioned fact that the affirmation of equality by aesthetic-political communities goes diametrically against the predominant reality of, and belief in the inequality of human beings and the hierarchical social order legitimated by it (as we saw earlier). As he puts it succinctly: "A political community is not the realization of a common essence or the essence of the common. It is *the sharing of what is not given as being-in-common*" (*D*138/186, emphasis mine). In this regard, Rancière also speaks of a "community that only exists through and for the conflict, a community based on the conflict over the very existence of something in common between those who have a part and those who have none" (35/59).

The notion of common sense is thus rather something of the order of what we defined earlier as dissensus or disagreement. Hence the counterintuitive and seemingly paradoxical combinations in Rancière's work between the key couples of opposites: common sense/divided sense and consensus/dissensus. He speaks of "common/litigious worlds" (58/89), "worlds of community that are worlds of dissension" (idem) or "disagreement" (60/91), "worlds of litigious community" (90/129), "dissensual community" (2009:59), "dissensual 'common sense'" (2010:139).[26]

A final aspect of Rancière's conception of politics as the creation of aesthetic worlds or communities that needs to be considered is that of its

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26   In the same way, Rancière's notion of "common language" has to be understood as a highly polemical concept being defined as "the political refusal of the policing logic of separate idioms" (2000b:13).

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efficacy. In other words, how politics so conceived can be thought to be able to effect changes in the existing police order? This especially in light of the fact that Rancière presents the two as eternal archenemies and their conflict as infinite, as we saw previously. It might perhaps come as no surprise that Rancière rules out any final solution or settlement to the conflict between police and politics and the wrong on which it is based. As he states, the wrong "cannot be regulated/settled [se régler]" (*D*39/64), for instance in the form of compromises reached through a dialogue between the involved parties and their interests.[27] The three reasons given for this are first, the fact that the "subjects [which] a political wrong sets in motion are... subjects whose very existence is the mode of manifestation of the wrong"; second, the infinite nature of the verification of equality and third, the principled resistance of the police against this verification (idem).

For all this, Rancière does not consider the 'wrong' to be "untreatable" (idem). He does believe that it can be "treated/processed [se traiter]" (idem) through verification and subjectification processes which "give it [i.e. the wrong] substance [faire consister] as an alterable relationship between the parties, indeed as a shift in the playing field" (64). In other words, to merely enable the part without part to manifest itself and acquire a visibility and consistency in a sensible order where it is treated as non-existent, invisible and inconsistent, even if the latter remains contested by the powers that be, is said to constitute a step in the direction of modifying this order. As Rancière explains it, in acts of political subjectification, "the equality of speaking beings and the distribution of social bodies are gauged in relation to each other [se mesurent l'un à l'autre], and this gauge has an effect on the distribution itself" (39-40/64). So again, the mere presentation of that which is thought to be inferior *as equal*, has the effect of disrupting and radically questioning the bases of attribution of inferiority or inequality.

Another way to understand this all in all somewhat obscure line of argument, is to link it to another of Rancière's claims with regard to politics as the formation of worlds and communities through the 'practice of the as if', namely that it forces an order based on a hierarchical division of the sensible into a "performative contradiction" (53/83). Politics is said to do so, because by "addressing an interlocutor who does not acknowledge the interlocutory situation", one "behaves as though it were being performed in a community whose nonexistence it at the same time demonstrates" (89-90/128). The existing order is thus forced to argue with those whom it considers incapable of arguing, thereby contradicting, in practice at least, its own order of inequality,

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27 About such "accommodations" achieved through political negotiations, May says that for Rancière it is not there "where the politics lies" (2009:113).

inversely forcing it to presuppose the equality of those which it considers to be inferior.

Despite all this, Rancière-style radical politics seem to offer little guarantee of success. As May emphasizes, one must separate the "existence of politics" from its "effectiveness" because of the lack of any guarantee of it leading to change (2009:116).[28]

VIII. CONFIRMING THE APPEARANCE

One last aesthetic feature of Rancière's notion of radical politics is its affirmative stance towards appearance and form. Rancièe articulates this aspect through a critique of what he calls "metapolitics" (*D*81-93/118-31). The latter is presented as one of the three major ways in which political philosophy in the Western tradition has suppressed the "difference from itself that politics consists of", which refers to the irremediable division between the two logics of the police and politics proper (63/97, 64-5/99-100).[29]

Metapolitics is alleged to suppress politics by identifying a region of life beyond the sphere of politics - or, at least, that which is said to falsely presents itself as politics - where the real social struggles are waged. For Karl Marx - Rancière's key theoretical reference - this more fundamental reality is the socio-economic sphere, with its different classes and the struggles between them. In its most simplified version, the metapolitical nature of Marxism can be seen to rest on its infamous conceptual distinction between society's infrastructure and superstructure. Within this model, the infrastructure - consisting of the so-called mode of production - is considered to constitute the primary level of society, the one that matters most when it comes to creating a world of material equality and full human emancipation and, as such, the most crucial level of contestation, intervention and transformation. In contrast, the superstructure - which includes, for example, the state and the legal system - is thought to be an epiphenomenon and byproduct of society's socio-economic

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28   About the possibility of there being some sort of accommodation at the end of the political process, May says that "the accommodation will not be something offered to the dēmos by the powers that be", but imposed on the latter by the former (2009:113).

29   The two other major ways in which politics is suppressed in Western thought distinguished by Ranière are what he calls archipolitics and parapolitics, associated with the political thought of Plato and Aristotle (as well as Thomas Hobbes) respectively. Archipolitics - with Plato's *Republic* and his attacks on democracy as main references - is reproached for completely suppressing politics (*D*65-70/100-5). Parapolitics for its part (70-81/105-18) is said to acknowledge - albeit reluctantly - the specificity of democratic politics and the reason for its historical existence, only to relegate it to an inferior place in the hierarchical order of forms of government. One can think here of the place of democracy in Aristotle's cyclical model of different types of government.

base. It is thought to exist only as a ploy by those structurally advantaged by the unequal organisation of the means of production to divert attention from this reality, manage some of its worst effects, placate the disadvantaged and, as such, preempt any attempts at radical economic change. On these bases, Marxian metapolitics denounces and relentlessly exposes what it perceives to be the irremediable falsehood of existing political structures and processes, their existence as a shadow theatre that is wholly inadequate in addressing the real issues and conflicts situated at a more fundamental economic level.

Rancière opposes such metapolitical conception of politics. He presents it as one of two main ways to interpret and relate practically to the difference between the form and content of politics, between its appearance and alleged substance or substrate - to use metapolitical terms -, the other one being presented as the properly political one (87/125). In order to make this distinction clear, he uses the example of human rights as historically pronounced in texts such as the "Declarations of the Right of Man and Citizen", written in 1793. He focuses more specifically on the obvious contrast between the equality of all men proclaimed in such politico-legal documents, on the one hand, and the blatant inequality of 'real' men on the other hand. That is, the fact that a lot of people - the majority even - are not equally capable of exercising the rights attributed to them, which thus largely remain dead letter on paper. In this regard, Rancière also speaks of the difference of the people with itself, pointing to "the difference between man and the citizen, the suffering-working people and the sovereign people" (87/125).

It is not difficult to imagine metapolitical critiques of such political declarations. They will be dismissed for being merely formal, well-sounding rhetorics, beautiful appearances that act like smokescreens designed to mask and divert attention from the ugly reality of material inequality and socio-economic injustices, as well as the lack of any serious intentions on the part of the ruling classes to make substantial attempts to put a stop to them.

Against this, Rancière holds that the properly political approach towards such political declarations is not to play the "metapolitical game of appearance and its denial [démenti]" (90/128) but, on the contrary, to "confirm" their appearance (88/126). This is based on his view of political forms and legal declarations as constituting "an effective mode of appearance of the people, the minimum of equality that is inscribed in the field of common experience" (87-8/126). In other words, no matter how "fragile and fleeting" political texts such as the Declaration of Human Rights are, Rancière holds them to be a "sphere of appearance of the demos", "an element of the… power of the people" (88/126). For this reason, the discrepancy between political forms and reality are not to be treated as "a scandal to be deplored" but, instead, as a "primary condition of the exercise of politics" (87/125). The

task of politics proper then is to "extend" this sphere of appearance, to "maximize" (idem) and "effectuate" (89/127) its power.

In *On the Shores of Politics* (1990/2007:46-7), Rancière presents the contradiction between the law and reality in terms of the major and minor of a syllogism. The major consists of that which the law declares in general terms - in the case of human rights, for instance, that all men are equal. The minor, for its part, would contain particular, existing rules and practices that go against what is affirmed in the major - e.g. the fact that voting rights only apply to property owners. In line with the previous, the properly political approach towards this syllogism for Rancière is not - as metapolitics would have it - to conclude that the major is inherently false, nothing but a "pure facade destined to hide the reality of inequality", as Michaud puts it (1997:432, translation mine). Instead, it is to "start up the polemic demand to change the minor, to change practices *by holding the law to its word* [en prenant au mot la loi]" (idem, translation and emphasis mine).

In short, for Rancière, the conceptual and strategic error of metapolitics is that it interprets "the forms of the democratic gap as symptoms of untruth (*D*91/129). For him, on the contrary, it is a matter of "interpreting, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the demos exists and a place where it doesn't" (88/126). Politics proper thus involves not allowing oneself to be distracted by the betrayal in reality of the equality proclaimed by legal or political declarations a strategic affirmation. Rather, it consists of taking these declarations at their word, to stick to their letter, using them as anchor points and levers to enforce a more maximal realization, to extend the scope and depth of their application.

This positive way of relating to the form and appearance of politics - surprising perhaps for a thinker with Marxian roots - can be seen as another key instance of Rancière's aesthetic determination of politics. Michaud for example presents the political strategy of confirming the appearance - which he explains in terms of "the necessity of a poetic-democratic virtue susceptible of 'assuming the irreality of representation'" - as one of the incidences of the "aesthetic theme" in Rancière's work (1997:433).

IX. RANCIÈRE'S 'SPECULATIVE LEFTISM' AND OTHER CRITICISMS

We now have a good understanding of Rancière's key claim of an aesthetics at the heart of politics. In the next chapter, I shall explain why he holds the inverse to be also true: i.e. that there is a politics at the core of aesthetics. To conclude our exposition on the aesthetics of politics - which is important for my critical evaluation of the politics of aesthetics in the chapters that follow - I

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shall point to a number of important criticisms of Rancière's theory of politics. The relevance of these criticisms for the general aims of this study will become clear in later chapters.

In this section, I shall offer an overview of some influential points of critique made by commentators. They are mentioned here to prevent an uncritical reception of Rancière's political thought, while also allowing for a still deeper and detailed understanding of it. In the following, final section, I shall develop a criticism of my own, focused specifically on the aesthetic dimension of Rancière's theory of radical politics.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, a lot of commentators have taken issue with Rancière's key conceptual opposition between politics and the police. Bruno Bosteels, for one, has reproached him for committing an error here that he at one point himself denounced as "speculative [or also: 'pure'] leftism" (2009:167). This term was originally coined by Lenin (1921/65) in reference to theories based on a "false dialectic of... false oppositions", as opposed to "an all-round consideration of relationships in their concrete development" (Bosteels 2009:168). By basing his political theory on a rather crude dualism, Bosteels accuses Rancière of going against his own advice to speculative leftist theories "to find the knotty point between power and resistance, between power and non-power, between the state and the plebs" and thereby avoid "these dualisms... [to] fall into the trap of... a Manichean scheme that is as radical and profound as it is inoperative" (169).[30]

Related to this, Peter Hallward (2006:128) has criticized what he perceives to be Rancière's all or nothing thinking, referring to the way in which politics is presented as a clear-cut conflict between those who are part of the police order and those who don't. Rancière is reproached for thereby underestimating the key role in the reproduction of a social order played by those who have a minimal part in it. Hallward argues that small as the latter's part might be, or rather: *precisely because* of being so, these groups have the most to loose in

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30 Bosteels, however, points to instances in *Disagreement* where the opposition between politics and the police is less hard and more confused. He mentions three such cases: the fact that "the police is never identified without rest with the state apparatus", a differentiation in degrees of police (i.e. better or worse ones) and Rancière's insistence "on the need of a binding, an encounter, or an intertwinement between both logics" in order for politics to be able to change anything at all (2009:169). The latter would suggest the necessity of "an inscription or verification of an effect of politics back upon the police" (170).

Gabriel Rockhill for his part argues that in Rancière's later works (which include his works on aesthetics) the opposition between politics and the police has softened somewhat. While in *Disagreement* for instance, the police order is identified with the division of the sensible and politics with its redivision, in later writings, politics would be presented as *itself* a division of the sensible and would thus, in Rancière's earlier terms, have to be regarded as police (2009:199).

relative terms, which makes them an extremely conservative force in society, all but ready to demand a radical overhaul of the existing order.[31]

Linking up to the latter, and further elaborating the perceived "purism" of Rancière's account of politics, Yves Michaud has criticized it for its "excessive and radical valorisation of democratic purity and angelic confidence in the purity of the poor", as well as for holding "some illusions about the virtue that dispossession confers on the dispossessed" (1997:445, translation mine). As he puts it bluntly: "proletarians can also sometimes be... 'hideous, vulgar and malicious' [affreux, sales et méchants]" (idem). The alleged naiveness of Rancière in these matters could then be seen as flip side of his too pessimistic evaluation and radical dismissal of existing social orders.

Other commentators have struggled with another aspect of the stark opposition between politics and the police, namely the presupposition of a seemingly natural state of domination and the resulting problem of conceiving the possibility and feasibility of democratic politics on this basis (see Section II). Jean-Luc Nancy for example has argued that Rancière "believes, in certain instances and in spite of himself, in some archeo-political 'nature'" based on inequality and domination (2009:86). For him, this begs the question as to the "reason for the irruption or invention of democracy" (87, see also Michaud 1997:427).

Critics have also taken issue with what one could see as a consequence of taking inequality to be the original and dominant setting of society: Rancière's presentation of democratic politics as a rather rare, exceptional occurrence. On this basis, Slavoj Žižek has criticized Rancière for propagating a marginalist politics based on a "logic of momentary outbursts of an 'impossible' radical politicization that contains the seeds of its own failure and has to recede in the face of the existing Order" (1999:232). Žižek here detects an essentially "Kantian opposition between the constituted order of objective reality and the Idea of Freedom that can function only as a regulative point of reference, since it is never ontologically fully actualized" (233). What Rancière would not be able to conceive, according to him, is "how the police... itself already relies on a series of disavowed/misrecognized political acts, how its founding gesture is political" (234). This would then blur and deconstruct the neat opposition between politics and police.

More on a practical level, Peter Hallward has criticized Rancière's theorization of politics as a rare, ephemeral phenomenon for its strategic

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31 Somewhat accommodating this aspect of Rancière's work, Todd May suggests a more differential way of conceptualizing inclusion and exclusion within the division of the sensible, allowing groups to be excluded in some ways, yet included in others, and all this to different degrees (2009:112). In this regard, May for instance distinguishes between economic, racial, gender, psychological and sociological categories of in/exclusion.

weaknesses. It is reproached for leaving little place, if any, for establishing what he calls "strategic continuity" and "the development of stable if not bureaucratic means of organization" (2006:123). For Rancière, the latter would have to be dismissed as betrayals of the authentic irruption of politics and a regrettable, yet inevitable regression toward self-policing. For Hallward, this makes it uncertain how Rancière-style radical politics can force improvements - however incremental - of the existing order. Organisational continuity would also be hampered by what Hallward considers to be Rancière's essentially individualistic model of emancipation, with social relations or mediation being perceived as "irredeemably contaminated by mastery and the social 'weight' of domination" (126).

Another strategically-oriented criticism by Hallward concerns the suitability of Rancièrean politics to effect radical changes within the current, "liberal-constitutional" order (124), specifically in view of what he sees as its high tolerance for disruptions and transgressions. Hallward especially considers the strongly visual nature of Rancièrian politics, as well as its "embrace [of] the rhetoric of mobility and liminality", to make it rather harmless and even complicit with a society driven by the spectacle and "newly mobile, 'fragmentary'' post-Taylorist forms of production" (125). Based on this and his previous criticism, Hallward reaches a damning verdict on Rancière's account of democracy. He states that it might turn out to be rather "inconsequential" (128) and risks to be confined to the "'unsubstantial kingdom of the imagination'" (129).[32] In line with his emphasis on the theatrocratic nature of Rancièrean politics mentioned earlier, he charges that it "encourage[s] us to do little more than 'play at' politics" (128).[33]

Finally, Rancière has also been criticized for the methodological approach adopted in *Disagreement*, a criticism that also relates to the one focused on Rancière's assumedly non-dialectic, static theorization of the opposition between politics and the police. Bosteels especially takes issue with the way in which Rancière posits the existence of an eternal, invariant essence of politics that is largely unaffected by the workings of history. The latter seem to be limited to Rancière's presentation of the three dominant ways in which politics proper is suppressed in Western philosophy, with metapolitics constituting the modern variety. Of this, Bosteels says that "in the last instance, history only seems to determine the successive eras of the covering up of an invariant form of politics (2009:174). He considers such an ahistorical, essentialist approach

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32 Hallward here quotes Friedrich von Schiller (1794).

33 Hallward himself hints at a more dialectical model of radical politics when he asks whether "It may be... that any such innovative blurring can only continue, in the domain of politics and art, if it is illuminated by a decisive commitment that is itself organized, unequivocal, categorical and combative" (2006:129).

to be an "anomaly" and "point of exception" in Rancière's work that, according to him, is mostly characterized by a strong "nominalist tendency" (163). Central to the latter - and contrary to Rancière's general approach in his works on political proper - would be the insight that "the universal exists only in the singular..., in the plurality of particular modes, places and operations" (163).[34]

X. IT'S THE DIVISION OF THE SENSIBLE, STUPID! OR IS IT?

Most of the critiques listed do not engage with what I have highlighted as one of the most unique aspects of Rancière's theory of radical politics: its intricate analogies to aesthetics, especially its Kantian formulation. As demonstrated, the latter plays a key role in the conceptualization of not only the foundational operation at the root of every social (police) order, but also of the radical, democratic resistance to this, as articulated by his notions of the division of the sensible and presupposition of equality respectively. One could even regard this turn to aesthetics as trademark of Rancière's particular brand of post-Marxian theorization of politics.

Of the objections mentioned, only some of those levelled take on the highly aesthetic nature of Rancière's model of politics. Think of his concerns with the strategic downside of Rancière's insistence on the sporadic, intermittent, mobile, liminal, rare, ephemeral and improvisational qualities of radical politics - all qualities that could be regarded as characteristic of (post) modern avant-garde art. Apart from having crippling organisational effects, Hallward also seems to suggest that these aesthetic qualities condemn Rancièrian politics "to a... dialectic of dependence, provocation and exhaustion" (2006:123) similar to the one in which successive artistic avant-gardes are regarded to have been trapped historically.

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34 Interestingly, Bosteels considers Rancière's work on aesthetics and art to be most exemplary for this nominalism because - as we shall see in Chapter 2 - no essence of art is posited, merely the existence of a plurality of historical regimes of art (2009:164). In this sense, he finds Rancière's approach to politics and art to be "asymmetrical", "deeply unequal", "polar opposites" (162). Bosteels himself posits "the question of the historicity of thought" as central... for "think[ing] today under the condition of certain transformations in art or in politics" (174).

Against Bosteels' critique, one could argue that there does seem to be a historical specificity to what Rancière considers to be politics proper. It seems to hold especially, although not exclusively, in the modern, democratic age. For Rancière, this is so because of a typical feature of the modern age, namely, the general societal state of disorder, which we shall expound upon in Chapter Two. This refers to a situation in which human nature is 'lost' and no longer in sync with - and thus no longer unproblematically legitimating - the social order. Admittedly, this point is mainly developed in his later works on aesthetics.

For my part, I shall engage with the two main instances of Rancière's aestheticization of politics mentioned above: (i) his claim that every social order is primarily a sensible, aesthetic order, to which it owes its most fundamental inequalities and injustices and (ii) the consequent claim that radical politics most fundamentally involves the overthrow and revolutionizing of existing sensible co-ordinates.

(i) With regard to the first, one can start by noting that by earmarking the sensible realm as the scene of a primary division on which a social order is founded, Rancière himself seems to offer a variation of what he denounces as metapolitics. As we saw, he considers this to be one of the three dominant ways in which politics proper has been repressed in Western political thought (see Section VIII). Despite Rancière's critique of metapolitics and its most important instance, Marxism, in particular, one could easily schematize his account of the division of the sensible in typically Marxian terms. Sensible divisions can be seen to from the base or infrastructure of a social order and what is conventionally thought to constitute politics - i.e. party politics, forms of government, etc. - as superstructure. Further, a hierarchy between these two levels can be detected with conventional politics as a secondary, epiphenomenal realm constructed on the foundation of a division of the sensible conceived as transcendental foundation of the first. The division of the sensible thus defines the conditions of possibility of conventional politics, set its basic co-ordinates and to determine, for instance, what spheres of life are spontaneously perceived as political or which population groups are considered to be naturally endowed with capacities presumed to be necessary for political participation.

In this sense, the difference between Rancière's political theory and Marxism is not so much that the latter is metapolitical and the former not. It rather concerns different accounts of what constitutes the metapolitical level or '*urscene*' of politics: i.e. modes of sensibility for Rancière, modes of material production for Marxism. Their diagnoses, however, of the fundamental problem of the metapolitical realm is similar, namely, that it is subject to an unfounded, unequal division and hierarchization of human beings into different classes or categories of people. In the case of Marxism, it most importantly concerns the division between those who own the means of production and those who don't and the resulting division of labour. For Rancière, the most fundamental class division takes place on the level of the sensible, with regard to people's assumed time and space constraints and sensible capacities.

One can question the primacy awarded by Rancière to the aesthetic with regard to the foundational injustices of a social order. It implies that conflicts over control of the means of material production - undoubtedly a

fundamental determinant of inequality and domination in human societies - have to be regarded as derivative, secondary manifestations of deeper, sensible divisions. In this scenario, the ultimate foundations of capitalist exploitation - or political oppression for that matter - have to be sought in an unequal, hierarchical ordering of human beings based on their spatiotemporal co-ordinates and sensible capabilities. One can think, for example, of decisions with regard to whose 'bodies' are naturally suited to manual labour as opposed to mental labour, or the earmarking of the workplace as a private space.

To question the aesthetic roots of political-economic inequalities and injustices is, however, not simply to endorse what would undoubtedly be the orthodox Marxist, knee-jerk response to Rancière's political theory. That is, the reaffirmation of the primacy of man's material concerns and the ensuing struggles on the level of economic production in the founding and formation of a social order. And further, on this basis, the exposure of Rancière's sensible divisions and classifications as second-order legitimizations invented to maintain the more primary, unequal distributions of material wealth in society.[35]

Undoubtedly, one of the merits of Rancière's political theory is its heterodoxy in this regard. That is, the way in which it exposes a source of inequality and domination that does not simply reduce human affairs to its most base, materialistic interests without, inversely, conceiving of politics as a battle between abstract ideas and beliefs, as idealist political theories do. In contrast to the latter, one could characterize Rancière's division of the sensible as 'materialist' in the sense that it fundamentally concerns perceptual conditions of human existence: i.e. time and space constraints, perception. My concern, however, is that Rancière's political theory errs in the opposite direction as orthodox Marxism by propagating a kind of *aesthetic reductionism* that threatens to downplay the importance of very real, socio-economic determinants of society's structures and conflicts.

To be sure, Rancière's radical move away from orthodox materialist explanations is undoubtedly driven by the felt need to offer an antidote against some of the economic reductionist excesses they have all too often let to. A neglect of economic matters and attempts at conceptualizing revolutionary politics on other than economistic grounds is also commonly regarded as a shared characteristic of many post-Marxist thinkers (Sharpe 2004, Žižek 2002, 1999). In Rancière's case, (Kantian) aesthetics can be seen to provide the alternative base for theorizing the political outside the straightjacket of

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35 One could even imagine Nietzschean, genealogical accounts of this process, with those who established their material wealth through the exertion of sheer force, after a while started to attribute their economic power to their superior sensible properties in an effort to make it seem 'natural' and justified.

Marxian political economy. In this regard, it might even be found to be significant that Rancière turns to a pre-Marxist, idealist thinker such as Kant or, as we will see in the next chapter, an early romanticist like Friedrich von Schiller. Still, if emphasis is placed exclusively on the sensible, it threatens to fall into the same trap as orthodox Marxist economism by merely exchanging the reductionist limitations of the latter with those of a new orthodoxy: no longer that of political economy but of political aesthetics.

Against this, it is perhaps more productive to conceive of the aesthetic and socio-economic realms not so much as two spheres of human life competing for metapolitical supremacy, but rather as irreducibly entangled with one another, as both determining and determined by the other.[36]

XI. THE BATTLE FOR SENSORY LIBERATION

(ii) Rancière's tendency to posit the division of the sensible as meta-foundation of society and ultimate source of its inequalities has some further problematic consequences on his conceptualization of the nature of radical, egalitarian politics. If one takes the most fundamental division of humanity to be aesthetic in nature - and not material or economic as Marxism has it -, this implies that also the struggle for equality has to be waged most importantly on the level of sensible existence. As Rancière puts it succinctly: "Politics is first of all a battle about perceptible material" (2000b:9). In other words, if one considers existing society with its hierarchies and relations of domination be produced and reproduced in the first instance in the sensory realm, a revolution of the latter, i.e. an *aesthetic* revolution, is regarded as primary.

Such a view implies that conflicts over ownership of the mode of production for example are not most fundamental in establishing equality and achieving emancipation, but only secondary manifestations of more primary conflicts over modes of sensibility, over which groups of people have which capabilities and time or are placed - better or worse - to perform certain

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36 This is not to say that they necessarily or always mutually reinforce one another, with material relations of inequality strengthening aesthetic ones and vice versa. They could also be seen to contradict and constrain one another.

functions in society. In this sense, Rancière could be said to displace the Marxian class struggle from the economic to the aesthetic realm.[37]

Here as well, questions have to be asked about the legitimacy of such a shift. It could be interpreted as an aestheticization of the class struggle, motivated by the belief that the end of capitalist exploitation, for example, would merely necessitate a redistribution of the sensible, a more equal apportioning of sensible properties to society's members. This, however, can be seen as a rather idealistic view of how radical social transformation is to be brought about by disqualifying the importance of an at least equally important arena of social conflict: man's material existence.

Idealism is here not to be understood in the usual sense, i.e. as positing the primacy of ideas, mind-sets and beliefs in human and social life and, in extension, holding a change with regard to the latter as most crucial for

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37 To speak of classes in relation to Rancière's work could be seen as entirely misplaced in light of his radical critique of the notion of class, defining the essence of politics rather in terms of a "dissolution of all classes" (*D*18/39). Rancière's main objection to the concept of class concerns the way in which it is used as an automatic, self-evident system for classifying people based on their allegedly objective position within the mode and relations of production, together with all kinds of assumptions concerning their abilities and sensibilities. As such, the concept obeys a police logic. One can for example think of the assumption that a factory worker must out of necessity be against capitalism yet because his life mainly consists of repetitive, manual labour and the necessary relaxation afterwards, he lacks the intellectual abilities to clearly articulate the conditions of his exploitation, being dependent for this on the intellectual avant-garde of the working class movement. As Rancière has argued, even some of the leading figures in the struggle against economic exploitation have conceived those in the name of whose liberation they fought, in such demeaning and patronizing terms (1983/2003).

Still, the notion of class and class struggle is not so much dismissed by Rancière but, as Gabriel Rockhill points out, is differentiated between class *within the police order* - as a "group of individuals whose origin or occupation bestows upon them a collective identity" - and *in the realm of politics* - "as a mode of subjectivization that interrupts social categories and breaks the established moulds of classification" and as such constitutes "an unmanageable excess", a "suspensive existence" (2004:59). Giuseppina Mechia makes a similar point, saying that it is a case of Rancière critically "evaluat[ing] the economic and social specificity of the concept of class" while "the Marxist concept of class struggle retains a certain value as *exemplum* of the functioning of the concepts that... [Rancière] is trying to create" (2009:81). Michaud, for his part, says that Rancière "does not conceive classes in the dogmatic or static way that has characterized Marxism but as power of differentiation with themselves" (1997:437).

It is in this sense that we can understand Rancière's simultaneous dismissal of notions of class and affirmation that "the setting-up of politics is identical to the institution of the class struggle", and even that the class struggle "is politics itself" (*D*18/39). But again, Rancière denies the existence of any classes prior to political conflict, to processes of politicization by the excluded (27/49), with the latter thought to be primarily based on sensible division and the struggle against it in aesthetic terms. On this basis, Rancière also reconceptualizes - or, more specifically, *repoliticizes* - the Marxian notion of the proletariat. No longer constituting a positivistic economic or sociological category, it is instead conceived of as a "specific occurrence of the demos, a democratic subject, performing a demonstration of its power in the construction of worlds of litigious community (90/128).

bringing about societal transformation. In Rancière's case, it is a case of what one, perhaps paradoxically, could call an *idealism of the senses*. It concerns the conviction that the primary task of radical politics is to bring about a more equal apportioning of sensory qualities within society, with the achievement of other equalities - e.g. material, socio-economic, political, juridical - being conditional and consequential on this. Such view, however, has not exactly been supported by historical evidence. For instance, even if most countries today have constitutions that enshrine the equality of all men - which can even be seen to constitute a global consensus, however much contested - material inequalities do not seem to have lessened, at least not in relative terms (Wallerstein 1995).

To be sure, here also, this displacement of the most primary frontline of emancipatory politics away from material inequalities to sensory ones, has to be understood in line with his break with orthodox Marxism. One of the reasons for the latter's fall from grace among West-European Leftist intellectuals, especially from the end of the 1960s onwards, is no doubt the realization that attempts made by existing socialist regimes to eliminate social division through establishing material equality, did not eradicate inequality as such. Although relative economic inequality was reduced considerably, this seemed to go at the expense of an increase in political inequality and oppression. The latter reappeared with a vengeance, coming back to bite Marxism which had claimed that 'bourgeois' politics and its abuses of power would inevitably whither away together with the eradication of capitalist modes of production. In reality, an elite of communist party cadres increasingly abused centralized resources to establish and secure their monopoly on power through disenfranchising the rest of the population. As we shall see later in Chapter Two, Rancière offers his own diagnosis of the way in which revolutionary politics, in its attempt to erect a radically equal social order, re-establishes highly unequal social relations, this inequality now being understood primarily in aesthetic terms, i.e. as based on sensible divisions. Think of the division between, on the one hand, professional revolutionaries who are thought to have the required time and intellectual capabilities to understand the iron yet cunning laws of history and, on the other, the working classes, who are considered to be too immersed in manual labour as to be capable of such specialized political tasks.

Among French leftist intellectuals, Paul Ricoeur was one of the first to draw its conclusions from the vicissitudes of the quest for human equality in socialist regimes in his essay "The Political Paradox" (1956). This text can be seen to have had a crucial influence on later post-Marxist thinkers, especially their turn to the political and away from orthodox, economistic Marxist models. Ricoeur's starting point is the observation that the problematic of

political power seems to persist stubbornly regardless of the economic organisation of society, whether highly unequal and disorganised in capitalist societies or highly equal and managed - even if deficiently so - in socialist ones. This led him to proclaim the autonomy of politics and its problem of the abuse of power.

One could say that, in similar vein, Rancière's political theory proclaims the autonomy of aesthetic division. That is, the latter also is presented as a constant characteristic of human societies and source of inequality, independent from the organisation of material life. However, it remains questionable to argue on this basis that the eradication of aesthetic inequality - even if this is understood as an infinite endeavour, impossible to achieve fully, as Rancière would insist - is therefore *primary*, most important both in itself and for eradicating economic and other forms of inequality.

Rancière should be credited for revealing how the sensory realm, as an important source of social domination and division, is an important frontline in emancipatory politics. However, to reduce the latter to a struggle for sensory liberation - even modelling it on the liberatory aspects of aesthetic experience, as I shall specify in the next chapter - is perhaps over-reaching, and unnecessarily so. It is, for instance, not clear why the fight against other operators of social division - not only class, but also gender or race - are not just as fundamental to achieving radical social transformation as the sensible.

Chapter 2: The emancipatory content of Kantian aesthetics

Synopsis

This chapter offers an overview of the second key claim of Rancière's political aesthetics, namely, that aesthetic experience in its modern conceptualization is inherently emancipatory. I start (Section I) by distinguishing between two types of propositions regarding the political status of art in Rancière's work depending on whether they specify this status in general or in historical terms. After briefly characterizing the first set of propositions, I then (II) elaborate on the second, showing how it constitutes what I call Rancière's 'regime theory' of art. Based on this, I elucidate (III) how his propositions regarding the close connection between art and radical politics are specific to one of the three major regimes of art distinguished by Rancière called the aesthetic regime, which is considered to be most typical and predominant in the modern era. I then (IV) explain how Rancière considers Immanuel Kant's theorization of judgements of taste to have provided the basic conceptual determinations of the politics inherent to modern aesthetic experience, especially with his notions of the free play of the faculties and autonomy of the imagination. The next section (V) shows how he considers Friedrich von Schiller to have extrapolated the political implications of Kant's thinking of aesthetic experience, holding the latter to be key to achieving individual and collective liberation. I then (VI) explain how Rancière, in line with Schiller, regards the enactment of freedom and equality in aesthetic experience to be far more radical than that attempted and partially realized by many radical political movements, from the partisans of the French Revolution to communist vanguard parties. Next (VII), I show how based on his reading of Kant and Schiller, Rancière derives his basic determination of the politics of art in the modern era as 'an autonomous form of life' and spell out some of the main implications for modern art, with particular focus on its paradoxical mode of autonomy. I then turn to two more aspects of Rancière's theory of the politics of aesthetics. First (VIII), I look into the way in which he conceives of the social efficacy of art in the modern period. The final sections (IX & X) try to throw some light on the important issue of the specific difference between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics which, however, is somewhat inconsistently and obscurely theorized by Rancière.

I. FROM THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS TO THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

Thus far, I have offered an account of the way in which Rancière conceptualizes politics in starkly aesthetic terms, with Kant's thinking on aesthetics as main theoretical reference. We can now gain an understanding of why he inversely holds that aesthetics - again, in its Kantian formulation, although no longer exclusively so - is inherently political.

This way of proceeding from politics to aesthetics is neither arbitrary nor a matter of mere chronology. Rancière holds that it is "on the basis of... [the] primary aesthetics [i.e. the politics of aesthetics] *that it is possible* to raise the question of the politics of aesthetic practices" (*ARO*13, emphasis mine). This can be understand in the sense that the politics of aesthetics, as I shall explain further, is also firmly rooted in Rancière's notion of the division of the sensible which occupies such a central place in his political theory.

It can, however, also be seen to point to the resemblances between his notion of radical politics and the politics specific to art works. At one point, the latter is defined in almost identical terms as the aesthetics of politics, in terms of enacting a "suspension with regard to the ordinary forms of sensory experience" (*AD*23,25/36,39). In line with this, Rancière defines art and politics as "two suspended forms of distribution of the sensible" (26/39). The resemblances, however, are not limited to the destructive operations at the heart of politics, as I called it, but also includes the constructive ones as Rancière further describes the politics of aesthetics in terms of redividing, reconfiguring and reapportioning. One can think of Rancière's specification of the politics of aesthetics as "the way in which practices and forms of visibility of art... intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (idem).

Things are more complex, however. As we shall see in more detail further (Sections II and III), the above formulations of the politics of aesthetics in terms of a suspension and redivision of the sensible order are not to be understood in an ahistorical sense, but are considered to hold specifically for art in the modern era. They must be understood as part of Rancière's quasi-historical theory of art's politics. For reasons of clarity, I suggest that one should distinguish between two types of claims concerning art's politicity in Rancière's work. On the one hand, there are specifications of the intimate connection between art and politics *in general*, that are valid throughout the ages. On the other hand, there are propositions that specify art's politics in historical, although, as we shall see, not historicist terms. In this regard, the

determinations of the aesthetics of politics mentioned in the previous paragraph belong to the second category.

I shall start this chapter by elaborating on the first kind of claims, because it forms the broader conceptual framework of Rancière's more particular, historical propositions. The other sections of this chapter will deal with the second set of propositions.

Rancière's core claim concerning the politics of art in general is that it is founded on an intimate connection between art and community. According to him, art forms are suggestive of "forms of community" and as such distribute the sensible (*PA*14). As he puts it: "the political dimension of the arts can be seen first of all in the way that their forms materially propose the paradigms of the community" (Rancière 2000b:17). Consequently, Rancière speaks of art forms as "modes for framing a community" (idem) and says that "figures of community are aesthetically designed" (*PA*18).

Rancière demonstrates the immanent connection between art and community through an interpretation of Plato's valuation of three important art forms of ancient Greek society: writing, theatre and choral music (13-4). According to him, Plato correctly understood these to stand for specific types of divisions of the sensible. The first two were seen to embody an egalitarian distribution of the sensible, which would explain why they were treated in rather dismissive fashion by Plato, in line with his general disdain for democracy (*AD*26/40). In contrast, Plato is said to have valued choral music positively because of the way in which it supposedly incarnates the orderly spirit of his ideal republic with its hierarchical division of the sensible.

These suggestions or inscriptions of a certain community paradigm or division of the sensible in art forms, constitute what Rancière calls the "sensible politicity" inherent to art forms (*PA*14). Accordingly, he says that it is at "the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization", that the "question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics should be raised" (18). Or, as he also phrases it: "what links the practice of art to... questions of the common is its constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a certain space-time" (*AD*23/36), as well as the "manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space" (23/37).[38]

In this light, we can understand Rancière's further contentions that "the arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them... what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the

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38 Rockhill states it so that "art and politics are consubstantial insofar as they both organize a common world of self-evident facts of sensory perception" (2009:196).

invisible" (*PA*19). He also phrases it thus that "art and politics are... linked beneath themselves [en deçà d'eux mêmes] as forms of presence of singular bodies in a specific space and time" (*AD*26/40). In line with this, we can also understand Rancière's claim that alliances between artists and revolutionary politics "are first of all formed on their own ground" (2000b:18).[39] He thus presents "the terrain of the sensible" as the "common ground", "meeting place" or "interface" of art and politics (2007a:259).

As indicated above, all these claims are to be taken as statements concerning the immanent link between art and politics in general. They provide the basic framework for Rancière's more historical claims concerning art's politics that can be seen as specifications of the way in which art's inherent politicity has been shaped throughout human history, how art forms in different eras have related to the division of the sensible in fundamentally different ways and have embodied very different types of sensible division.

It is important to differentiate clearly between these two types of claims even if Rancière does not do so. It helps to avoid a possible misunderstanding concerning the close connection between art and radical politics in his work. Namely, that he is not affirming this relation in general or in principle, but only as a typically or predominantly modern tendency. I already noted that the definition of the politics of aesthetics mentioned earlier - as suspension and reconfiguration of the dominant sensible co-ordinates - is to be understood as such a historically specific mode of art's general politicity.

This implies that Rancière's political aesthetics also allows for art forms that divide the sensible in ways that do not annul or redivide existing, unequal divisions of the sensible - as radical politics does - but, on the contrary, confirm such sensible divisions and enforce their grip on society. As an example, one can think of what Rancière considered to be the conservative political status of choral music in Plato's philosophy mentioned earlier.

Rancière himself does not explicitly articulate the difference between the two types of claims concerning art and politics. I shall speculate on possible reasons for this in the following section. As an example, we can take an essential passage in his aesthetic writings that offers an extensive list of the "effects in reality" produced by "political statements and literary locutions" (*PA*39). These effects can be seen to be equally valid for art practices.

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39 Based on this, Rancière also reverses the question concerning art's usages for politics. Dismissing responses "in terms of criteria for the political evaluation of works of art", he considers it to be "up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around" (*PA*65).

They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions and the abilities of bodies. *They thereby take hold of unspecified groups of people, they widen gaps, open up space for deviations, modify the speeds, the trajectories, and the ways in which groups of people adhere to a condition, react to situations, recognize their images. They reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction and submission. [...] [T]hey do not produce collective bodies. Instead, they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies. [...] [They cause] modifications in the sensory perception of what is common to the community, in the relationship between what is common to language and the sensible distribution of spaces and occupations. They form, in this way, uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible.* (39-40, emphasis mine)

Although Rancière doesn't do so, one can clearly distinguish here between, on the one hand, general claims concerning art's politicity (the part not emphasized) and, on the other hand, propositions that are most typical of art in the modern age (the part emphasized).

Before I look closer into the details of Rancière's historical claims concerning the politics of aesthetics, it is useful to mention some other, more general features of his theory of the politics of aesthetics from the outset.

First of all, following from art's immanent politicity, the politics of aesthetics for Rancière is not tied to any literal manifestation of politics in art. In other words, it does not so much concern the content of art works, at least not in the first instance or most importantly. As instances of the latter, Rancière refers to art works that express "messages" or "feelings" about society, that represent "structures", "conflicts" or groups in society or formulate directives for political action (*AD*23/45). Rancière opposes such explicit forms of political art, claiming that art is political only by distancing itself from such direct links with politics (23/36-7). One can say that in the same way that his theory of politics steers clear from ordinary, conventional conceptions of politics (e.g. in terms of forms of government, party politics or ideologies) his theory of political aesthetics distances itself from what is usually considered to be political art (45-6/65-6). Instead, Rancière conceptualizes the political dimension of art at what he considers to be a

more fundamental level, that of the division of sensible. We shall deal with Rancière's critique of explicitly political art practices later on (in Chapter Six).

Second, and somewhat in line with the previous, it is important to stress that Rancière considers art's politicity to be independent from the artist's intentions and political orientations. His key example in this regard is Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. He argues that despite the political conservatism of the author, the book was perceived at the time to enact "democracy in literature", due to its "refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever", as well as the "decision to depict and portray instead of instruct" (*PA*14, *AD*40/58, 2005:17-8). For Rancière, the egalitarian tenet of Flaubert's novel and similar ones is the result of the application of the specific modus operandi to treat all subject matter - whether high or low, elitist or popular - in equal fashion. In this regard, he also speaks of the "equality of indifference" (idem). In response to the political status of these works, Rancière thus says that "It was not a matter of personal opinions or strategies. Literature had its own politics" (2005:18). Phrased more generally, Rancière holds that the politics inherent to art works "obey their own proper logic" (*PA*15). We can connect this to his claim, mentioned earlier in this section, that art's politicity is enmeshed in its forms and the specific type of community or division of the sensible they embody.

Thirdly, and somewhat contrary to the previous, Rancière does not regard the political status of art works - as 'emancipatory' or 'reactionary' for example - as something that can be unambiguously established once and for all. He, for example, says that art works "offer their services in very different contexts and time periods" (*PA*15). Also at one moment in time or in one particular context, art works are said to be "susceptible to being assigned to contradictory political paradigms" (17).

II. A REGIME THEORY OF ART

In this chapter's remaining sections, I shall deal with what I distinguished as Rancière's historical claims concerning art's politicity. These form part of what I call his regime theory of art. The basic claim here is that it is futile to theorize about art or aesthetics in general terms, as if it were an entity with certain essential properties that have remained constant throughout human history. Rancière, on the contrary, holds that "there is no such thing as art in general, no more than there are aesthetic conducts or sentiments in general" (*AD*6/15). Consequently, art has to be conceptualized in radically historical terms. It must be treated as a contingent category that has had very different manifestations and very different properties awarded to it - for example, regarding its political status - throughout history.

The idea of art or aesthetic experience as an invariant, universal entity whose essence, formal qualities, laws or effects can be theorized, is usually associated with idealist or "bourgeois" aesthetics (Bennett 1979). Considering what was previously said about his regime theory, Rancière's revalorization of idealist aesthetics - both in his political and aesthetic works - is thus not to be taken as a re-affirmation of the latter's essentialist and universalist claims. Instead, as I shall elucidate in what follows, Rancière radically re-formulates aesthetics as a specific, historical regime of art, rather than a general and universal theory of the aesthetic as such.

As we shall see in the next section, Rancière distinguishes between three very different ways in which art has been conceptualized in the West, each constituting a regime of art or, to be more precise, a "regime of the identification of art". The regimes each determine "a specific relationship between practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility that enable us to identify their products as belonging to art or to an art" (*AD*28/43). Hence, Rancière also speaks of regimes of the visibility or intelligibility of art.[40] Again, the central idea behind the conceptualizaiton of art in terms of such regimes is that art, whether as a concept, practice or experience, is not something that exists naturally, eternally, universally or is recognizable or identifiable in a direct or unproblematic way. On the contrary, it is thought to be the outcome of a "complex process of identification", with art's existence being dependent on a certain "gaze" and "thinking" that identifies it as such (6/15). This is what Rancière calls the "conditional" (*AD*26/40) or "contingent" (*PA*51) character of art. Based on this, it should also be clear that Rancière's regimes of art specify "not so much... a type of art as... a mode of *relating to* art", as Mark Robson puts it (2005:83, emphasis mine).

One of the key features of Rancière's regime theory of art is the central role awarded to philosophical theorizing on art in its identification. This is not to say that philosophers are thought to have "invented" the art regimes. Rather, Rancière considers them to "elaborate the regime of intelligibility within which they could be thought" (*AD*10/20). In this regard, we can further specify the fundamental operation at the heart of the regime theory of art. As Rockhill points out in relation to Rancière's work on literature - but equally applicable to his work on art - the focus and aim of what he calls his "aesthetic genealogy" (2004:60) is to analyze "the intellectual constructs at work in the various attempts to isolate the nature of literature" (54). In doing so, Rancière is said to refuse to side with any of the available answers or approaches to the question of literature's nature, instead "resituat[ing] the question itself in its historical context and examin[ing] the various factors that determine possible

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40   At one point, Rancière also speaks of "systems of art" (e.g. 2000b).

responses" (55). The goal of Rancière's regime theory is thus to excavate the historical conditions of possibility that determine "the space of possible statements regarding the nature of literary [or artistic] works" (55). As Rockhill sums it up, it is "a genealogy of the historical conditions that produced both the question and its contradictory response" (56). In the sections that follow, we shall see how Rancière uses the same modus operandi in tackling the question of the politics of aesthetics. Before we do so however, I need to point out two further, important aspects of Rancière's regime theory.

The first concerns our use of the term 'art' in our general account of thus far. Doing so, is somehow to commit an error because a distinctive feature of Rancière's regime theory is that even *what* the different regimes identify differs radically throughout history. He for instance holds that it is only in the modern era that one speaks of art in its "undetermined singularity" (*AD*6/15) while before, one either spoke of "the arts" or "images".

The question then becomes what is identified or thought differently by the different regimes, i.e. their raw material or substrate. Rancière does not explicitly theorize this. He does, however, use certain general terms such as "ways of doing and making" (*PA*13, *ARO*13), "discursive and bodily practices" (*PA*14) or "techniques" (2009:31) to describe that which is identified in a specific way by each regime. In this light, we can understand Rancière's statement that although there have always been poetry, dance or theatre, there has not always been 'art' (*AD*6/15,26/40). In other words, certain art practices and techniques have been more or less universally and constantly present in Western societies. However, the way in which their specificity has been conceived, for instance in relation to other human practices - e.g. religious, economic and, most importantly for Rancière and our own purposes, political - or even whether they are at all considered as a separate category of life, differs radically throughout history and, so one might add, from context to context.

To conceptualize the meta-categories of Rancière's regime theory in this way, might be seen to contradict its basic claim of radical historicity. Still, the categories mentioned are rather devoid of any specificity, serving as an empty canvas used by the regimes to paint their specific configurations. They do not have any special ontological status on their own and might, in their naked state, even be seen to be relatively indistinct from other human practices. However, it is perhaps more correct to say that the practices or techniques in question are *always already* inscribed in certain regimes and thus signified in

specific ways. This implies that one can never experience them in their 'bare' form.[41]

A second important feature of Rancière's regime theory that needs to be mentioned from the outset is that the regimes of art are not conceived of as homogenous epochs that follow one another in clean succession. Instead, different regimes can co-exist at any one time, in unison or tension with one another. Still, the regimes do have a certain degree of historical specificity in that their relation with particular eras is determined in terms of typicality and predominance. Each of the three major regimes of art distinguished by Rancière is presented as most characteristic of, and prevailing in a particular age, leaving open possibilities for 'anachronistic' or residual manifestations of other regimes. As an instance of the latter, we can refer to the status of tragedy in Ancient Greece. Rancière regards tragedy to be a precursor of the regime of art typical of the modern age in a context and time dominated by a very different, antithetical regime of art.[42] Later (in Chapter Five), we shall see how Rancière presents this more open and relaxed approach towards historical determinations as one of the key differences with Foucault's archæological methodology, which he otherwise presents as methodological precedent for his regime theory (2005:23).

III. AESTHETICS: AN INVENTION OF RECENT DATE

Rancière's regime theory distinguishes between three major regimes of art in Western history (*ARO*135, *AD*7-8/16-17,28-30/43-5, *PA*20-4,35-8).

(i) In the ethical regime of images, art as such is said not to exist. What exists instead are images that, to a better or worse degree, are thought to copy the truth and are assessed on this basis, i.e. according to their pedagogic value in disclosing the truth. They are thus classified either as 'good' copies that help people to access the truth, or 'bad' copies that lead people astray, away from the path to the 'good and true'. In the latter instance, this can be done by sowing confusion between images and the truth, tricking people into mistaking the former for the latter. As might be obvious from the way I phrased things thus far, Rancière's key philosophical reference for this regime is

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41 Rancière's general claims concerning the relations between politics and art mentioned in the previous section can be understood in a similar way. Although articulating some of the meta-assumptions of Rancière's regime theory, in terms of content, it is situated at a level that is far too general to be able to support any sufficiently specific claims.

42 Rancière's regime theory also allows for particular art forms to be constituted by a specific combination of different regimes. As we shall see later (in Chapter 6), critical art practices of the 1960s and 70s based on collage techniques are conceived by him in terms of a combination of elements from the representative and aesthetic regimes of art.

Plato. Although he doesn't specify this, one can think of Plato's diagram of the divided line which forms part of his general Theory of Forms. Within this model, images - or, expressed as mode of thought, 'imagining' - constitute the lowest stage on the path to true knowledge of the Good.[43] On this basis, Plato also relegates artists and poets - as producers of images - to the the lowest ranks of his ideal republic.

(ii) Contrary to the previous regime, the representational regime of the arts acknowledges poetic practices as constituting a domain and category of their own, that of imitations. Consequently, they are assessed on their own terms, *as* imitations, not copies. The central criterion here becomes that of whether an art work obeys certain canonical rules and norms in imitating certain topics. For instance, whether it follows an established hierarchy of genres or whether the form of expression is adequate to the subject matter. The key issue is thus no longer whether an image is true or false - as in the ethical regime -, but whether it has been made well, according to the relevant, appropriate artistic conventions. The most important philosophical reference here is Aristotle's *Poetics* (1895), as well as later classicist theories of art that posit a fixed repertoire and hierarchy of art forms and genres derived from art works of the classical period, taking the latter as gold standard of beauty.

(iii) In the aesthetic regime of art, the key identification criterion is the way in which artistic practices present or embody a specific form of sensibility. In this regard, Rancière variously speaks of sensory experience (*AD*23,25/36,39), sensory apprehension (29/44), sensible milieu, sensorium (27/41) or still, "ways of sensible being" (11/21). It more specifically concerns forms of sensibility that suspend or differ from the normal or dominant modes of sensibility (30/45, *ARO*135). It is this, rather than its representational value or its adherence to a certain normative set of rules - as in the previous representational regime - that determines that something is regarded as art. Rancière also presents the difference between the representative and aesthetic regimes in terms of a shift away from ways of doing to modes of being (*AD*29/44). As I shall elucidate in what follows, the key philosophical references here are Kant and Schiller,[44] as well as Romanticism in general

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43 See Plato's *Republic* (360BC), Book 2, 3 & 10.

44 Other philosophical references include works of Schelling, Hegel and Vico.

which, as is generally established, formed a radical break with classicist models of art (Berlin 2000).[45]

Rancière's radical aesthetics is mainly concerned with the third, aesthetic regime of art, which he considers to be most typical and dominant from the middle of the 18th century onwards, and the specific relation between aesthetics and politics it proposes. Rancière speaks of the establishment of this new regime in terms of an "aesthetic revolution" (2005:14). So again, for Rancière aesthetics does not denote a general, universal, eternal category of human existence, as it did for Kant for example, but on the contrary refers to a specific understanding of art typical of, although not exclusive to, a certain period in time. Thus, in the same vein in which Michel Foucault famously spoke of "Man" as "only a recent invention, a figure not not yet two centuries old" (1986:xxii), Rancière states that aesthetics, and the specific type of sensible experience it posits as central to artistic production and experience, "was born... two centuries ago" (*AD*6/15).

Before we specify Rancière's conception of the aesthetic regime and the politics of art proper to it in more detail, it might be useful to list some of the historical events mentioned by Rancière as key contributing factors to the regime's rise to prominence. He mainly refers to some of the events that took place in the eighteenth century mentioned by Hegel (1975) in his account of romantic art that would have led the latter to speak of a "contradictory mutation in the status of [art] works" (*AD*8/18). These historical occurrences include: (i) the acceleration in archæological discoveries and the resulting, growing realization of the historicity of classical art, eroding its status as universal, eternal normative framework of beauty; (ii) the pillaging that took place during the revolutionary and imperial wars that caused products of traditional art schools and genres to mix, further blurring and undermining classicist categories; and (iii) the French Revolution and the consequent decline of the predominantly religious and courtly art of the previous centuries. Made possible by this confluence of historical events, the aesthetic revolution was thus not "sparked", as Rockhill indicates, by "one single cause" (2004:73).

One can understand the first two developments to have dealt a heavy blow to the representational regime of classical art. The third event, for its part, can be seen to have contributed to the increasing stress on "sensible

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45 Rockhill detects a "loose correspondence" between Rancière's three aesthetic regimes and the three political regimes theorized in *Disagreement* (i.e. the archi-, para- and meta-political regimes) (2009:197). Further, in the three aesthetic and political regimes, he detects three more general regimes: (1) "a hierarchical distribution founded on the *ethos* of the community", (2) a representative regime of appropriate and adequate forms", and (3) "an ambiguous realm that vacillates between nihilism and the glorious incarnation of truth" (2004: 60).

singularity" (*AD*8/18) as key identification criterion for art. As Rancière argues, art's separation from its previous, religious and courtly "functions and destinations" resulted in a "loss of destination" (2009:69-70). This, so one could further argue, caused artists to be thrown back onto themselves more and more, which leads Rancière to speak of the "solitude of the [art] work" (*DA*36/53). This not only explains the greater focus on art itself - i.e. on its medium, materiality, gesture or production process (8-9/18-9) - but also on the artist herself - her 'being-an-artist', way of life, societal position and political views. Most importantly perhaps, the loss of "dependence of artistic productions on a distribution of social places and functions" (2009:70) - or, as Rancière also describes it, their independence "from displays of domination and rules of certification" and detachment "from its old functions and judges" (2003:199) - opened up the possibility for art to take on a countercultural role, to develop modes of sensibility that deviate from, or invalidate the ordinary, dominant ones.

To be sure, the modern artist's acquisition of an independent, critical voice is not without contradictions, since it can be seen to have come at great cost. It can be regarded as a pyrrhic victory because the same conditions that made it possible - the severing of dependency relations between artists and established powers - also relegated art to a relatively marginal, powerless place in society. In this sense, the position of the artist in the modern period became the inverse of that in the preceding, ancient or feudal times, where art was firmly integrated in society. Think for example of the way in which medieval society was conceived of as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This enabled it to have a big impact on everyday, as well as political and religious life. For the same reason, however, art had to closely tow the line of the status-quo - e.g. celebrating christian values or legitimating the natural supremacy of lords and kings. In modern times, in contrast, the independence gained from society enables artists to take up positions that challenge the ruling order. Their impact on society, however, is severely limited, it being rather unlikely for the artist to be able to express its critical voice on a large scale. This makes of modern art's independence a double-edged sword.

Other important consequences of the shedding by modern art of its previous representational duties to the aristocracy and clergy mentioned by Rancière are the drastic changes with regard to its publics - the latter becoming anonymous, undifferentiated - as well as the places of its exhibition - no longer churches and palaces, but the space of the artist studio and museum (*AD*7-8/17-8).

Apart from the specific historical events and dynamics mentioned above, Rancière also points to a perhaps more important, general change - although linked to the French Revolution - that greatly contributed to the establishment

of the aesthetic regime. According to him, a "new disorder" had come to prevail in society at the end of the 18th century (13/23). He seems to regard this disorder not in the first place, or exclusively, as a social or political phenomenon - for example the collapse of hierarchically ordered feudal societies due to an upsurge in egalitarian sentiments - but as pertaining to "human nature" (12/22). More specifically, it concerns the "loss" of human nature as it was conceived within the representative regime, based on a "norm of adequation between an active and receptive faculty" (idem).[46] In the modern era, there would instead be an "immediate union" of these faculties (idem).

In the following sections, I shall specify what this refers to in more detail. At this stage, I just want to point to Rancière's general claim of a new sensory mode of being characteristic of the modern, democratic, egalitarian era, one based on a disorder and union of the human faculties. He holds that some of the founding figures of philosophical aesthetics - especially Kant and Schiller - have first made explicit and conceptualized this new, modern mode of sensibility, just as their thought was, inversely, made possible by it. As Rancière puts it, aesthetics is "a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium... of a lost human nature" (11-2/22); it is "the thought of a new disorder" (13/23).

For Rancière, the collapse and levelling of the traditional hierarchies between the human faculties had direct repercussions for the new, post-feudal social order - or rather, disorder - because, as he argues, "a 'human' nature is aways simultaneously a 'social nature'" (12/22).[47] He argues that in feudal times, human and social nature "mutually guaranteed" one another (13/24), securing a tight fit between "everyone's place [in the social order] and the 'sense' appropriate to that place" (14/25). In the modern era, in contrast, the "rules by which human nature is accorded with social nature" are said to be suspended (idem), the first no longer able to prop up the second and even eroding and subverting it. Modern, societies thus came to constitute a paradoxical type of order, its main organizing principle being one of 'disorder'.

This had direct consequences for the field of art as an important part of the feudal order. As Rancière puts it:

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46 The one source mentioned by Rancière with regards to this specific reading of the shift from feudal to modern societies is Schiller's drama *The Robbers* (1781/2006) and the statement of one of its character (Franz Moor) that "the links of nature are broken" (2009a: 62).

47 Rancière defines "social nature" as "a certain order of bodies, a certain harmony between the places and functions of a social order and the capacities or incapacities of the bodies located in this or that place, devoted to this or that function" (2009a:70). This also means that "forms of domination [are]... a matter of sensory inequality" (idem). In opposition to this, the aesthetic regime is seen to be driven by the "shaping of a new body and a new sensorium for oneself" (71).

> The human nature of the representative order linked the rules of art to the laws of sensibility and the emotions of the latter to the perfections of art. But there was a division correlative to this linking whereby artworks were tied to celebrating worldly dignities, the dignities of their forms were attached to the dignity of their subjects and different sensible faculties attributed to those situated in different places. ... Nature, which yoked words to sensibilities, tied them to a division of the sensible which put artists in their place and set those concerned by art apart from those that it did not concern. (12/22-23)

All these "rules", "laws" and "ties" collapsed with the transition from the representative to the aesthetic regime, resulting in a situation in which anyone was deemed capable of becoming an artist, as it was no longer linked to a distinct sensible disposition (13-4/24-5). Further, anyone was considered to be able to appreciate art, this also having become disconnected from one's place in society (idem). Finally, with the rise of the aesthetic regime, anything whatsoever was considered to be 'dignified' to be made into the subject matter of art and could be treated in any way the artist desired to, there no longer being a hierarchy of themes and corresponding ways of representing them (idem).

IV. THE UTOPIAN CONTENT OF KANTIAN AESTHETICS

In the following sections, I shall further specify the core characteristics of the aesthetic regime of art, focusing especially on what Rancière considers to be the emancipatory politics inherent to it. I shall show how he deduces this from some of the founding texts of modern philosophical aesthetics. Even more explicitly so than in Rancière's conceptualization of the aesthetics of politics, Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" in his *Critique of Judgement* (1789/1914) occupies a central place in his argument for the radically political nature of aesthetics in the modern era.

In this section, I shall explain what Rancière considers to be the "utopian content" of Kant's aesthetics of the beautiful (2003:198). The next section deals with the other key theoretical source of Rancière's theorization of the politics proper to aesthetics: Friedrich von Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794).

For starters, one has to acknowledge the key influence of Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" on Rancière's formulation of the aesthetic regime of art in general. Think for example about its key shift away from a differentiation between artistic ways of doing - typical of the representative regime - to "distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products" (*PA*22).

We saw that in the aesthetic regime, art works are "identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible" and, more precisely, one that is "extricated from its ordinary connections" (idem). Similarly, one of the main objectives of the first part of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is to determine the conceptual specificities of aesthetic judgements. Large chunks of this work consist of Kant meticulously differentiating taste judgements from other types of judgements - mainly sensual, cognitive and practical ones - for example with regard to the type of interests or satisfaction involved or the kinds of purposes served.

Further, Rancière takes the sensible mode of being identified by Kant as proper to judgements of taste to constitute the main source of its liberatory nature. More specifically, it concerns the lively, harmonious, horizontal and free play between the human faculties, the imagination and understanding in particular (Kant 1789/2000:124-7). Apart from being in free play, Kant also says that the two faculties "agree with each other" and are in "mutual subjective harmony with one another" (idem). He also speaks of a "proportionate accord" between the imagination and understanding in judgements of taste, which are said to be made by the two faculties "in combination" (idem). This free play of the faculties at the heart of aesthetic experience, and especially the fact that the imagination is here in a "productive and self-active" and not merely "reproductive" state (124), also forms the basis of Kant's determination of the mode of being proper to aesthetic experience as autonomous.

Kant contrasts the mode of free play and autonomy unique to judgements of beauty with the most important other types of human judgements where the imagination is ruled by, or subordinated to the other faculties. In the experience of what he calls "the agreeable" (95), the freedom of the imagination is said to be curtailed and overpowered by the senses. In knowledge judgements, this is done by the faculty of understanding and in practical judgements concerning what is good, by Reason. As Kant puts it succinctly: "An object of inclination and one that is imposed upon us by a law of reason for the sake of desire leave us no freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure ourselves" (idem). In case of practical judgements, he explains it thus: "where the moral law speaks there is, objectively, no longer any free choice with regard to what is to be done" (96).[48] In contrast, Kant

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48   This will form the basis of Rancière's rejection of contemporary appropriations of the Kantian sublime - mainly in the work of Jean-François Lyotard (see *AD* 88-105/119-41), as well as conceptions of aesthetics in ethical terms (see *AD* 109-31/145-173) - for being anti-emancipatory. The way in which Rancière locates the radical political potential in the beautiful rather than the sublime could be seen as quite provocative. It goes against a key trend among poststructuralist thinkers such as Lyotard and Deleuze to play out the radicality and deconstructive qualities of the sublime against the beautiful.

characterizes the satisfaction proper to aesthetic judgements as the only "disinterested and free satisfaction" (95). He further specifes this freedom in terms of "free lawlessness" (124) and "a lawfulness without law" (125).

For Rancière, the specific freedom and autonomy attributed to aesthetic experience forms the emancipatory core of Kant's aesthetics. Rancière interprets Kant's free play of the faculties in terms of a suspension of the hierarchies and relations of domination that usually prevail between the human faculties. Closely following Kant, Rancière speaks of a "twofold suspension, a suspension of the cognitive power of understanding that determines sensible givens in accordance with its categories; and a correlative suspension of the power of sensibility that imposes an object of desire" (*AD*30/45). In aesthetic experience, it would instead be a case of "inventive activity and sensible emotion encounter[ing] one another 'freely', as two pieces of a nature which no longer attests to any hierarchy of active intelligence over sensible passivity" (13/24). Rancière also speaks of aesthetic experience as constituting a "specific sensorium, cancelling the oppositions of activity and passivity, will and resistance" (*ARO*136), the latter now forming a "union without a concept of opposites" (*AD*12/22). Or still, about the specific autonomy experienced by the subject in contemplations of the beautiful, Rancière says that this is "not the autonomy of free Reason, subduing the anarchy of sensation. It is the suspension of that kind of autonomy. It is an autonomy strictly related to the withdrawal of power" (*ARO*135-6).[49]

Rancière considers these key determinations of aesthetic experience to be inherently liberating because they undercut the foundation of unequal divisions of the sensible which, as we saw in the previous section in the case of the representational order, are founded on a tight correspondence between a hierarchical view of sensible, human nature and an equally stratified social order. In contrast, Kant's theorization of taste judgements is seen to constitute a mode of being that annuls all hierarchies and divisions that usually rule human existence - in this regard Rancière also speaks of a "dehierarchization" (2009:37). As such, he considers it to found nothing less than a "new form of distribution of the sensible", one based on "aesthetic play" (*AD*30/45). The aesthetic division of the sensible is thus not just another division of the sensible similar to the existing ones - whose key operations, as

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49 We can find the same logic of the suspension of hierarchies in Kant's other key determinations of aesthetic judgements in terms of "disinterested satisfaction" (§§1-5), universality without concepts (§§6-9) and "purposiveness without purpose" (§§10-17). It all concerns complex notions in which the traditional oppositions and hierarchies between the terms involved are annulled and replaced by their paradoxical combination. For example, the fact that aesthetic experience, on the one hand, subverts the dominance of purposeful, interested, conceptual activity without, on the other hand, simply affirming their opposites: i.e. purposelessness, disinterestedness, non-conceptual particularity.

we saw in the previous chapter, were that of dividing, classifying, ordering and hierarchizing. It concerns a radically different type of division of the sensible and a highly paradoxical one, since its main principle of division is the *suspension* of all divisions or even *non*-division. As such, it shares a key feature with democratic politics (see Chapter 1, VI). In this regard, it is significant that Rancière presents aesthetics and politics in the modern era as two "suspended forms of division of the sensible" (*AD*25/39).

V. SCHILLER AND THE AESTHETIC REGIME'S FIRST MANIFESTO

If Rancière credits Kant for having provided the main conceptual determinations of the radical political core of art in the aesthetic regime, it is early German romanticist Friedrich von Schiller who is said to have translated Kant's theoretical insights into "anthropological and political propositions" (31/46). Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1794) is said to offer "one of the first formulations of the politics inherent to the aesthetic regime of art" (27/41) and is presented by Rancière as the aesthetic regime's "first manifesto" (*PA*23-24). He specifically makes much of a short passage in the *Letters* stating that "man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays" (15th letter, 1st sentence of the last paragraph). Of this claim, Schiller says that at this point in his exposé, it might "perhaps appear... paradoxical" (idem). He further says that: "I promise you that the whole edifice of aesthetic art and the still more difficult art of life will be supported by this principle" (idem). Rancière refers to these passages as the "original [or also, 'birth'] scene" of the aesthetic regime of art (*ARO*135).

For Rancière, these passages succinctly express the basic modus operandi of Schiller's *Letters*. It affirms one of Kant's key characteristics of aesthetic experience, the 'free play' between the faculties, and takes it to constitute the essence and ultimate destination of man's individual and collective existence, elevating it not only to man's most unique anthropological characteristic, but also to a political ideal. What makes this endorsement of aesthetic play as key operator of human liberation especially interesting for Rancière's purposes of defining the politics of aesthetics, is that it forms a key part of Schiller's attempt to explain and offer a solution to some of the shortcomings and failures of the French Revolution, that had begun a few years before the writing of the *Letters*. Although started as a radical attempt at human emancipation, this revolution soon degenerated into a cycle of sectarian violence and the terrorization of the populace, an outcome that is generally attributed to the impotence of its proponents to put their lofty ideals into practice.

Schiller's diagnosis of the vicissitudes of the French Revolution is rather unique in that it attributes its failures and excesses to a persisting imbalance between what he considers to be the two most basic human drives: the sensuous and formal drives.[50] While the first refers to man's natural, material existence, the second consists of the rational capacities used to structure the world conceptually and morally. As such, the sensuous and formal drives can be seen to correspond loosely to Kant's faculties of, respectively, sense and understanding/reason.

For Schiller, the interaction between these two basic modes of being is problematic due to their opposed nature, orientation and interests, with little possibilities for mediating between them. In most instances, the drives operate in utter separation from one another, causing human life to be radically split between the search for material satisfaction on the on hand, and intellectual or moral pursuits on the other, both unable to counterbalance the other, resulting in a fragmented and incoherent existence. Moreover, if an attempt is made by one of the drives to establish some kind of coherence through mediation with its opposite, this mostly results in a situation of domination. One can think, for example, of the form drive restraining the sense drive through the rigid, abstract application of moral imperatives on man's material existence, eradicating all avenues for sensual pleasure in the name of some higher spiritual cause. Such repression of one drive by the other is unsustainable in the long run and leads, sooner or later, to a 'return of the repressed', for example in the form of episodic excesses of material gratification that undo all the gains achieved through intellectual or moral asceticism.

It is such a destructive and tragic standoff between two incommensurable human tendencies that Schiller identifies as root cause of the general failure of the French Revolution. On the one hand, there are attempts by the vanguard of the revolution to force the social fabric into the desired political mould - one could say, just like an artist shapes the inert or passive material into a predetermined form. On the other hand, there is the resistance or indifference with which these attempts are met on the part of masses, which are preoccupied mainly with daily survival and life's pleasures. It is this discrepancy that led Schiller to state in *the Letters* that "a great moment has found a little people".

Phrased in terms of Rancière's theory of the division of the sensible, we can say that the French revolution, although emancipatory in content and aim, still upheld a hierarchical relation between revolutionary party and masses, emancipators and emancipated, rulers and ruled, with the first unidirectionally attempting to lift the second out of their assumedly

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50 In German: "Sinnliche Trieb"/"Sinnestrieb" and "Form Trieb".

unenlightened, sorry state of existence. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric, a hierarchical division of the sensible thus persists, founded on a neat and asymmetrical distinction between two types of humanity. On the one hand, there are those endowed or 'gifted' with a strongly developed formal drive (i.e. intellectual insight and moral rigour), on the other, the less fortunate who are 'trapped' into a life of sensuous, material satisfaction. In this regard, Rancière says how for Schiller, domination and servitude are part of an "ontological distribution", a dual opposition of, and hierarchy between activity and passivity, thought and sensible matter (*PA*27). The revolutionary regime thus replicated and continued the same unequal division of the sensible typical of the ancien régime that it claimed to terminate in the name of equality and emancipation, which caused these ideals to revert quickly to its opposite.[51]

All this led Schiller to the firm belief that social and political emancipation is destined to end in tragedy without a prior or parallel emancipation of human sensibility that surmounts the conflictual interaction between formal and sensuous drives. As reflected in the passages from the *Letters* quoted in the beginning of the section, he considers the nurturing of a third drive, the so-called 'play drive',[52] modelled on Kant's notion of free play between the imaginative and cognitive faculties dealt with in the previous section, to be key to such emancipation. The play drive would allow for a horizontal, harmonious play between formal and sensuous drives. As Rancière explains it, in Schiller's play drive the opposition and hierarchy between the drives is cancelled, with the latter "becom[ing] a single reality", forming a "new region of being: the region of free play and appearance" (*PA*27). The "dualities" that usually and negatively shape the

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51 Schiller's diagnosis of one of the first major emancipatory movements of the modern era can be seen to hold also for many of its successors. Think for example of the relation between Leninist-style communist vanguard parties that legitimate their iron rule over the masses based on the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which became the gold standard in really existing socialist regimes. Such dirigisme by communist parties was deemed necessary to manage the so-called childhood illnesses that were seen as unfortunate yet inevitable by-effects of the radical transformation of the mode of production which, if left unchecked, could revert the gains of the revolution. Think for instance of the ruthless repression of the large-scale resistance of farmers in the USSR to the industrialization and collectivization of agricultural production. In theory, such highly dirigiste state was supposed to be only a transitory stage on the road to communism proper as envisaged by Marx. It was thought to 'whither away' when, the hearts and minds of the people having been fully emancipated, only an 'administration of things' would be necessary. In reality however, this never happened, resulting in societal orders based on a highly oppressive imbalance of power, with a ruling elite exercising a monopoly on all moral and intellectual activity, instructing the rest of society in top down fashion. Hence, in relation to socialist states, Rancière says that "the separation between two humanities is *de facto* renewed" (*AD*37/54).

52 In German: "Spieltrieb".

"ordinary forms of sensory experience" - between "appearance and reality...,
form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility" - are
hereby suspended and transcended (*AD*30/45).

It is on the basis of such more balanced, equal and playful interaction
between the imperatives of reason and contingencies of sensible-material life
that Schiller founds his ideal, aesthetic state, which Rancière describes as "pure
instance of suspension,... a moment of the formation and education of a
specific type of humanity" (*PA*24). He explains the main idea behind
Schiller's aesthetic state, and the aesthetic education essential to it, as follows:
because of the impossibility of the direct realization of an equal and free
political community, human beings first need to develop "this specific [i.e.
aesthetic] mode of living in the sensible world" (27). In this sense, we can
understand Schiller's claim quoted earlier, that the determination of man in
terms of aesthetic play acts as support for "the whole edifice of the... art of
living".

Rancière thus spells out the political stakes of aesthetic experience as
determined by Schiller as those of realizing "man's full humanity", of
promising a "humanity to come, one at last in tune with the fullness of its
essence" (*AD*34-5/51) or still, "a new form of individual and collective
life" (32/48), one that turns man into a more complete, as well as emancipated
being. Art and beauty are regarded both as exemplary instances of such
emancipated life, as well as effective tools for educating people into assuming
such playful, whole form of life.

VI. AESTHETIC EQUALITY VERSUS THE EQUALITY OF REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS

We now understand why Rancière claims that Kant and Schiller's
conceptualizations of the aesthetic as "a specific sphere of experience which
invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory
experience" is much closer to "the social experience of
emancipation" (2005:15). That is, closer than more obvious candidates such
as the French revolutionaries of the end of the eighteenth century and a long
line of communist vanguard parties in their wake. By theorizing what
Rancière variously calls "freedom and equality of feeling" (*AD*32/47),
"aesthetic" or "perceptible" equality and "equality of sentiment" (2007:258a,
2003:198), these early idealist aesthetic theories are lauded for having
developed the idea of a more fundamental liberation of mankind. They are
seen to have provided the "principle of a more profound revolution, a
revolution of sensible existence itself and no longer only of the forms of
state" (*AD*32/48).

The advantage of such aesthetic revolution is said to lie in the fact that it eliminates "sensory inequality" (2009a:70) which, as we mentioned previously, all too often persists in revolutionary movements. This would then undercut attempts at realizing true liberation and, on the contrary, reinforce the same relations of domination under the cloak of their opposites. In contrast, Rancière considers the aesthetic regime to propose a new idea of political revolution, that of "a common humanity still only existing as an idea" (*PA*27). As he also puts it, it concerns a revolution based on "the anticipation of the perceptible equality to come" (2003:198). Based on our exposition in Chapter 1 (especially Section III) we can understand this to refer to Kant's notion of *sensus communis*.

Although Rancière, as we saw, presents Schiller's *Letters* as having explicitly made this connection between aesthetics and politics, he also contextualizes Kant's aesthetic theory within the increasingly egalitarian spirit of his time and the French Revolution in particular. He for example presents Kant as "the contemporary of a century and of populations confronted with the problem of uniting freedom... with compulsion" (2003:197). For him, at the core Kant's aesthetics is the question "through what means... an equality of sentiment [can] be brought about that gives the proclaimed equality of rights the conditions of their real exercise" (198). In this regard, Kant is said to refuse to denunciate such a real exercise of freedom on the basis of "the inequality of competences and social capacities" (idem). His aesthetic theory would deny "that the only future of the idea of equality is the terror exercised in the name of a people incapable of exercising their rights" (idem).

One could thus say that Rancière's readings present the founding fathers of idealist aesthetics as *crypto-communists*,[53] as more radical than the 'official' radicals of their time and thereafter, criticizing the latter for replicating thoroughly inegalitarian and authoritarian societal models. This no doubt forms one of the most remarkable and perhaps provocative procedures of Rancière's political aesthetics. This not only because of the idealist or romanticist tenet of the thinkers in question, but also because it concerns their aesthetic thinking, which is often considered to be the epitome of the excesses of idealist-speculative thought.

Against this, Rancière holds that theorizing on the aesthetic and beautiful in the modern era was entangled from the very beginning with a political concern for the possibilities and conditions of real equality and emancipation - both individually and collectively -, with the first thought to hold the key to the second. In this regard, Rancière states that "[t]he very idea of Art - of... aesthetic experience - as defining a specific sphere of experience was born in

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53 In this regard, Rancière also speaks of "cultural communism" (2003:199).

the late 18th century under the banner of equality: the equality of all subjects, the definition of a form of judgement freed from the hierarchies of knowledge and those of social life" (2003:198). Or still: "[f]rom the very beginning, the autonomy of aesthetic experience was taken as the principle of a new form of collective life, precisely because it was a place where the usual hierarchies which framed everyday life were withdrawn" (Rancière 2005:20-21).

We can also relate the above to Rancière's claim of the rise of a new disorder in the modern period, which we mentioned earlier (in Section III). We saw that one of the key, underlying ideas here is that the collapse of feudal societies and the transition to modern, democratic ones was not an exclusively social or political affair but, more fundamentally, involved a radical change on the level of the senses. We can now understand how Kant and Schiller, with their conceptualization of a radically different, aesthetic mode of being - whether characterized in terms of the 'autonomous mode of the imagination' or 'play drive' -, have supplied positive models for the 'lost' human nature characteristic of the post-feudal era. Rancière credits them for being the first to have made intelligible the new, radically egalitarian mode of sensibility appropriate to the modern democratic ethos. In doing so, they have shown how this loss carries the promise of an "unprecedented equality" and new "humanity to come" (*AD*8,13-4/17,24-5).[54]

VII. ART AS AN AUTONOMOUS FORM OF LIFE

In the previous sections (IV to VI) we have explained in what sense aesthetic experience, as defined by Kant and Schiller, harbours the promise of radical equality and emancipation that is able to serve as support for a new life and society. We now have to determine the implications for art itself or, to be more precise, for the way in which it is identified within the aesthetic regime. Here also, Rancière takes his cue from Schiller and his suggestion - contained in the passage quoted above - that the key to "the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful" lies in conceptualizing man's essence as a playing being who exerts his different drives - or, for Kant, his different faculties - in autonomous, harmonious, non-hierarchical fashion. Play, in other words, is regarded as the foundation of both radical politics and aesthetic art, the art of life and beauty (Robson 2005).

Based on this, we can specify the key identification criterion of art in the aesthetic regime - that is, of an art equal to the modern spirit of emancipation

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54 In relation to Kant, Rancière calls it "a new madness to think it possible to separate the community of aesthetic sentiment from the feasts of domination and competences of knowledge" (2003:197). We can see this 'new madness' within thinking as conceptual counterpart to the 'new disorder' of human nature and society.

and equality - as that of embodying or enacting the mode of sensibility and form of life theorized by Kant and Schiller as radically emancipatory: that of autonomy and free play. Rancière consequently defines the "key formula" of the aesthetic regime as follows: "art is an autonomous form of life" (*ARO*137, *PA*26). In the modern era, something is thus visible or intelligible as art only insofar as it incarnates, expresses, activates or puts to work what Rancière also calls a "sensorium of autonomy" (*ARO*136).

We already showed that the type of sensory experience characteristic of aesthetic art is one that invalidates the ordinary, dominant forms. We can now understand that it is not a case of art embodying any form of sensibility whatsoever that differs from the dominant ones. Key is that the divisions and hierarchies active in the latter - e.g. mind over matter, ends over means, reality over appearance - are cancelled, transcended and combined in harmonious, non-hierarchical fashion. In this sense, we can specify the modes of being that are regarded as ordinary or dominant by Kant and Schiller - and Rancière after them - in general terms such as rationalism, intellectualism, utilitarianism or instrumentalism.

A further important thing to note concerns Rancière determination - following Kant and Schiller - of art's inherent radical political potential in terms of autonomy. This should not be understood as an endorsement of autonomous art forms. That is, affirmation of the ideal of an art purified of all supposedly external elements, an 'art for art's sake' that only obeys its own, self-given laws, however these might be defined. Rancière opposes such tendencies in modern art for "clos[ing] in upon itself" (2003:199).

As Rancière's formula of the aesthetic regime clearly indicates, autonomy is in the first instance and most importantly that of "the experience, not of the work of art" (*ARO*136). Or still, "aesthetic autonomy is not the autonomy of artistic 'making' celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience" (*AD*32/48). And, so one can specify further, it is precisely because of this requirement for art to embody an autonomous form of experience that it has to transcend its autonomy as a specific practice divorced from life. Art cannot merely set itself up as an independent, self-legislative branch of human activity specialized in the production of beauty, because it also fundamentally concerns something more than mere beauty, namely, a new form of individual and collective life modelled on the experience of the beautiful.

I shall look into this specific aspect of Rancière's political aesthetics - i.e. the relation between art's autonomy and heteronomy - in full detail in Chapters Four and Five, especially with regard to the very different, opposite types of aesthetic politics founded on it. At this point, I want to elucidate his

key claims in this regard and spell out some of its implications insofar as they aid a fuller understanding of the aesthetic regime of art.

Rancière's main argument is that insofar as autonomy plays a role in identifying art in the modern era, it concerns a "paradoxical mode of autonomy" (2000b:12) because it is conditional on its opposite: art's heteronomy. As such, the aesthetic regime is said to "ground[...] the autonomy of art to the extent that it connects it to the hope of 'changing life'" (*ARO*134). This is why Rancière also says that modern aesthetic experience is "one of *heterogeneity*, such that for the subject of that experience it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy" (135, emphasis mine). Or, in yet another formulation, he says that "the artwork participates in the sensorium of autonomy inasmuch as it is *not* a work of art" (136, emphasis mine). It is because of this, what Rancière calls, "original link" between, or "knot binding together autonomy and heteronomy" (134) that "'the autonomy of art' and the 'promise of politics' are not to be counterposed" (136).

It is thus crucial to clearly grasp the specific, even counter-intuitive meaning given to the term "aesthetic" by Rancière. To 'aestheticize' something, for example, for him does not mean to turn something into an autonomous, beautiful object, as it is commonly understood, but exactly the opposite: to posit something as a form of life (137).

In order to understand aesthetic art's paradoxical autonomy better, we can look at the changes in this regard in the shift from the representative to the aesthetic regime - it being clear that the ethical regime offers a straightforward heteronomous determination of art. One could say that in the representative regime, art works are more unambiguously autonomous than in the aesthetic regime because, constituting a special ontological category - that of "fictions" or "imitations" - they are "liberate[d]... from questions of truth" (Rancière 2000b:9). To be sure, representational art works have to obey certain fixed conventions and rules. Still, these are not so much defined and imposed from the outside - as is the case in the ethical regime, think of the way in which Plato subjects art to external standards of philosophical truth or morality - but are specific to the arts as a particular, specialized branch of human practice (*PA*21).

Having said this, precisely as a specific way of doing and making, representational art formed an integral part of a highly stratified social order. As Rancière explains, the high degree of regulation of the arts typical of the representational regime "enter[ed]... into a global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations" (22). In other words, even though representational art's conventions and standards are medium-specific, the way in which they are structured - i.e. in terms of primacies and hierarchies (of certain genres, of speech, of action over character, narration over description, etc.) - conforms to the more general organizing principle

characteristic of "a fully hierarchical vision of the community" (idem). It is in this analogous mode of structuration that representational art's heteronomy is to be located.

As we already saw, in the aesthetic regime, art's autonomy is not defined in terms of an independent set of specific practices or techniques with concomitant norms and conventions. Autonomy here relates to art's sensory mode of being. As Rancière puts it, with the rise of the aesthetic regime "the things of art [are]... henceforth... identified less according to criteria of 'ways of doing', and more in terms of 'ways of sensible being'" (*AD*10-1/20-1). So, while art works in the representative regime formed a category distinct from life - one, however, structured in a way analogous to the hierarchical form of societies of which it formed an integral part - art works in the aesthetic regime are themselves regarded as embodying, or even fabricating forms of life (2007a:257).

On the one hand, this transgression of art in its narrow conception as a specific, representational technique and its expansion towards life itself, makes aesthetic art forms more heteronomous than representational ones. It makes them more autonomous, on the other hand, because the forms of life they enact are autonomous with respect to the dominant, unequal forms. The autonomy of representational and aesthetic art refers to very different aspects: to art as practice in case of the first, to art as a form and fabricator of life in case of the second.

One of the consequences of aesthetic art's peculiar, paradoxical autonomy is that it makes the identification of art a complicated affair. To be the product of a specific artistic practice is no longer sufficient for being considered to be art (*AD*6/15). In more historical terms, Rancière describes the paradoxical state of art in the modern era in terms of "art [being]... defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common experience, at the very moment that the boundaries between what is and isn't art were being erased" (2007a: 257). In this regard, Rancière also speaks of the "erasure of the visibility of art as a distinct practice" (idem). This causes the key identification criterion of the aesthetic regime to be highly paradoxical. In order for something to be visible or intelligible as art, Rancière says, "two apparently contradictory conditions are required. [It] must be seen as the product of an art and not as a simple image [as is the case in the ethical regime]... But it must also be seen as something that is more than just the product of an art [as the representational regime does]" (idem). This 'more' or 'other' that is demanded of modern art works is of course the experience or creation of an autonomous form of life.

By simultaneously affirming art's autonomy and its identity with life, the aesthetic regime's specificity thus consists of a "fundamental identity of opposites" (*PA*24). The paradox at the heart of the aesthetic identification

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regime of art is that, on the one hand, it asserts the absolute singularity of art, yet, on the other hand, no longer upholds a way of doing or making that would be specific to art. Still, despite the aesthetic regime's paradoxical criteria - Rancière also speaks of the regime's "paradoxical sensorium" - it would still allow for something to be defined as art (*AD*11/22).

Note, however, that Rancière, by foregrounding the criterion that a work has to harbour a form of life, does not simply advocate art's heteronomy, as the ethical regime does. It still retains being a product of an artistic practice as a condition that is necessary, yet no longer either sufficient or most important - as is the case for the representational regime - for being identified as art. And the inverse also holds: to instantiate an autonomous form of life is in itself *also* not a sufficient criterion for something to be considered art. If this were so, it would be a case of extreme heteronomy and radical social movements, for instance, would have to be equally regarded as aesthetic art works. It is rather so that the aesthetic regime has two necessary conditions: (i) being the product of an art, and (ii) embodying an autonomous form of life; neither of which is in itself *sufficient*. Both requirements are thus to be met if something is to be identified as art.

Still, Rancière seems to uphold a hierarchy between the two criteria, awarding greater importance to the second one. This is no doubt due to the fact that the second criterion is a unique feature of the aesthetic regime. A further, specific attribute of the relation between the two key preconditions is that they are internally conflictual. To be more precise, the second criterion (of heteronomy) erodes the first (of autonomy) because it is premised on a form of life that no longer recognizes divisions and hierarchies between different forms of human practice or expertise, including that of art. As Rancière puts it: modern art, by "shak[ing] up the distribution of places and competences" as a result of instantiating an autonomous form of life, "blurs" or "displaces" its own borders (2010:149). "Doing art" is even taken to *mean* the blurring of art's borders (idem).

VIII. THE PARADOXICAL EFFICACY OF AESTHETIC ART

Another important aspect of Rancière's aesthetic regime of art - and his notion of the politics of aesthetics in general - that needs to be specified concerns the question of the social efficacy of art in the modern era. If one of the core propositions of this regime is that art is indissolubly linked to the promise of a liberated individual and collective life, one might then further ask in what way or to what degree it is able to deliver on this promise. The issue of art's social efficacy has always been a key and contentious topos within radical

aesthetics and it is thus important to look into the way in which Rancière tackles it.

In view of our previous account, talk of efficacy might seem somewhat misplaced, given the way in which art is pitted against instrumentalist models of action in the aesthetic regime of art. We shall see, however, that Rancière conceptualizes aesthetic art's efficacy precisely through a critique of means-end, cause-and-effect theories of art's capacity to effect socio-political transformation. He considers the other two regimes of art - the representational and ethical regimes - to constitute such theories. In this section, I shall look into the way in which Rancière articulates the aesthetic model of art's political efficacy in contrast to that of the two other regimes - whose basic tenet I shall briefly specify - starting with the representational regime.[55]

Rancière takes classicist theories of theatre as exemplary for the representational model of art's efficacy, which he also refers to as the pedagogical paradigm of the social efficacy of art (2010:136). He specifically focuses on the way in which the theatrical stage is conceived of "as a magnifying mirror where spectators could see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form[,] [which]... was supposed to prompt specific changes in their minds" (2009a:60). For this to be successful, however, it must be possible for spectators to read particular thoughts and emotions into the actors' performances on stage in an unambiguous way. Classical drama theories are said to take this for granted, holding that the spectators "possessed a grammar which was regarded as the language of nature itself" (idem). In this regard, Rancière also speaks of the presupposition of "a language of natural signs" (61).

We here recognize one of Rancière's key claims concerning the representational regime mentioned earlier (in Section III), i.e. the close fit between human and social nature in feudal societies. In similar vein, Rancière claims that the representational model of efficacy relies on a "concordance", "correspondence" or "harmony" (62) between two "complexes": on the one hand, a complex of "sensory signs", on the other hand, a complex of "forms of perception and emotion through which [the latter]... is felt and understood" (60). These two highly attuned registers are said to guarantee a "continuity between the intrinsic consistency - or 'autonomy' - of the play and

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55 It is again important to stress that although there is a certain historic specificity to the three models of art's efficacy - in line with Rancière's general account of the three art regimes -, this is not to be understood in any hard, historicist sense. It does not exclude the possibility of different models of efficacy being active simultaneously, whether in tension with one another or combined into hybrid forms. As we shall see in Chapter Six, Rancière observes - somewhat perplexedly - that representational and ethical models of art's efficacy still exert a disproportionately strong influence on contemporary political art practices.

its capacity to produce ethical effects in the minds of the spectators in the theatre and in their behaviour outside the theatre" (61). As Rancière also puts it: it secures a continuity between *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, between the production of art and its reception.

Rancière's main issue with this model of art's efficacy concerns its - in his view - overly simplistic, "cause-[and]-effect schema", with its "straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means" (2009a:74), between intention and consequence (2010:135). For Rancière, to presuppose the latter might have been justified in well-ordered, pre-modern societies where, as he puts it, "[t]he stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum" (2009a:62). However, it becomes untenable - or at least, highly instable - in modern, democratic societies which Rancière considers to be infected by a radical disorder, both of human nature itself and its relation with society, as we previously saw. In other words, with the "collapse of the idea of [human] nature", the representational regime would also have lost support for its specific claims with regard to art's social efficacy (62).[56]

In contrast to the representational model, Rancière presents the aesthetic model of art's social efficacy as based on the "rupturing of any determinate link between [art's] cause and effect" (64). As he also formulates it, it is premised on "The suspension of a determinable relation between the artist's intention, a performance in some place reserved for art, and the spectator's gaze and state of the community" (2010:137). Rancière even turns this into an imperative when he says that art should "refuse... to anticipate its effects" and "accept their insufficiency" (149). This makes the efficacy of aesthetic art highly paradoxical as it is determined by "indeterminacy" (2009a:64) and engenders "undecidable" (62), "incalculable" effects (73, 75).[57]

Once again, Kant is credited with having conceptualized the key propositions of this model of art's efficacy. Rancière more precisely refers to Kant's claim that satisfaction in the beautiful is not supported by a concept, which I elucidated earlier (Chapter 1, V). In this context, Rancière takes this to point to the lack of "correspondence between the concepts of artistic *poiesis*

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56 Rancière mentions Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758) as one of the key texts that caused the cracks to show up in the representational model of art's efficacy. It is said to have demonstrated how the supposedly direct, causal chain between theatrical performance, reception and action was all but this, allowing for radically opposing interpretations and, consequently, very different courses of action instead (2010:137). Also, and perhaps more fundamentally, an inconsistency was laid bare connected to the essentially hypocritical nature of theatre itself: the fact that it "exhibit[s]... signs on human bodies of thoughts and feelings that are not *their own*", thus creating "a gap at the heart of... mimetic continuity" (2009a:61-2).

57 In this regard, Rancière also speaks of "aesthetic distance" (2010:137) and "indifference", as well as a "radical subtraction [and]... withdrawal" (138).

and the forms of aesthetic pleasure (*aesthesis*)" (2009a:64). He further interprets this so that "art entails the employment of a set of concepts [in its production], while the beautiful possesses no concepts [i.e. in its reception]" (idem). It is easy to see how Kant's conception of art's efficacy thus goes counter to the basic thrust of the representational conception, premised as it is on "a disconnection between the production of artistic *savoir-faire* and social destination, between sensory forms, the significations that can be read on them and their possible effects" (2010:139).[58]

With all this, Rancière is not saying that art in the modern era has become inefficacious. At one place, for example, he affirms, albeit somewhat cautiously, that art's emancipatory promise within the aesthetic regime has not been *in*effectual (*ARO*133). Rather, it is so that aesthetic art produces political effects "on the basis of an *original effect* that implies the suspension of any direct cause-effect relationship" (2010:142; 2009a:73,75). This original effect refers to what he also calls the "original disjunction" (2010:143) between *poesis* and *aesthesis*, which I elucidated earlier. Thus, instead of a smooth, causal chain from viewing art to understanding its 'messages' to adjusting one's behaviour accordingly - as is presupposed by the representational model of art's efficacy-, the aesthetic model considers the shift between these different registers to imply...

> ... a move from one given world to another in which capacities and incapacities, forms of tolerance and intolerance, are differently defined. What comes to pass is a process of dissociation: *a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt*. What come to pass is a rupture in the specific configuration that allows us to stay in 'our' assigned places in a given state of things. These sorts of ruptures can happen anywhere and at any time, but they cannot be calculated. (idem, emphasis mine)

In other words, based on our account of the aesthetics of politics in the first chapter (specifically Section IV), we can say that Rancière situates the source of modern art's efficacy in the *dissensus* it produces, in the "dissociation" or "rupture" it causes between art's production, reception and the actions resulting from the latter. Accordingly, Rancière also specifies aesthetic efficacy as "the efficacy of dissensus" (139). The political efficacy of art in the modern era is thus based on the way in which it disturbs the transmission "between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it,... between... sensory

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58 Rancière also speaks of "a disconnected community between two sensoria - the sensorium of artistic fabrication and the sensorium of its enjoyment" (2009a:64).

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regimes and 'bodies'" (idem). By doing so, as the passage quoted above states, aesthetic art suspends - however momentarily - the grip that the given order holds on its subjects or the community, creating a gap or surplus in the order of things. In this regard, Rancière also speaks of an "aesthetic cut" (2009a:82) that opens up opportunities for bodies to have different capabilities than those attributed to them by society, possibilities for aspects of life to have different meanings and be awarded more importance in society. By doing so, art, if not paving the way for more egalitarian reconfigurations of society, then it at least creates a sense of their possibility. Still, as Rancière emphasizes, such effects cannot be calculated beforehand on the basis of the artist's intentions and the properties of the art work.

On very much the same grounds as in the case of the representational model, Rancière dismisses the ethical (or *archi*-ethical) model of the efficacy of art.[59] Like the aesthetic model, he considers the ethical model to be based on a critique of the representational model and formulated at the same time (2009a: 62). Still, it is said to misrecognize or repress the aesthetic regime's break with the representational regime.

The main thrust of the ethical model would be to want to do away with all "representational mediation" between art and society, instead striving after what Rancière calls "ethical immediacy" (2010:137). In other words, instead of trying to effect societal changes through a complex configuration of coded representations that are expected to engender certain predictable responses from society, it holds art to be most efficacious when in its works and practices, it itself implements the desired social change in the 'real world' or, at least, makes a start with it.

Rancière mainly takes issue with what he identifies as the key presupposition of this model, namely, the existence of a self-evidently 'real' world, which is opposed to "appearances, representations, opinions and utopias" (149). Rancière's notion of dissensus, on the contrary, denies the existence of such a 'real' world and, instead, considers it to be always "constructed", "a matter of 'fiction'", "what is *given as* our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions" (148, emphasis mine). For him, the idea of a self-evident reality is typical of the police order and its consensual logic, according to which "the sensory is given as univocal" (149).

Against conceptions of art's efficacy in terms of a direct intervention in some allegedly real world, Rancière locates the efficacy proper to art in the modern era in the capacity "*to introduce dissensus* by hollowing out that 'real' and multiplying it in a polemical way" (idem). Instead of being fixated on

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59   As key theoretical references for the ethical paradigm Rancière mentions Plato, Rousseau and, more in general, "the modern sense of anti-representation" (2009a:62-63).

reality, art, if it wants to be efficacious politically, should regard any claims to, or representations of reality with extreme scepticism. It should steer clear from them and rather conceive itself as a "practice of fiction" that "undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given 'common sense'" (idem).

An important question that has to be put to the aesthetic model of art's efficacy is *how* efficacious it considers art to be. Based on the properties discussed above - i.e. the indeterminacy or incalculability of art's effects - it comes as no surprise that Rancière is rather cautious in his estimate of art's success in effectively bringing about radical political change. Rancière's position can be summed up as follows: yes, the "truly political" operation of art is to "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" - i.e. to create dissensus - and by doing so it "may open up new passages for political subjectification", yet the latter cannot be calculated or guaranteed in any hard, cause-and-effect way: it may or may not happen depending on factors that go beyond art's control (151).

In this sense, Rancière can be seen to externalize the terms and conditions of art's success in bringing about social and political transformation. His message to artists seems to be that they should accept the inherent "insufficiency" of their powers to effect social change - even actively "question[ing]... [art's] own limits and powers" in this regard (149). He seems to say that they should resist the temptation to lay claim to achieving such change through their work or practice since this is in fact beyond their control, dependent on external circumstances. We shall shall later (in Chapter 5 and 6) discuss some of the problematic features of Rancière's rather cautious and conservative view on art's social efficacy.

IX. WHY THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS IS NOT THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS

Now that we have gained a thorough understanding of Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics, one more, final aspect needs to be addressed. It concerns the differences and relations between this notion and the aesthetics of politics, the other key concept of Rancière's radical aesthetics overviewed in the previous chapter.

In the Introduction, I indicated that Rancière does not regard politics and aesthetics as distinct entities that relate to one another in external fashion. On the contrary, they are held to be intrinsically linked, each containing the other as a constitutive dimension. I emphasized, however, that Rancière hereby does not simply erase their differences. Rather, he holds politics to have its own

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aesthetics and aesthetics its own politics, each thus constituting a singular practice. This is, for instance, clear from Rancière's objections to contemporary claims that "artistic practice has become political practice" (2007b); claims often made in reference to increasingly activist stances in the art world. He criticizes such views for being "a too easy way of erasing the specificities of both artistic and political dissensuality" (idem).

Unfortunately, the specific differences between the politics of aesthetics and aesthetics of politics are rather scarcely and confusedly thought by Rancière. It concerns one of the most obscure and under-articulated aspects of his radical aesthetic theory and, as such, a rather hard nut to crack. He rarely tackles the issue head-on and the few, brief, isolated, dense passages where he does so, when added up, suggest at least two possible accounts that appear inconsistent, contradictory even. This neglect can be explained, perhaps, as the result of Rancière's drive to demonstrate how aesthetics and politics are fundamentally linked, treating their differences as a less important, secondary issue.

One account that is articulated mainly in his earlier writings on aesthetics (*AD*, 2002c) specifies the form of politics proper to aesthetics in terms of a metapolitics, a concept that we encountered in Chapter One. This is then said to constitute the specific difference with the aesthetics of politics which is here defined in terms of dissensus. This difference is then presented as the reason why the politics of aesthetics sometimes opposes (*AD*46/66) or even suppresses (38/55) the aesthetics of politics. This then contrasts with a second account that is predominant in his most recent writings on aesthetics (2010). Here, *both* the aesthetics of politics *and* politics of aesthetics are coneptualized as forms of dissensus and thus not only the former as in the first account. It, however, concerns very different forms of dissensus.

I shall present both accounts in turn, starting with the first in this section and the second in the next section. I shall offer an overview of the main textual evidence for each, attempt to interpret discrepancies and - as far as possible - mediate between the two, as well as point to some of the wider implications for Rancière's radical aesthetics as a whole that will be used in later chapters.

As said, a first, important way in which Rancière theorizes the differences between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics is in terms of, respectively, a practice structured by dissensus (*AD*25/39) and one based on a metapolitical logic (*AD*36/53,37/55, *ARO*137). Of the politics proper to aesthetics, he for instance says that it "opposes its own forms to those constructed by the dissensual interventions of political subjects" (*AD*33/49).

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Or still, having stated that the "'aesthetic' programme... is essentially a metapolitics", he goes on to specify this programme in terms of the "elimination of political dissensuality" (37,38/55). Still another formulation of this, is that the metapolitics of aesthetics "causes the 'aesthetics of politics', i.e. the practice of political dissensuality, to vanish" (37/54). At one point, Rancière even suggests that there is something in the politics of aesthetics that resists democratization and emancipation (2009a:56).[60]

If the metapolitics of aesthetics is hereby said to oppose the aesthetics of politics, the inverse also holds. Of the aesthetics of politics, Rancière says, for example, that "it has its own modes of dissensual invention of scenes and characters, of demonstrations and statements, which distinguish it from, and *sometimes even oppose it to*, the inventions of art" (46/66, emphasis mine).

In what sense now does metapolitics constitute the fundamental model of aesthetics' politics? As already specified (Chapter 1,VIII), the basic modus of operandi of metapolitics is to earmark a particular sphere of life as most critical for the aims of creating a just or equal society. Moreover, this sphere is opposed to that of conventional, official politics, whose importance is dismissed. We thus saw how Marxism - the paradigmatic case of metapolitics

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60 We should, however, specify that this opposition of elimination of the aesthetics of politics is said of what Rancière considers to be one of the two major forms of the politics of aesthetics in the modern era - that of the 'aesthetic revolution', the other one being that of the 'resistant form' - an aspect of his political aesthetics that will be treated extensively in Chapter Four. On the one hand, it seems as if Rancière considers only the aesthetic politics of the aesthetic revolution to constitute a metapolitics - although again not consistently so, as I will demonstrate below. This aesthetic metapolitics is then said to operate a "twofold" (AD37/54) or "joint elimination" (38/55). That is to say, it not only suppresses the aesthetics of politics but also the other major form of aesthetic politics. If we add to this that the latter - i.e. the aesthetic politics of the resistant form - is described by Rancière at one point in terms of "the dissensual form of the work" (41/59), we might deduce from this that aesthetic metapolitics suppresses dissensual practices both in their political form (i.e. the aesthetics of politics) and its aesthetic form, and this on similar, metapolitical grounds (i.e. their formalism, the fact that they merely constitute 'appearances'). Such a view is also confirmed by the fact that Rancière presents as one of the two "threats" to the politics of the resistant form that of "its transformation into a metapolitical act" (40/58).

Still, there are many passages that are inconsistent with the above, i.e. with metapolitics only constituting the politics proper to one of the major forms of aesthetic politics. At one place, he for instance speaks of the "metapolitics of the resistant form" (42/61). At another, Rancière says of the major forms of aesthetic politics that they are all metapolitics, which he defines as aesthetics' "way of producing its own politics" (*ARO*137). Or still, at one point Rancière specifies the "politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art" as metapolitics (*AD*36/53).

In other words, confusion galore. Despite these inconsistencies, however, I suggest to regard the first interpretation as not only more correct (i.e. with regard to the general tenet of Rancière's argument) but also more useful in making sense of Rancière's theory. For one, Rancière does mainly expound on the meta-political character of aesthetic politics in relation to the politics of the aesthetic revolution - for instance, in reference to the historical avant-gardes and their alliance with communist avant-gardes.

in *Disagreement* - condemns 'bourgeois' democratic politics for being a mere shadow theatre, with the 'real' political battles being waged at the supposedly more fundamental, socio-economic level. We also saw how Rancière opposed metapolitics to politics 'proper'. Instead of opposing the so-called epiphenomena of conventional politics, the latter was said to, inversely, 'confirm' them, to use them as levers to enforce radical change.

In Rancière's aesthetic writings, the politics of aesthetics is presented as metapolitics in the sense that it also upholds a more fundamental level beyond that of conventional politics: that of the "forms of sensible experience" (33-4/50). It thus substitutes the domain of the "sensible order" for "the [political] order of appearance and form" (37/55). The politics of aesthetics is then presented as a form of politics that aims at revolutionizing society not by way of conventional political instruments - e.g. by obtaining state power -, but rather through revolutionizing the modes of our sensible existence. The latter is believed to be the level where the real obstructions to emancipation lie and, consequently, where radical changes are to be introduced.

Rancière, however, does not present the politics of aesthetics as just *a* form of meta-politics. He takes it to be nothing less than its *Ur*-form, its first historical manifestation and the template of all subsequent metapolitical formations. This includes Marxism which - as we saw - in his earlier political work featured as main, historical manifestation of metapolitics. In his works on aesthetics, on the contrary, Marxism is presented as a later variety or "particular form" (34/50) of aesthetic metapolitics, which is even said to have made it possible. As he puts it: "the revolution of workers is conceivable only after a revolution within the very idea of revolution, in the idea of a revolution of the forms of sensible experience as opposed to a revolution of state forms" (33-4/50).[61]

This has rather puzzling implications. We saw that in *Disagreement*, the aesthetics of politics - i.e. politics proper - is opposed to metapolitics, which is valued negatively and dismissed. In some of his key aesthetic writings, on the contrary, the politics of aesthetics is presented as the very prototype of metapolitics, with the latter now being valued in a positive way as a more valid

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61 But then again, in a later text, he presents aesthetic metapolitics - and the "new idea of thought involved in the aesthetic regime of art" - as only "part of the invention of that which in Disagreement I analysed as modern metapolitics" (2005:18, my emphasis). This formulation thus does not assert a founding role for aesthetics.

and relevant form of politics than the aesthetics of politics or what he called politics 'proper'.[62]

Also, as already remarked briefly earlier, Rancière's understanding of the politics of aesthetics qua metapolitics implies a negative valuation of dissensus and, by implication, the aesthetics of politics, whose essential logic is defined in terms of dissensus. The metapolitics of aesthetics is said to dismiss dissensual political practices, including its key strategy of confirming the forms and appearances of conventional politics, for intervening on an irrelevant, superficial domain. Instead, the politics proper to aesthetics is said to strive toward the "the formation of a 'consensual' community,... a community... realized as a community of feeling" (37/54). By doing so, Rancière holds it "to achieve what was pursued in vain [sic] by the aesthetics of politics, with its polemical configuration of the common world", namely, the promise of a "non-polemical, consensual framing of the common world" (*ARO*137, emphasis mine; see also 2005:18). In the same vein, Rancière presents "aestheticization", understood as "the constitution of a new collective ethos" (idem), as alternative to politics proper. He also speaks of a "metapolitics of the sensory community, aimed at achieving what had been missed by the 'merely political' revolution - freedom and equality incorporated in living attitudes" (idem).

It is difficult to make sense of this conceptualization of the difference between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics in terms of hierarchically ordered oppositions - i.e. consensus and dissensus, non-polemical and polemical modes of framing. First, in specifying the politics proper to aesthetics, Rancière seems to go against his own key concept of politics qua dissensus or, at least, seems to point to some serious limitations. Also, the aspects that make of politics an intrinsically *aesthetic* endeavour - e.g. its confirmation of form and appearance - are here the exact opposites of those that make of aesthetics an intrinsically political endeavour - e.g. the metapolitical dismissal of existing political forms as secondary phenomena. This leads to the somewhat startling conclusion that the same characteristics that constitute the essence of the aesthetics of politics are opposite to those that constitute that of the politics of aesthetics.

How now can we understand such radically opposed valuations? One possible interpretation is that for Rancière it is not so much a matter of

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62 Note how this also implies an opposite valuation of Marxism, in part at least. In Rancière's writings on aesthetics, Marxism seems to be criticized not so much for being a metapolitics as such - as is the case in his political theory - but rather for wrongly identifying the meta-level most crucial for emancipatory politics. It is blamed for wrongly taking this level to concern the modes of production, as opposed to the modes of sensibility. In this regard, Marxism is said to substitute "productive man" for "aesthetic man" (*AD*38/55).

choosing one over the other - e.g. the aesthetics of politics over the politics of aesthetics - as most profound, genuine form of radical politics. Instead, he could be seen to merely theorize the specificity of both forms, which happen to embody partly opposite characteristics and aims. One could further argue that this is precisely what makes them *irreducible* to one another or, as he puts it, why there is an "incalculable tension" between them (2010:151). This would then be in line with what Todd Davis identifies as the central aim of Rancière's work on aesthetics: to "defend and illustrate a non-reductive conception of the political meaning of the work of art" (2010:127).

In other words, if the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics are found to be opposite in many ways, this does not have to be regarded as a conceptual inconsistency that needs to be resolved. Rather, it might be seen to result from the fact that they are political in two singular, incomparable ways, with no meta-criterion to choose one over the other as a more radical political notion. Rancière could thus be seen to affirm both forms of politics *equally*; to regard both as 'proper' forms of politics, albeit ones that apply incompatible methods or focus on very different domains. The advantage of setting up the two central concepts of his radical aesthetics in such undecidable way might be the way in which they expose and complement each other's weaknesses.

To conclude this overview of the first important way in which Rancière conceives the difference between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics, I want to point to a consequence for conceiving political art practices, which I shall develop further in a later chapter (Chapter Six). Based on this account, we can deduce that for Rancière, art practices geared towards creating dissensus, for instance by confirming the forms or appearances of democratic politics, have to be thought of as *not* political; at least, not political in a specifically *aesthetic* way. Instead, they are to be viewed as political in a political way and thus no longer instances of political *art*. On the one hand, Rancière's crossover notions of the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics can thus be seen to complicate and circumvent conventional questions as to what is 'art' or 'politics' and at what point politicized art practices stop being art and become 'plain' politics. On the other hand, however, his radical aesthetics still upholds definite limits in this regard.

X. ART AND POLITICS AS TWO FORMS OF DISSENSUS

I shall now turn to what I distinguished earlier as a second account of the specific difference between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics in Rancière's work. As I noted, this account seems to counter the oppositional relation between the two assumed by the first account or, at least, to soften it. Here, art and politics are thought to "each define a form of dissensus, a

dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" (2010:140). Rancière thus states that, apart from being so for politics, dissensus forms "the very kernel of the aesthetic regime" and, further, that the connection between the two - i.e. between politics and aesthetics - "should be cast in terms of dissensus" (idem).

Although most typical of his later works - where he for instance routinely speaks of "artistic and political dissensuality" (2007b) - one could interpret his earlier works in the same vein, even though they mainly support the first account. One could argue that Rancière there somewhat misrepresents his own concept of politics proper which leads him to exaggerate the differences between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics. We know from his political theory that politics qua dissensus is not to be understood in terms of the conventional politics of the state. Still, his earlier writings on aesthetics sometimes create this impression. Even if one of the core procedures of politics proper consists of strategically confirming the legal-political forms and appearances upheld by the state, this does not mean that they can be regarded as conventional politics or that they condone the latter.

The same can be said of Rancière's presentation of the aesthetics of politics as geared toward the creation of a consensual community. This also is far more complicated. As he himself indicates, it does not refer to a community "in which everyone is in agreement" (*AD*37/54). It rather concerns a highly dialectical concept, mediated with its opposite. Think of Rancière's characterization of aesthetic community as a "dissensual community" or still, "a community structured by disconnection" (2009:59). It is thus not to be understood as a straightforward instance of consensus politics.

Within this second account, the key question then concerns the specific differences between political and aesthetic forms of dissensuality. Unfortunately, the latter also are articulated by Rancière in rather elusive and ad hoc fashion.

There is one obvious way in which he distinguishes between the two in his aesthetic writings. He there emphasizes that in the case of the aesthetics of politics, dissensus is engendered through the invention of new collective subjects and "forms of collective enunciation" (2010:140). As such, it "consists above all in the framing of a *we*, a subject of collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of its parts" (141-2), by "offering itself as a representative of everyone, and of the capacity of everyone" (2007a:264). This can easily be read as a succinct summary of his theory of politics proper, overviewed in Chapter One.

What sets political forms of dissensus apart from aesthetic ones is thus their subjective, collective component. However, it is not very clear what - inversely - sets the aesthetic mode of dissensus apart from its political

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counterpart. At one point, he articulates it so that while politics "give[s] a collective voice to the anonymous", aesthetics "re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience" (idem). Steven Corcoran seems to say something similar in his equally dense commentary on the difference between politics and aesthetics when he states that:

> While politics involves the open-ended set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality - that is, the staging of a 'we' that separates the community from itself - aesthetic products *tend to define a field of subjective anonymity as a result of introducing the egalitarian axiom into the modes of representation themselves.* (2010:16, emphasis mine)

We can deduce from the above quotes that both political and aesthetic dissensuality result form the application of the egalitarian axiom, yet that one important difference concerns their *sphere* of application. The aesthetics of politics applies the presupposition of equality to real people or, more specifically, to the 'part with no part', hereby creating communities of the excluded. Dissensus is then created by demonstrating the equality of groups in society that are generally held to be inferior.

For its part, the politics of aesthetics produces dissensus by establishing equality on the level of our 'common experience' and 'modes of representation'. We can understand this in light of Rancière's regime theory of art. As we saw, one of the cornerstones of the representational regime of the arts - and the reason for its inherent inequality - was the close guarding of a set of hierarchical relations between different subject matters, ways of presenting them, spaces of exposition and viewing publics that were regarded as most appropriate and granted an almost eternal value. With the aesthetic revolution, this representational system was dismantled. Certain topics (e.g. courtly life or religion) were, for example, no longer treated as more worthy than others, demanding a more elevated poetics to represent them or an initiated audience to appreciate them. What is posited instead, is "the equal availability for everybody of everything that occurs on a written page" (2005:18) or, just the same, on a painted surface or in an exhibition space. Rancière thus defines the type of equality central to aesthetic dissensuality as the "equality of indifference" (idem). In line with this, we can understand how the positing of a "shared impersonal experience" and "field of subjective anonymity", as quoted earlier, is central to, and distinctive of the way in which aesthetics produces dissensus.

Based on this account, we can also understand why Corcoran holds political and aesthetic dissensus to involve "different principles" (2010:16) -

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without, however, offering much of an explanation for this - apart from their different 'objects'. Political dissensus occurs when those excluded by society refuse their enforced anonymous, impersonal and indifferent existence by claiming an own voice or 'stage' for themselves. The aesthetics of politics, on the other hand, affirms these very same qualities - i.e. anonymity, the impersonal, indifference - as key to levelling or 'de-hierarchizing' differences between modes of speaking or doing and the socio-sensible divisions maintained and legitimated through them.[63]

We could thus summarize it so that both politics and aesthetics - in their radical conceptions - are committed to achieving equality and creating dissensus, yet they not only do so by targeting different areas but also go about it in somewhat opposing ways.

Finally, Rancière also seems to distinguish the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics with regard to their *ability* to create dissensus. In this regard, he seems to introduce a hierarchy, with the politics of aesthetics in a subservient role. Think, for example, of his statement that the politics of aesthetics "*help[s] create* the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation *may* be developed that are characteristic of the 'aesthetics of politics'" (2010:142, emphasis mine). In a passage quoted earlier, he expresses it so that the dissensus created by the politics of aesthetics "*contribute[s] to the formation of* political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible" (*PA*40, emphasis mine).

The dissensual operations of aesthetics thus play an important contributing role in engendering radical political action. However, the latter do not necessarily or certainly result from the former. In this regard, Rancière says that aesthetics' radical political effects are "consequent on its articulation with other modifications in the fabric of the sensible" (2007a:259) such as, so one can interpret, these produced by political practices of dissensus. In this light, we can also understand Rancière's claim that the aesthetics of politics can only produce "*effects* of dissensus" (2010:140, emphasis mine) and thus not dissensus *itself*, or so it is implied. The latter would then be the preserve of the aesthetics of politics. All this is also in line with his rejection of any direct causal relationship between aesthetic art and its political effects, addressed earlier (Section VIII).

Still, for all the uncertainty of its efficacy, the politics of aesthetics does seem to be awarded a privileged role in radical politics. Think for instance of

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63 But again, Rancière is all but unambiguous on this score. At one point, he for instance specifies the way in which art works create dissensus in terms of the "fram[ing of] new forms of individuality and new haecceities" (2010:142).

Rancière's statement that the aesthetics of politics is "specific, but... based on modifications to the fabric of the sensible, produced in particular by artistic reconfigurations of space and time, forms and meanings" (142).[64] Still, although interdependent, in terms of producing dissensus, their relation can be seen to be somewhat skewed.

As confusedly as the differences between the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics are thought by Rancière, he does hold them to involve rather different operations, even if they ultimately serve the same radical political agenda. As said earlier, we shall return to this aspect of Rancière's political aesthetics later in this study.

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64   Similarly, about the "aesthetic way of writing" as embodied in the work of Flaubert (see earlier, Section I), Rancière says that it "brought about the capacity and the materials for a political re-configuration of the partition of the perceptible" (2005:17).

Chapter 3: Never again the ideology of the aesthetic?

Synopsis

After the two previous, mainly expository chapters, the aim of this chapter is to problematize Rancière's central theoretical move in his deduction of the notions of both the politics of aesthetics and aesthetics of politics: i.e. the awarding of a radical political core to Idealist-Romantic aesthetics. I start (Section I) by showing how Rancière hereby claims a third position for himself, in-between what he presents as the two main strands of contemporary anti-aesthetic discourse, based on a social and artistic critique of aesthetics respectively. Sections II to V critically assess his key arguments against the first, social type of anti-aesthetic theorizing, with Bourdieu's sociological theory of art as its most important representative. I first (II) briefly summarize the latter's main tenet. Next (III-IV), I look into Rancière's main criticism of Bourdieu's account, which consists of two interconnected claims. The first is a factual one, namely, that Bourdieu offers, if not an incorrect, then at least an incomplete and partial reading of the historical interrelations between aesthetics, society and politics, resulting in a too pessimistic valuation of these relations. The second objection (V) focuses on Bourdieu's methodology and reproaches it for engendering anti-emancipatory effects both because of its scientistic tenet, as well as the adopted subject position. Having presented Rancière's counterarguments against Bourdieu-style social theories of aesthetics, I then begin to problematize Rancière's own, alternative theory. First (VI), with regards to its theoretical approach, I challenge his claim of adopting a more dialectical stance towards the politics of aesthetic than his cultural materialist counterparts, which is said to result in a more positive valuation of aesthetics' political potential. I show how compared to the more sophisticated of recently developed Marxian cultural theories - mainly those of Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson - Rancière's method actually falls short in terms of dialectical depth and complexity. The second critical point, pursued in the remaining sections (VII-X), develops a more substantive criticism of Rancière's radical aesthetics, which partly results from the methodological weakness exposed previously. It is based on a comparison between Rancière's reaffirmation of Idealist aesthetics and a similar contemporary philosophical project labeled as the 'New Aestheticism'. I first (VII) show how they are similar in important ways by using Dave Beech's and John Roberts' account of new aestheticist philosophies. I then (VIII) look into Beech's and Roberts' main criticism of the New Aestheticism: its uncritical furthering of a constitutive violence at the heart of the aesthetic. I also (IX) offer an overview of their proposals to remedy this, mainly through an endorsement of aesthetics' 'Others'. Finally (X), I argue how

> *Rancière's affirmation of aesthetics' political radicalism - both in his notions of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics - can be criticized on similar grounds as the New Aestheticism for neglecting to gauge how aesthetics itself constitutes an unequal division of the sensible, instead of only being the latter's utopian suspension.*

I. DEFENDING THE AESTHETIC AGAINST THE RIGHT AND THE LEFT

This chapter offers a critical assessment of the central component of Rancière's political aesthetics elucidated in the two preceding chapters: the awarding of a radical political content to modern philosophical aesthetics and its Kantian-Schillerian variant in particular. This can be seen as the common thread of both his account of the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics. I shall problematize this key aspect by comparing Rancière's project for a radical aesthetics with other, relevant, contemporary thinking on the politics of aesthetics. For this purpose, it is useful to first look at how Rancière positions his work on art and aesthetics against what he perceives to be its main contemporary contenders. I shall do so in this introductory section.

Rancière mainly differentiates his work from two sets of theories. Although these are considered to be fundamentally opposed to one another, they would share one essential feature, namely, a highly critical stance towards philosophical aesthetics. Rancière regards them as the two most important manifestations of what he calls "contemporary anti-aesthetic discourse" (*AD*6/15). He also variously characterizes this discourse in terms of a "discontent" with (idem), "hatred" of, and "resentment" toward aesthetics (2002c). However, despite agreement on this score, the two theoretical configurations are said to oppose aesthetics for opposing reasons, which we shall elucidate in what follows.

The first group of anti-aesthetic thinking singled out by Rancière can be labeled as 'social critiques of the aesthetic' (*AD*1-2,9-10). This rather broadly defined category refers to theories that offer social explanations - but also cultural and historical ones - of key claims of philosophical aesthetics, as well as the rise of aesthetics itself as a distinct, modern discipline. As most important subspecies, Rancière mentions the sociology of art, social histories of art and postmodern cultural theory, as well as some of its key proponents: Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Clark and Hal Foster, respectively.

As we shall see in the particular case of Bourdieu's sociological theory of aesthetics, Rancière's main objection to these theories concerns what he

perceives to be their overly reductive, simplified accounts of aesthetics. They are blamed for explaining away the specificity of the aesthetic, its radical political potential in particular, treating it as little more than a symptom of other, supposedly more fundamental processes, whether socio-cultural or historical.

These, what one could also call, historical materialist theories of aesthetics have been particularly thriving in the radically politicized intellectual climate of the 1960s and 70s, of which they can be seen to be an important offspring. This was a time in which all established, inherited, 'absolute' values - such as, in the case of philosophical aesthetics, beauty and art - were automatically put under suspicion and scrutinized with the aim of uncovering their complicity in perpetuating the existing order, which was experienced as highly unjust and oppressive.

In this light, Rancière's dismissal of such radical social critiques of the aesthetic and, inversely, his unapologetic defence of 'high idealist' aesthetics might seem quite surprising for an ultra-leftist thinker who cut his philosophical teeth during this same revolutionary period. This is already less so, if one considers Rancière's relatively clean break with Marxism - at least, its orthodox or structuralist variety - early in his career. Still, considering his specific career path, and his relentless and unrepentant adherence to the struggle for radical emancipation up until this day, it is quite crucial to flesh out in more detail how his claims concerning the radical political status of aesthetics are to be positioned vis-à-vis those of other key leftist theorists of the same generation.

This is all the more necessary because of Rancière's rather cursory, nonchalant even, dismissal of social critiques of the aesthetic. For example, when he states that such critiques have "almost totally gone out of fashion" (2/10), in a book published in 2004.[65] Moreover, where he does engage more extensively with this tradition, he mainly focuses on its most vulgar specimens, thereby setting up a straw man and bypassing its more dialectical versions.[66] One of the aims of this chapter is to offer a more

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65 Against this, one could argue that cultural materialist approaches to aesthetics have recently made a come-back with the increasing political radicalization of considerable sections of the art world since the end of the 1990s, at about the same time in which Rancière started to engage in a more explicit way with aesthetics.

66 This could be seen as a result of the highly polemical tenet of Rancière's work, which causes him to engage mostly with theorists or theories with which he radically disagrees. It could also be seen as part of what Eric Méchoulan (2009) presents as Rancière's "specific way of arguing", of which he says that Rancière "does not analyze authors as such, or even short passages of philosophical works; he makes very few quotations....; he seldom refers to his adversaries' names and claims" (55).

substantial and fair comparison between Rancière's radical aesthetics and that of his most important leftist contemporaries.

If Rancière considers leftist, materialist critiques of aesthetics to have long surpassed their expiry date, he says of a second category of anti-aesthetic theories that they have formed the "dominant intellectual opinion" "[f]or twenty years now" (idem). Based on the publication date of the book in which he states this, we can deduce that the said dominance is to be taken from the middle 1980s onward. One could label this second strand of critiques as 'artistic critiques of aesthetics'. Under this category, Rancière lumps together the writings on aesthetics of philosophers such as Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard.

This mixed bag of theoretical positions is said to have in common that they side with art works and affirm their irreducible singularity over and against what they take to be illegitimate and false appropriations by aesthetic philosophy. Against mediated, programmatic experiences of art, the theories mentioned would award a central place to "the pure encounter with the unconditioned event of the [art] work" (idem). Or, as Rockhill characterizes this position, it "privileg[es]... the existence of radical singularities that escape rational explanation" (2004:74). The shared aim of these philosophers is thus to sever and purify the experience of art from all the meanings, intentions and goals attributed to them by philosophical aesthetics. The latter is blamed for having created all sorts of confusion about art's essence and having raised all kinds of false expectations, most extravagantly with regard to its political potential.[67]

Rancière presents this second set of theories also as a critique of the first category of social critiques of aesthetics. As we saw, this first group of theories lambasts philosophical aesthetics for its alleged "denegation of the social" (2/9, quoted from Bourdieu 1979/84). For example, aesthetics' alleged repression of the fact that the lofty ideals it attributes to the aesthetic (its disinterestedness, freedom, harmony, etc.) are strongly determined by social, economic or ideological forces. In contrast, the second group of theories is said to deny the validity of *any* social determination of art.

One could say that artistic critiques of the aesthetic accuse their social counterparts of sharing the same illness as philosophical aesthetics, namely, that of misrecognizing art's singularity by attributing all kinds of 'foreign'

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67 One could also regard this group of theories as a counterpart within the field of aesthetics of what Rancière in the realm of political philosophy calls 'pure politics' (*D*92/131). This refers to theories that want to shed all supposedly foreign, not strictly political elements from the conceptualization of politics such as economic or sociological aspects. In a similar vein, the theories listed could be seen as attempts at providing a pure aesthetics, if it wasn't for their dislike of the term aesthetics (see further in the main text).

properties to it. Only, in the case of social critiques of aesthetics, these meanings would no longer be philosophical in nature, but are now derived from disciplines such as political economy, sociology and literary theory. Still, they are illegitimate all the same, so artistic critiques of the aesthetic might argue. Despite its critique of social critiques of aesthetics, the second set of theories thus do not defend or re-affirm aesthetics. Quite on the contrary, it shares the first's anti-aesthetic stance, even though for opposing reasons.

One of the most general grounds on which Rancière critiques both anti-aesthetic formations, is what he considers to be their incorrect understanding of aesthetics. Both are said to be based on a dismissal of aesthetics as a "confused type of thinking [une pensée du mélange] involving a Romantic confounding of pure thought, sensible affects and artistic practice" (3/11). Against this, both social and artistic critiques of aesthetics would apply "a principle of separation that puts elements and discourse in their respective places" (idem). Rancière thus also characterizes them as "theories of distinction" (4/12).

Rancière, on the contrary, holds that the mixing of fundamentally different registers and disciplines - mainly those of politics, philosophy and art - in fact make up a constitutive, singular feature of art in the modern age. To want to eliminate it, so he argues, is thus to want to get rid of art itself (idem). As Rockhill sums up his position: against the "presupposition... that aesthetic history can and should be divided between works of art and the philosophical reflection on the nature of aesthetics...[,] Rancière... demonstrates that these domains are in fact co-extensive and that it is impossible to separate theoretical claims from artistic practice" (2004:54).

Moreover, for Rancière, the aversion towards confusion at the core of anti-aesthetic discourse has stakes attached to it that are not merely conceptual and limited to philosophical thinking on art. He regards critiques of aesthetic confusion to function "homonymously" (*AD*4/12) as covert critiques of, or resistances to modern, egalitarian-democratic 'disorder' - discussed previously (Chapter 2,III) - and, inversely, as implicit pleas for a hierarchical social order.

I leave Rancière's criticism aside for the moment. In this introductory section, I mainly want to consider the way in which Rancière sets up his aesthetic theory in opposition to the two types of theories mentioned and takes up a third position. Several commentators have identified such positioning as a typical feature of his thinking in general. Bosteels speaks of the tendency to "occupy... the space in-between... or the non-place between two positions, according to the well-know formula neither... nor..., which at the same time entails a categorical refusal of the false alternative *either... or...*" (2009:16-17). The philosophical 'non-place' - or even 'no-go-area' one might say - that is affirmed in Rancière's political aesthetics, is that which both

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social and artistic critiques of aesthetics vehemently and passionately resist despite their otherwise antithetical positions: namely, the idealist-romantic notion of the aesthetic.

Badiou, for his part, describes Rancière's prototypical positioning in terms of a "struggle on two fronts", which he considers to be an application of the Maoist dictum that "a true revolutionary fights the Right as well as the official Left" (2009:40-41). In this case, one could understand such dual struggle as one against, on the one hand, the dominant tendency of the post-May '68 Left to subject aesthetics - as one of the crown jewels of idealist-humanist, 'bourgeois' philosophy - to a radical critique from a social and historical perspective. On the other hand, Rancière could be seen to resist the 'rightist', 'conservative', 'counter-revolutionary' restoration of the sanctimonious status of art and aesthetics. He could then be seen to find fault with both: objecting as much to the vulgar, social reductionism of the first, as to the fetishizing and puristic tendencies of the second.

One of the key questions of this chapter will concern the validity, as well as value of Rancière's third, in-between position. Such a stance no doubt contributes a great deal to the intrigue and popularity of Rancière's political aesthetics in the art world. It allows him to affirm the aesthetic as a radical political notion, while staying clear from what could be seen as the twin dangers of reductionism and fetishization.

For the stated purpose, I shall test some of Rancière's basic criticisms of alternative contemporary politico-aesthetic theories, not just the ones mentioned above, but also others. Key to this, will be an alternative contextualization of Rancière's work on aesthetics. I shall contest his claim of a dominant, anti-aesthetic theoretical consensus - both among 'leftist' and 'rightist' thinkers. Instead, I shall consider his work as very much in sync with contemporary attempts among progressive philosophers to move away from the leftist anti-aestheticism of the recent past and identify something worth saving in aesthetic thinking and art practice. I shall argue that such 'new aestheticism', as it has been labeled, is a more apt characterization of the dominant attitude towards the aesthetic among contemporary leftist philosophers. Fleshing out the differences and similarities between Rancière's reaffirmation of the aesthetic and that of the new aestheticism will allow for a better understanding of the first, as well as an assessment of its vulnerability to some important criticisms that have been levelled against the second.

II. IDEALIST AESTHETICS AS CONTINUATION OF CLASS WARFARE BY OTHER MEANS

I start my problematization of Rancière's radical aesthetics by looking into his main criticisms of social accounts of aesthetics. I shall narrow down the scope of this broad category and focus mainly on his objections to Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology of art, of which his book *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979/84) forms one of the key texts. I do so, first of all, because Rancière mainly and most extensively engages with Bourdieu's work on art. Secondly - and probably the reason for the former - because he regards Bourdieu's approach to art to "epitomize" one of the "major attitudes of social science" (2005:15), as well as one of the "prevailing ways of connecting aesthetics and politics" (14-15).[68] Thirdly, Bourdieu's work is most useful in bringing out the particular features of Rancière's approach, which he himself presents as its exact opposite.

For our purposes, it is not necessary to get too much into the nitty-gritty of Bourdieu's extensive and elaborate sociological analysis of art in *Distinction*. Rather, I shall offer an account of its general tenets, which are rather straightforward. At its core, one can distinguish two major claims.

On the one hand, Bourdieu argues how aesthetic taste, mainly in its Kantian theorization, rather than describing the universal logic of the human experience of beauty, is in fact strongly determined by non-aesthetic, social processes. It is found to be intrinsically tied to the socio-economic position and lifestyle of particular groups in society. It more precisely concerns population groups with enough spare time and sufficient capital to contemplate and acquire art, such as the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Rancière describes this process in terms of a transformation of "economic and social capital into cultural capital" (2005:15). Bourdieu thus reads Kant's key determinations of judgements of taste - e.g. their disinterestedness, purposelessness, the free play between the faculties - as expressions, albeit distorted, covert ones, of the class position and way of life of the upper echelons of society. These are regarded as the historical and material conditions of possibility of Kant's aesthetic theory. As Rancière summarizes this first proposition: "[a]esthetic distance... served to conceal a social reality marked by a radical separation between the 'tastes of necessity', affiliated with the popular habitus, and the games of cultural distinction reserved for those who had the means for them" (*AD*1/9).

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68 Other labels used by Rancière to characterize this position include "Kulturkritik" (*ARO*145), "symptomatology" (idem) and the "sociology of culture" (2005:15). In relation to aesthetics, all these theoretical groupings are said to claim to speak "the truth about art, the illusion of aesthetics and their social underpinnings, the dependency of art upon common culture and commodification" (*ARO*145-6).

A second core claim of Bourdieu's work on art is that in addition to being an expression of the leisure and wealth of the dominant classes within the theoretical realm, aesthetic taste - again, as defined by Kant - is actively utilized and manipulated by these classes to maintain and further their dominance over and against those lower ranked. Kantian aesthetics, in other words, is presented as a powerful weapon of class warfare in the hands of the upper classes. This is mainly so due to the way in which it makes a conceptual distinction between good and bad taste, thereby providing a philosophical legitimization not only for judging people's aesthetic sensibilities in hierarchical fashion, but also their social class status. Bourdieu is thus said to regard taste judgements as "incorporated social judgements" (2005:15).

For Bourdieu, aesthetics thus does not constitute an autonomous realm of human existence, elevated from and relatively undisturbed by petty conflicts over material wealth and political power that predominate in everyday, social life. On the contrary, it is conceptualized as a *displaced* frontline of the class struggle. One could say, offering a variation on Carl von Clausewitz famous definition of war, that Bourdieu considers aesthetics to be nothing more than 'a continuation of class warfare by other means'. He thereby treats the aesthetic realm as any other social space, as manipulated to the same degree by particular groups in society in order to defending their class interests.

Against Kant's determination of the satisfaction proper to aesthetic judgements as 'disinterested', Bourdieu thus argues that it is all but disinterested, since it plays a key role in securing the interests of the dominant classes. This is done by exploiting cultural or 'aesthetic' capital - which, as we saw, is a byproduct of the possession of sufficient political or economic capital - to distinguish themselves from the lowly classes and throw up an extra, aesthetic barrier to their ascension of the social ladder.

To be sure, Bourdieu considers all this to be carefully hidden, repressed, denied even, under the cloak of offering a true conceptualization of the "universal and invariant form of our mental appropriation of reality", as Bennett succinctly describes one of the core pretensions of "bourgeois aesthetics" (1979:104). Rancière thus concludes that for Bourdieu, the aesthetic functions fundamentally as an *illusion*, as "a device which merely serves to mask the reality that aesthetic judgement is structured by class domination" (*ARO*133). Still, by exposing aesthetics' illusory nature, Bourdieu neither downplays its importance in the class struggle nor does he overlook the specific ways in which this struggle is waged in or through the aesthetic. The mere length and breadth of Bourdieu's sociological studies of art testify to this.

III. WORKER EMANCIPATION AS AESTHETIC REVOLUTION

We shall now look into what I see as the first of two main objections of Rancière against Bourdieu's sociological account of art and aesthetics - but, again, the latter is considered to be paradigmatic of a more general, social science approach. It concerns a substantive criticism, namely, that Bourdieu fails to do justice to the historical complexity of the modern dynamics between aesthetics, society and politics.

Rancière bases this criticism on his archival research into 19th century working class mobilization (1981/9), and his discovery of the key role aesthetics plays in the latter. We briefly referred to this part of his work in the Introduction. Rancière claims that his findings offer evidence of "a much more dialectical relationship between the social, the aesthetic and the political" (2005:15), more so than allowed for by Bourdieu. Given this, Rancière reproaches Bourdieu's account for being reductionist, for reducing the aesthetic to the social. As he sums up the bottom-line of Bourdieu's analyses: "Aesthetic difference... turn[s]... out to be a mere sublimation and concealment of social difference" (idem). Bourdieu is thus criticized for oversimplifying what is in fact an intricate and dynamic interaction between politics and aesthetics.

Related to this, is Rancière's reproach toward Bourdieu's theory of being "vulgar" (1983/2003:197). This is a charge not uncommonly levelled against materialist accounts of culture and can be understood to refer to the alleged lack of refinement and subtlety of his analyses. It can also be taken as criticism of the way in which Bourdieu brings down art and aesthetics, which are generally regarded to concern higher, more civilized preoccupations of human existence, to the level of what is most base in man: the struggle for material benefits and social power.[69]

For a better understanding of Rancière's criticism, we shall first look into his alternative reading of the relations between aesthetics and politics in the modern era. As already mentioned, one of the key discoveries of his research into early working class movements - and no doubt a fascinating one - is that, as he puts it, "at the core of the emancipation of the workers [there] was an aesthetic revolution" (2005:14). One can explain this aesthetic component of worker emancipation in terms of three interconnected claims. The first two relate to the aesthetics of politics, the third one to the politics of aesthetics.

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69 Bourdieu himself is under no illusion about the vulgarity of his critique of aesthetics. Think of the title of the post-script to *Distinction*: "Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques" (1984:485).

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The first claim is that early working class emancipation struggles to an important degree consisted of a redistribution of the sensible as conceptualized in Chapter One. More specifically, it involved active resistance by workers against the way in which their time - which, as we saw, forms a key aspect of a division of the sensible - was regimented and coded by the capitalist social order. More specifically, it concerned its division into two parts, each exclusively programmed for a specific purpose. While the day hours were designated for work, the remaining hours of the day, the night basically, were reserved for physical and mental recuperation in function of the working day ahead. For Rancière, a key component of the workers' struggle for emancipation was to break out of this temporal straightjacket, to annul the capitalist division of their time. He for instance says of this struggle that it necessitated "the conquest of the night for doing something else than sleeping" (idem).

A second key claim of Rancière's account of worker emancipation concerns the *specific ways* in which workers redivided their time. This consisted most importantly of attempts to reclaim the hours of the night for activities other than resting. Rancière's archival research lays bare how after work, mostly at night, workers engaged in poetic and literary activities. As he puts it: "The first worker-militants began by taking themselves for poets or knights, priests or dandies" (1983/2003:200). Rancière considers this "acquisition of the aesthetic gaze" (2005:13) by workers to have played a key role in their struggle for emancipation.

Again, this can be understood in terms of Rancière's conception of the aesthetics of politics as a redistribution of the sensible. In this instance, the aesthetic determination of workers that is reconfigured, concerns their sensible capacities. What is disproved, is the dominant view of workers as lacking the necessary refinement or training to be able to appreciate, let alone create, genuine art. Such valuations can be found to be crucially linked to the other key sensible determinant of time, mentioned first. The time consuming nature of work, but equally the manual, repetitive, 'mindless' nature of the labour performed, were thought to make workers unable and disinclined to pursue artistic endeavours.

By appropriating the nighttime for purposes not only other than those designated by the existing order, but also ones that were considered to be beyond their sensitivities and capabilities, workers thus overturned some of the key sensible determinations that stood in the path of their emancipation. The innovative and even controversial thrust of Rancière's findings is then that workers' struggles are shown to be driven not primarily or even most importantly by such typical demands as higher wages and a reduced working day or, more generally, ownership of the means of production. More

fundamental, for Rancière, was what he variously calls "the 'politicization' of the worker's experience", the development of a "sense of common ownership of the powers of language" (2005:15), the construction of "another relation to speech, visibility" (14) or still, a reframing by workers of "their self-perception or the perception of their world" (idem).

It is easy to see how, as Rancière himself indicates, these findings concerning workers' struggle for emancipation served as factual, historical foundation for his theory of the aesthetics of politics (idem). For Rancière, they demonstrate that oppression is to an important degree caused by sensible divisions and, consequently, that liberation necessitates an aesthetic revolution that undoes these divisions. Hence, Rancière sums up the core aim of his archival research as that of "restag[ing] the birth of the so-called 'worker's movement' as an aesthetic movement: an attempt at reconfiguring the partitions of time and space in which the practice of labour was framed, and that framed at the same time a whole set of relations" (13).

Also the way in which workers, appropriated aesthetic discourse - hereby proving to the social order that they possess sensibilities equal to those of their 'superiors' - forms, as we saw, a key aspect of Rancière's aesthetics of politics. Again, this is said to undo the existing division of the sensible, because it demonstrates "the possibility for anybody to appropriate for him- or herself another ethos than the ethos suited to their condition" (16). In this regard, Rancière also speaks of a "process of dis-identification" (14), another key feature of the aesthetics of politics.

It is further important to note that, as already suggested by the term 'appropriation', it is a case here of workers taking something that is presumed to be unique to their class antagonists and turning it into a tool for their own liberation. As Rancière states: "At the heart of social emancipation there was the process of appropriation by the workers of a language which was not their language but the 'others' language', the language of 'high' literature" (16). Rancière also describes this process in terms of workers "entering the game of bourgeois passions (and the most 'legitimate' [i.e. aesthetic] ones)" (1983/2003:200). According to him, the proletariat's use of "borrowed passions" and "words" has played a crucial role in developing an own voice (idem).

A final, third claim made by Rancière apropos early working class struggles is that it is no coincidence that the 'ethos' which they appropriated, is that embodied in "the practice of poetic language and the 'disinterested' gaze on the visible" (2005:15). He holds that aesthetic discourse and practice served as "privileged support of strategies of appropriation" by "intellectuals of the proletariat" (2003:199). Think of his remark on the 'acquisition of the

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aesthetic gaze' by Gabriel Gauny, who in Rancière's research features as prototypical example of early proletarian intellectuals:

> Strangely enough, the carpenter Gauny seems to be commenting on the *Critique of Judgement* when, from the room in which he lays a parquet floor, he offers the gaze of an aesthete on the décor of his servitude: 'Thinking himself at home, as long as he has not finished the room in which he nails down the boards, he likes the layout of the place; if the window opens onto a garden or over a picturesque horizon, he stops moving his hands for an instant and shifts his thoughts toward that spacious view in order to enjoy it better than the owners of the neighbouring homes' (idem, Rancière quotes from Gabriel Gauny (1983)).

Rancière considers the carpenter's aesthetic ways of looking to be "in keeping with the idea, spelled out by Kant and Schiller, according to which aesthetic experience is a specific sphere of experience which invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience" (2005:15). Rancière's point here is thus not only that in contemplating and appreciating the aesthetic properties of his spaces of work in disinterested fashion, Gauny transgresses stereotypical assumptions about the inclinations and aptitudes of people of his class and profession. It also points to the emancipatory content of Kantian aesthetics as such, i.e. the way in which it inherently facilitates a dissociation between persons, their vocation and presumed sensitivities. Based on this, we can understand Rancière's claim that Kant and Schiller's conceptualization of the aesthetic is much closer to "the social experience of emancipation" (idem). Apart from an instance of the aesthetics of politics, early worker emancipation is thus also presented as proof of the radical nature of the politics of aesthetics.

Accordingly, Rancière differentiates between two aesthetic revolutions: one constituted by the workers' politics of appropriation, the other established by the aesthetic regime of art, which he considers to be more "general" or "wider" (2005:14). Thus far I presented both aesthetic revolutions as in sync with one another. However, Rancière holds them not only to be different, but considers their relationship to be "twisted" and even "conflictual" (16). In a later section (X), I shall expound on the differences, interrelations and tensions between the two aesthetic revolutions and include it in my critical assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics.

IV. THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS: A GLASS HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

How now should we arbitrate the two radically opposing accounts of the political status of art and aesthetics in the modern era covered so far? On one side, we have Bourdieu's sociological theory of art which analyzes to the bone the intricate ways in which the dominated, no matter how hard they try, again and again get the short end of the stick in the game of aesthetic distinction. This is blamed on the fact that the 'bourgeois' game of aesthetics is rigged from the start, the basic rules having been written - and still so up until today - by the dominant classes, tailored to their particular situation of power and privilege. This would put them in pole position from the get-go while the dominated are inversely burdened with a negative handicap even before they have entered the game, making it a near impossibility of beating their dominators.

In contrast to this straightforward, pessimistic assessment, Rancière's archival research in to working class struggles demonstrates how aesthetic discourse and practice have in actual fact been used successfully by those relegated to inferior positions in society to stake their claim to being the equals of their supposed superiors, to demonstrate that they are endowed with equal sensibilities and competencies. In other words, he contends that historically, the dominated have taken on the dominant at their own game and have proven to be their match. Rancière further argues that workers' recourse to aesthetics was not coincidental, as if they could have picked any of their oppressors' typical 'games' to prove their equal worth. According to him, what makes aesthetics the weapon of choice for those struggling for liberation, is the presupposition of sensible equality inherent to it, and with this, annulment of the hierarchies upheld by inegalitarian regimes. As we saw, Rancière identified this as the radical, utopian content of Idealist-Romanticist aesthetics.

Note again how Rancière's argument for a close connection between aesthetics and emancipatory politics rests both on his notion of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. In my critical assessment - in the last section of this chapter (X) - I shall challenge Rancière's radical aesthetics on both counts. In the remainder of this section, I want to further specify, refine and reflect on the differences between Bourdieu's and Rancière's account of the relation between politics and aesthetics in the modern period.

I shall start by considering some possible retorts to Rancière's claims from a Bourdieusian, social science perspective. A first, 'quantitative' objection will no doubt be that Rancière's proletarian poets constitute a relatively marginal historical phenomenon. And further, that it does not therefore warrant the kind of generalizations made by him concerning the role of Kantian aesthetics in working class emancipation struggles. It could easily be discarded as a

statistical aberration. Davis identifies this as a typical feature of Rancière's work: the focus on exceptional, singular moments and figures, taking them to be exemplary (2010).

Another predictable response from a Bourdieusian perspective would be to dismiss working class appropriations of bourgeois aesthetics as a misplaced identification with the very tools used against them by their oppressors. In this sense, the worker-aesthetes could be seen to suffer from a condition similar to Stockholm Syndrome. They could be found to be mistaken in several ways. For one, they can be seen to make a naively optimistic estimation of the intrinsic worth of aestheticism. Further, their appropriations could be considered to be cases of self-inflicted mental colonization, with workers uncritically adopting bourgeois values. Finally, there might be misrecognition of the fact that they will always be second-rate citizens in the bourgeois territories of the aesthetic.

Against these counterarguments, Rancière could stand firm and maintain that the artistic exploits of 19th century proletarians, even if a relatively rare historical occurrence, still prove that aesthetics *can and has* served as support for emancipatory struggles. And, further, that this is conceivable only if one takes aesthetics to harbour a genuine, liberatory promise, even if one concedes that this promise has been insufficiently realized or even downright betrayed ever since it was made. In this light, we can understand Rancière's more qualified statement that aesthetics' promise has not been *in*effectual (*ARO*133). This more reserved stance however, is still miles apart from Bourdieu-style social critiques of the aesthetic that categorically reject the promise of aesthetics for being *intrinsically* false, considering it to be nothing more than a bourgeois ruse to maintain class dominance.

But again, although Rancière does not shy away from critiquing Bourdieu to the bone, some of the most explicit ways in which he differentiates his own political theory of aesthetics from that of Bourdieu are more nuanced, for instance calling his own approach 'more' dialectical or "more pertinent" (idem). This more cautionary positioning could be interpreted as an indication that Rancière does not completely dismiss social critiques of the aesthetic for being absolutely mistaken or having no historical leg to stand on. In line with his more qualified expressions, he might admit that it is not entirely illegitimate' to say, for example, that Kantian-style aesthetic experience was historically made possible by the leisurely lifestyle typical of the non-working classes, whether bourgeoisie, noblemen or academic philosophers. Still, so he might counter, the fact that early German Idealist aesthetic theories have been manipulated throughout modern history for justifying deeply inegalitarian divisions of the sensible, has not prevented them from having been used equally well as levers for realizing radically emancipatory goals.

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In other words, Rancière's reply to Bourdieu-style social critiques of the aesthetic might be that they do not completely settle the issue of the political value of art. On the contrary, they can be seen to only tell one part of the truth and, with regard to the relation between art and emancipatory politics, the least pertinent part. He thus seems to say that despite the fact that in past times the aesthetic has been all too often abused to legitimate class dominance, one does not have to resign to this. The utopian content of aesthetics makes it equally capable of being put to good use and historically the oppressed have indeed done so. I shall later question this key claim.

In Rancière's and Bourdieu's widely divergent accounts of the relation between modern aesthetics and politics, one could also detect a clash between two radically different types of theoretical politics. Based on our previous account, one could say that one of Rancière's general objections to Bourdieu-style critical approaches concerns its typically metapolitical tenet. As we saw earlier, some of the basic features of metapolitics are the endless denunciation of the betrayal in reality of beautiful promises made in the political realm, as well as the latter's dismissal for being epiphenomenal and for misrecognizing the real determinants of political strife, in whichever way these may be specified. Bourdieu's theoretico-political strategy can be seen to do something similar, focused as it is on endlessly exposing how the canonical texts of modern aesthetics are in fact a string of nice words, how its emancipatory promises were never seriously meant to be realized in society and, instead, are merely meant to divert attention of the irredeemably class nature of its key propositions. An important part of such metapolitical reading of idealist aesthetics would also be to offer an explanation of how all this might have happened unbeknownst to the philosophers in question, with the latter sincerely believing in the promises made, without acknowledgment of their class prejudices.

We saw that in opposition to metapolitics' "work of demystification" (2015:17), the properly political approach for Rancière is to fully endorse the promises made by political or juridical declarations. These are held to be sincere, even if not intended so by their authors, in an attempt to enforce and extend their application in reality. In this sense, Rancière's reading of some of the most canonical texts of Idealist-Romanticist aesthetics can be seen to be properly political. It takes the egalitarian tenet of these texts at face value, regardless of whether they were made in good faith or not.

As an example of Rancière's reading strategy, we can take his position towards what metapolitical critics denunciate as the illusory nature of the aesthetic. Against this, Rancière embraces this illusory status as precisely that which makes aesthetic experience emancipatory, for the reason that it allows for "the possibility of playing" (1983/2003:199). One could say that he hereby

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applies the same strategy on a theoretical level which he attributes to his worker-poets; practicing what he preaches, so to speak.

We can further specify Rancière's position by confronting it with what I consider to be one of the most penetrating metapolitical critiques of the history of modern aesthetics by Martha Woodmansee (1994). Through detailed genealogical analyses, she argues how some of the classic texts of this tradition - including those by Kant, Schiller and the less-known Karl Philipp Moritz - were in fact too a high degree motivated by financial self-interests and fears of pending irrelevance.

Woodmansee contends that the historical occurrence of typically aesthetic concepts such as disinterestedness or autonomy has to be understood in the context of the rapid emergence of an art market in Western Europe at the time. The latter was increasingly geared towards so-called 'low' literature and - inversely - indifferent at best, hostile at worst, towards 'high' literature. In order to preserve some dignity in their increasing marginalization, as well as to secure their livelihood, Woodmansee argues that the said theorists made "a virtue... of necessity" (22). As she explains this: "the relative ineffectuality of beautiful [i.e. autonomous, 'high', elitist, etc.] art, instead of rendering its value problematic, [was]... construed as evidence of its very excellence" (idem). She considers the self-interested motives mentioned to be the "more fundamental material impulses responsible for th[e]... valorizing of [autonomous] art" (20). Woodmansee thus presents the autonomous conception of art as a resolution to "a concrete dilemma of the [then] contemporary art world" (21).

Rancière's theoretical politics could be seen to be capable of deflecting such damaging metapolitical revelations that point to dubious, self-interested, narcissistic motivations behind aesthetics' key conceptual propositions and emancipatory promises. Instead of decrying the shallowness or falsehood of these promises, Rancière could argue that the properly political stance as a theorist or philosopher, is to affirm them *regardless*, in order to force their 'true' realization. In other words, to affirm their emancipatory content despite of, and over and against the intentions and motivations of their authors. One could also say that for Rancière the key question to be asked concerning Idealist aesthetics is what one can *do* with it, how it can be put to work practically for the purpose of liberation. In this sense, we can understand Rancière's earlier mentioned claim that the promise of a new, emancipated life inherent in aesthetic experience has not been ineffectual, to refer to such "performative efficacy" (1983/2003:199). Or, as Robson puts it, "the promise, read in terms of its effect is... seen [by Rancière] as performative" (2005:82).

To be sure, phrased in this way, Rancière's approach towards Idealist aesthetics could be found to be *all too* political. It seems to implies that it almost doesn't matter whether aesthetics is inherently emancipatory or not, as

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long as it serves as effective means to the ends of liberation. In other words, even if aesthetics is found to be dubious or problematic in itself - e.g. due to its covert prejudice toward the dominant classes - this can be dismissed as ultimately irrelevant as long as it is efficacious as an instrument toward achieving radical change. Rancière's position, however, cannot be reduced to such utilitarian-instrumentalist reasoning. As we saw, he argues that Idealist aesthetics is *inherently* emancipatory, that the 'ends' of emancipation are already contained in the 'means' so to speak.

I shall leave this issue for the moment and shall return to it at the end of this chapter. I first want to bring some more considerations into the equation by looking at some further objections made by Rancière against Bourdieu-style social theories of art. Still, at this point, I want to already briefly state the key question I want to pose to Rancière's account of the historical entanglements between emancipatory worker struggles and idealist aesthetics. It concerns the question as to whether the appropriations of aestheticism by Rancière's worker-poets, although not without merit from a tactical perspective, do not run the danger of uncritically endorsing and further entrenching a mode of sense-experience that, its emancipatory aspects notwithstanding, is too contaminated and compromised by the thoroughly anti-emancipatory and oppressive agenda of the dominant classes. Or, put in a more straightforward way, the question is whether Rancière doesn't overestimate the radical potential of the workers' strategy of "beating the enemy at her own game" and, inversely, overlooks some of its obvious limitations, such as the counterproductive effects engendered due to the fact that it is still the 'game' of the oppressor - i.e. Idealist aesthetics - that serves as normative framework and sets the rules. As a result, the latter might be seen to have emerged stronger than ever after being appropriated by workers, having reinforced and extended its hegemony.

V. SPEAKING TRUTH TO AESTHETICS? THANKS, BUT NO THANKS!

We now understand one of the main reasons why Rancière considers Bourdieu's approach to art to be inherently anti-emancipatory. As a result of adopting an insufficiently dialectical approach, Bourdieu is said to end up with a too pessimistic estimation of the interaction between aesthetics and politics, offering little hope to the oppressed for successful resistance. By theorizing aesthetics as an essentially bourgeois affair biased against the lower classed, which is none of their business, Bourdieu's analyses are said to endorse "the old Platonic commandment that everybody stay in his own place" (2005:15).

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This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Bourdieu saves up his most complex, dialectical analyses to demonstrate how the hold of class society on its subjects is never more tight than in instances in which the lowly classed imagine themselves to have overcome their class determinations. He considers people to be never more duped by the system and more 'self-deluded' about their 'real' place in societies' hierarchies than when they believe to have transcended the latter, by regarding themselves as their class enemies' equals, for example.

I now put Rancière's substantive criticisms of Bourdieu's work aside - i.e. focused on the question of which account has the most historical evidence to back up its claims. Rancière can be seen to offer two more arguments why social-science approaches to aesthetics, without necessarily intending to do so, play into the hands of the same division of the sensible based on inequality and domination whose dubious workings and intricate ruses it relentlessly dissects and exposes. In both instances, it more concerns *the manner in which* Bourdieu deduces and puts forward his claims. Or still, the objections concern the specific - in Rancière's view, anti-emancipatory - *discursive or performative effects* of Bourdieusian social theory. As will become clear, these criticism add more fuel to Rancière's dismissal of social science approaches as "not the most productive" (*ARO*133) or even "depressing" (1983/2003:180) with regard to transformational politics.

(i) A first criticism focuses on what one could call the rabid scientism of Bourdieu's approach, i.e. the way in which he derives and presents his propositions as inevitable social laws. Again, Rancière's critique is here not so much focused on the content of these propositions and their justifications. Instead, it is concerned with their *form qua scientific truths*, as well as with the underlying assumption that only such truths 'shall set us free' - to express it in biblical terms.

Against this, Rancière argues that instead of such a liberating effect, Bourdieusian social theory produces exactly the opposite. It is said to do so by theorizing *ad nauseum* the elaborate ways in which society is unevenly organized not only with regard to the distribution of material wealth, but even with regard to something more elevated and spiritual like aesthetic taste, with those on top anxiously holding on to their benefits by doing everything in their power to deny others access. As such, it sends out an unmistakable message to those at the receiving end that all attempts at opposing or correcting injustices and inequalities are ultimately futile. And it does so despite the fact that Bourdieu's efforts at exposing the inherent inequalities of class society are driven by strong feelings of outrage - Bourdieu being generally labelled as a neo-Marxist thinker.

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Rancière's key contention here is that the systematic, scientific treatment of processes of domination has a *normalizing, naturalizing* effect on them by explaining their injustice away. In other words, it grants a sense of inevitability and necessity to the very same power mechanisms it bends over backward to expose as scandalous. In relation to political art practices geared at raising-awareness, but just as applicable to Bourdieusian social critique, Rancière explains it so that by "build[ing] understanding and dissolv[ing] appearances", they kill the "strangeness... that attests to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world" (*AD*45/65-6). In this regard, he considers critical art - but again, just as well critical social theory - to be caught in a "vicious circle" (46/66): the more it offers insight into the workings of an unjust system, the more it causes "things to lose their capacity of resistance" (idem). We can thus understand why Rancière sums up the bottom-line of Bourdieusian critical social theory in terms of a return to "the disenchanted knowledge of the eternity of division between the possessors and the dispossessed" (1983/2003:202).[70]

A second aspect of this criticism of Bourdieu's scientistic approach focuses on its pretensions to enlighten and conscientize people as to the deeper mechanisms behind their oppression. Rancière's key claim here is that the real obstacle to liberation is not so much a lack of knowledge or insight. On the one hand, he holds that the oppressed themselves mostly possess sufficient insight into the reasons and ways of their exploitation (*AD*45/65, 2009a:76, 2010:144). On the other hand, he argues that even if such knowledge would be lacking or insufficient, "understanding does not, in and of itself, help to transform intellectual attitudes and situations" (*AD*45/65). Instead, he holds the true obstacle to emancipation - and the reason for prevailing political inaction, apathy or resignation among the dominated - to be a "lack [of] confidence in their capacity to transform" their unenviable circumstances (idem). The key factor for radical political mobilization would thus concern the "feeling" (idem) of possessing the necessary powers to change one's conditions of existence, and not so much access to correct, scientific knowledge about their underlying causes.

By being exclusively focused on providing such knowledge, Bourdieu's theory would thus miscalculate the true needs of those whom he intends to enlighten, i.e. assistance in building their self-confidence in being able to

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70   In this formulation, we can detect Rancière's critique of 'speculative leftism', I mentioned previously (Chapter 1, IX). As we saw, the latter's central flaw concerns its thinking in false, 'Manichean' oppositions and dualisms due to a lack of dialectical depth and complexity, which is also what Rancière reproaches Bourdieu for. According to him, this is also what make speculative leftist theories inoperative, which is another key accusation of Rancière towards Bourdieu.

effectively challenge the injustices to which they are subjected . Even worse, based on what I said earlier, Bourdieu's scientism could even be held to indirectly deprive the oppressed of belief in their own powers of achieving radical change by granting an inevitable character to the status-quo.

One could say that Rancière here puts to use Friedrich Nietzsche's famous statement that "Knowledge kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion" (1874:Section 7, second but last paragraph), as well as Nietzsche's arguments in support of this claim. Of "Dionysian man" and Hamlet, Nietzsche says that their inaction must be attributed to the fact that...

> ... both have looked deeply into the true nature of things, they have gained knowledge and are now loath to act. They realize that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the imputation as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is out of joint". (idem)

It is precisely such an overwhelming sense of the eternal, unchanging reality of domination and class privilege that Rancière pinpoints as main performative effect of social critical theories à la Bourdieu on the dominated and lowly classed, with similar debilitating effects.

(ii) Apart from its scientism, a second important way in which Bourdieusian-style social critiques of aesthetics are found to be deeply anti-emancipatory by Rancière concerns the *subject position* adopted in relation to the people it aims to enlighten. At the basis of Bourdieu's demystificatory endeavours, he detects a radically inegalitarian interaction. On one side, there is the critical social scientist who claims possession of a unique, magisterial insight into the laws of domination. In this sense Rancière calls Bourdieu "the sociologist-king" (1983/2003), a clear reference to the supreme role of the philosopher in Plato's philosophy. On the other hand, there are those whose lives are caught in the web of domination. Because of not having had the privilege of being trained in the rigid ways of science, they are heavily reliant on critical sociologists like Bourdieu to enlighten them with regard to the wicked ways of their oppression.

We thus get a highly asymmetrical exchange, relation of dependence and hierarchical division of roles with regard to the production of knowledge. The social scientist here sits at the top as supreme 'subject in the know', feeding his knowledge - or, at least, a simplified, watered-down version of it - to the 'victims' of the existing order situated at the lower ranks. Rancière's fundamental problem with such interaction, as Michaud succinctly states it, is that "the very notion of an explication meant to make somebody understand something, supposes a world divided into wise and ignorant men" (1997:428, translation mine). Rancière thus again argues how Bourdieu-style critical

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theory paradoxically reinforces the same relations of inequality it purports to expose as unjust. In this regard, Michaud speaks of critical sociologists "stump [ing] reputedly inferior intelligences who see themselves confined to their limitations due to being deprived from their self-confidence" (idem, translation mine).[71] The position of domination occupied by Bourdieu-type theorists in the realm of knowledge is thus considered to further aggravate the oppressed's lack of belief in their abilities to change their deplorable conditions of existence for the better.

For Rancière, this is unforgivable, especially for a branch of theory that considers itself to be at the forefront of radical political struggle. It reinforces the same mechanisms of domination whose inherent injustice it so meticulously dissects. This is diametrically opposed to the central aim of Rancière's emancipatory pedagogy that is geared to a radical redistribution - reversal even - of the conventional, hierarchical and highly unequal division between an 'all-knowing' master and his 'ignorant' pupils. This is founded on a horizontal interaction between what he calls an 'ignorant' master who openly professes his ignorance and whose sole pedagogical role is to motivate his 'pupils' to use their own intelligence in order to gain insight by themselves (1987/91). This can be said to constitute true emancipation for Rancière, with the subject gaining confidence in its powers of understanding.

VI. THE AESTHETIC: A POLITICALLY AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT

Now that we have gained a better understanding of Rancière's main objections to Bourdieu-style social theories of aesthetics and politics, I shall start to problematize some of the central, underlying claims. In this section, I assess Rancière's contention of adopting a more dialectical methodological approach towards the politics of aesthetics. I already mentioned that this formed one of the most fundamental ways in which Rancière distinguishes his work from social critiques of aesthetics. In the following sections of this chapter, I scrutinize some of the key substantive claims at the heart of Rancière's politico-aesthetic theory.

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71 Rancière could here be seen to practice some vulgar, materialist reductionism of his own, arguing, as Michaud sums it up, that Bourdieusian critical sociology "imprison[s] the lower classes in their situation while ensuring, in passing, its own scientific lucidity" (1997:426, translation mine). The implication is that Bourdieu, in constructing a highly elaborate and complex scientific theory of art and society, is motivated - even if partly or unconsciously - by a desire to affirm his intellectual superiority, as well as by self-preservation. Bourdieu could, for example, be seen to do so by first establishing a monopoly position on critical knowledge of the system for himself and then creating 'demand' for his expertise by depriving his potential 'clients' (the oppressed) of confidence in their own cognitive abilities.

As we saw, Rancière mainly bases his dismissal of social and cultural explanations of aesthetics on a critique of Bourdieu's sociological theory of art, taking it to exemplify fundamental flaws shared by all such theories. However, by focusing on a self-assertedly vulgar variety of social critiques of aesthetics, he could be seen to set up a straw man. He can be reproached for hereby avoiding critical engagement with more dialectical specimens within the same tradition of cultural materialism, of which there are plenty.

To offer a more accurate and fair comparison, I shall first offer a brief account of one of the key, common, conceptual claims concerning the political status of art made by such more complex materialist theorizations of aesthetics, namely, that of its *irreducible ambiguity*. I then consider how Rancière's approach fares in comparison to such theories in terms of complexity and 'dialecticity'.

One of the most known, relatively recent, Marxian theoretical engagements with the politics of aesthetics is Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). Other than the title might suggest, the work is highly critical of what it calls "left functionalism" and "left moralism" with regard to art. Such stances are blamed for reducing "the internal complexity of the aesthetic to a direct set of ideological functions" (4,8). Against such reductionist, vulgar approaches, Eagleton presents the politics of aesthetics as an "eminently contradictory phenomenon" (3). This is attributed to the fact that aesthetics is both "inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society", *and* a "powerful challenge and alternative" to the latter (idem).

About the Kantian concept of aesthetic autonomy, Eagleton for instance claims that it is "radically double-edged", providing, on the one hand, "a central constituent of bourgeois ideology" (9), namely, the ideological model of subjectivity required by the middle class for its material operations. On the other hand, it is also said to found "the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities" that makes up "the anthropological foundation of a revolutionary opposition to bourgeois utility" (idem). Or, as Eagleton also articulates this dual side of the aesthetic: it "offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation" while it simultaneously "blocks and mystifies the real political movement towards such historical community" (idem). Politically, Eagleton thus takes the aesthetic to be "amphibious concept" (idem).

This identification within aesthetics of both negative, conservative ideological elements and progressive, revolutionary ones can be traced back to Karl Marx's diagnosis of the political status of religion as an equally intrinsically contradictory phenomenon (1844). He considers religion to be both a genuine expression of discontent with the existing order and the desire

for radical change *and* an 'opiate', commanding people to desist from attempting to realize such change in their earthly lives.

Based on the highly dialectical nature of aesthetics' politics, we could say that theories that denounce the illusory nature of the aesthetic or its complicity with the 'bourgeois' order - like Bourdieu's sociology of art - are not simply wrong and therefore cannot be dismissed outright. They are right to take on aesthetics for playing a conservative role in propping up existing social orders based on inequality and exploitation. The problem comes in, however, when emphasis is exclusively put on this one dimension, which makes such theories limited and one-sided, causing them not to tell the whole truth about aesthetics' political value.

In this sense, Rancière's criticisms of Bourdieusian social critiques of the aesthetic are equally justified. To reduce aesthetics to its negative ideological function and condemn it on this basis, is to do away with the dialectical complexity of its inherent politics. One could thus understand Rancière's almost exclusive emphasis on the utopian, emancipatory aspects of aesthetics - which we also explained in terms of a political-theoretical strategy - as an attempt to provide a counterbalance to such theories. This more optimistic stance toward art's radical political potential is no doubt an important contributing factor to the enthusiastic reception of Rancière's work on aesthetics in the contemporary art world.

To be sure, Rancière is not the first to privilege the liberatory promise of the aesthetic over and above its illusory, ideological nature. Here also, he can be seen to tread in the footsteps of a long line of cultural materialist theorists. Eagleton, for one, claims that the contradictory political status of the aesthetic can only be encompassed by dialectical thought, as well as by a "redemptive" approach. He defines the aim of such approach in terms of "salvag[ing] and redeem[ing] for left political uses what is still viable and valuable in the class legacies to which we are heirs", considering the "bourgeois" tradition of aesthetics to be one of those legacies (8). In this regard, Eagleton lauds Bertold Brecht's pragmatic approach toward aesthetics, "using what you can" for revolutionary purposes (idem). Rancière's radical aesthetics can be seen to be animated by the same spirit: to isolate the utopian content of 'bourgeois' aesthetics and use it for emancipatory purposes.

One of the most influential, recent Marxian champions of such utopian, redemptive approach towards cultural production is Fredric Jameson. One can think here of the key methodological claim made in *The Political Unconscious* (1981/2002) that in interpreting cultural products one has to simultaneously apply a negative and positive hermeneutic. That is, one has to conduct both an "ideological analysis proper" and "a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same ideological texts" (286). Or, as he also phrases it, "an *instrumental*

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analysis [has to be] coordinated with a *collective-associational* or *communal* reading of culture,... a functional method... [has to be] articulated with an *anticipatory* one" (idem).

Still, although Jameson holds a materialist approach to the politics of cultural products as a case of 'both... and...', he went especially far in offering redemptive readings. He, for example, even granted a utopian dimension to cultural expressions of the dominant classes, and this "not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate their own class privilege and power, but rather because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity" (281).

For both Eagleton and Jameson, it is thus a matter of combining and integrating positive and negative political dimensions of art works into a dialectic of aesthetic ideology and utopia, aesthetic illusion and radical political promise. In Jameson's case, however, there is a special focus on the second.

It is a pity that Rancière doesn't engage with these more dialectical versions of Marxian cultural criticism. This could have made explicit the minimal - or not so minimal - differences between the two, as well as relativize his claim of a clean break and opposition between his approach to aesthetics and that of social critiques of aesthetics. Such more honest consideration and weighing of their differences might have allowed for a more realistic, complete and, ultimately, more productive approach to theorizing the politics of aesthetics.

Instead, it is difficult not to conclude that compared to contemporary cultural materialist theorizations of the contradictory political status of aesthetics and the consequent, dual, ideological and utopian approach, Rancière's conceptualizations of the inherent politics of aesthetics come off as rather one-dimensional. If not entirely neglecting the negative ideological functions of art, Rancière at least dismisses their pertinence, inversely awarding exclusive importance to its emancipatory potential.

To be sure, this overestimation of aesthetics' radical political status could be explained strategically, as antidote to approaches that exclusively focus on art's negative ideological role and, as such, could be experienced as a breath of fresh air within the art world. Still, Rancière's political aesthetics does seem to err in the opposite direction and be too simplistically, 'vulgarly' even, optimistic about art's revolutionary agency. One could see this as another manifestation of what Michaud referred to as Rancière's 'angelicism' (1997:445) mentioned earlier. By completely overlooking aesthetics' negative ideological aspects, his affirmation of Idealist aesthetics becomes prone to an uncritical reinstatement of these aspects. His one-sidedly

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utopian approach in other words risks furthering some of the problematic ideological functions of aesthetics under the cloak of its opposite.

VII. 'HATRED' OF AESTHETICS OR NEW LOVE AFFAIR?

In the remaining sections of this chapter I shall specify some of the substantive shortcomings and dangers resulting from the methodological limitations of Rancière's radical aesthetics discussed in the previous section. I shall do so by looking into some of the most important criticisms levelled at philosophical projects that, in a similar vein as Rancière and formulated more or less during the same time period (from the 1990s onwards), have reaffirmed the progressive political potential of art through a revaluation of Idealist and Romanticist aesthetics.

The existence of such projects might seem somewhat surprising in light of the way in which Rancière himself positions his work on aesthetics. As we saw earlier, he creates the impression of being a lone voice crying out in the contemporary desert of the anti-aesthetic. He further alleges that the contemporary theoretical climate is especially hostile to the heritage of Idealist-Romantic aesthetic philosophy.

Such a presentation is misleading. It omits the fact that at least ten years before Rancière started to write explicitly on aesthetics at the end of the 1990s, the philosophical world has witnessed a massive return to aesthetics. This even to the degree that a label has been coined for this tendency within philosophy: the New Aestheticism (Joughin & Malpas 2003). Dave Beech and John Roberts for their part speak of "the new [philosophical] writing on aesthetics" (2002:14), as well as the "recent revival of the philosophy of aesthetics" (13). Robson speaks of "a movement [back] towards the philosophical question of aesthetics" and, more specifically, "a reengagement with the legacy of German idealist and Romantic thought" (2005:77). He considers Rancière's work to constitute "a distinct version of this re-reading of the Kantian legacy" (79).[72]

One is thus justified to claim that instead of a generalized hatred and resentment toward aesthetics, a new love affair has been blossoming for quite some time now between contemporary philosophers and the aesthetic. Other than Rancière suggests, there has in fact been a massive re-investment in, and re-valuation of philosophical aesthetics. It is therefore more correct to consider Rancière's work on aesthetics as a relatively late instance of this tendency within contemporary philosophy, as well as only one of many theoretical

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72 Philosophers that are regarded as main proponents of the New Aestheticism include Jay Bernstein (1992), Andrew Bowie, Peter Osborne and Isobel Armstrong (2000).

projects that take up the sword for aesthetics' key importance for progressive politics against its anti-aesthetic detractors.

It is unfortunate that Rancière does not engage with this key tendency in contemporary aesthetics and the work of its key proponents.[73] This can be found to be rather odd, considering the powerful influence of the New Aestheticism as present-day conceptualization of the relation between art and politics, as well as the intensity of some of the controversies that have raged over it. For the purpose of this chapter - the problematization of Rancière's recuperation of idealist aesthetics for radical politics - it is useful to look into some of these controversies because, as I shall argue, his work is vulnerable to some of the key objections levelled against the New Aestheticism. This will then allow me to articulate some of the substantive problems of Rancière's radical aesthetics.

Before we can do so, we first have to establish in more detail the similarities and differences between Rancière's reaffirmation of aesthetics and that of the New Aestheticism. This is not meant to offer a full-blown comparison, however. This would exceed the scope and aim of this study, especially since the New Aestheticism, like any philosophical movement, includes a wide diversity of theoretical projects. For this comparison, I shall mainly rely on the influential account of the New Aestheticism by Beech and Roberts (2002) who, as will become apparent subsequently, have also formulated one of the most thorough and harsh critiques of it.

Beech and Roberts present the New Aestheticism as an attempt by mainly anglophone Leftist philosophers - but also literary theorists, art historians and critics - to critically reconsider their relation to art and aesthetics in the post-1989 era.[74] They specifically detect a desire to move away from the Left's vehemently anti-aesthetic stance in the 1970s and early 1980s, characterized by "aggressive suspicion and denunciation" (16,29) of art's and aesthetics' "broken promises, bad habits and canonical structures" (33). New aestheticists are said to blame this radical dismissal of the aesthetic by the Left for having given rightist theorists free rein to appropriate it for their own, conservative

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73   The New Aestheticism is not to be confused with what Rancière presents as the second anti-aesthetic theoretical current, which I called the artistic critique of aesthetics. This, first and foremost, because the New Aestheticism does not discard philosophical aesthetics but on the contrary re-affirms it. A second important difference is that the New Aestheticism still holds on to the idea of art as inherently political.

74   The fact that the New Aestheticism is mainly an anglophone movement might explain its absence in Rancière's work. Such explanation would however rest on the rather dubious assumption of a total separation between francophone and anglophone philosophy in which both are completely oblivious of or, at least, indifferent toward the work of the other. Moreover, in his description of social critiques of aesthetics, Rancière does refer to two 'anglophone' theorists: Timothy Clark and Hall Foster.

purposes. As main culprits for this, a wide variety of theoretical formations are fingered such as Marxism, deconstructivism, poststructuralism (32), feminism, post-colonial theory (16-7), social theory and history of art (25) and literary theory (Petts 2005). Some of the collective sins attributed to these formations by new aestheticists include the reduction of discussions of aesthetics to discussions on ideology (Beech & Roberts:17), "disregard for the particularity of works", as well as art's intellectualization and historicization (Petts 2005).[75]

We can thus say that Rancière and the New Aestheticism offer similar diagnoses of the post-1968 Left's attitude toward aesthetics. They share the view that in the recent past, leftist philosophers, in their revolutionary fervour, sold the aesthetic too quickly and cheaply to the ideological adversary, thereby throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Moreover, in his critique of leftist social critiques of aesthetics, Rancière takes issue with the same tendencies decried by new aestheticists such as overemphasis on ideology, instrumentalism and reductionism.

In terms of their basic response to leftist anti-aestheticism, once can also detect a lot of similarities. According to Beech and Roberts, the new aestheticism is driven by a desire to reclaim aesthetics from the Right (16). This is said to be prompted by the crisis of Leftist anti-aestheticism - Beech and Roberts speak of a "crisis in the political usefulness and intellectual validity of the social in art" (26). This would itself be linked to certain broader political developments such as the "crisis of Marxism", the collapse of socialist regimes and "disappointment with postmodern's bureaucratization of art's critique of itself" (17). This is then said to have produced an urge among the contemporary Left "to renegotiate their own inheritance and previous convictions within a transformed political culture" (18). Beech and Roberts consider this to be the shared "point of departure" (idem) of the New Aestheticism and this can easily be seen to be that of Rancière as well.

The New Aestheticism's reappropriation of aesthetics is done through a reconceptualization of aesthetics and especially its progressive political potential which, again, can also be seen as the central programme of Rancière's radical aesthetics. Beech and Roberts, however, do not consider the new aestheticism's revision of the political status of the aesthetic as end in itself. Rather, it is presented as favoured *means* to recalibrate leftist politics in accordance to what are perceived to be fundamentally changed historical

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75 Isobel Armstrong (2000) offers a similar account of the Left's relation to aesthetics in the recent past. She states how "over the past two decades [i.e. since the beginning of the 1980s], the category of the aesthetic has been largely ignored or attacked" and speaks of a "turn to the anti-aesthetic" and an "anti-aesthetic project". She specifically claims that "Marxists and cultural materialists... have largely retreated from aesthetic questions" and "have failed to address the democratic and radical potential of art" with the result that the aesthetic has "been left to the reactionaries".

circumstances - which they characterize as post-revolutionary or post-Thermidorian. This is what Beech and Roberts see as the New Aestheticisms's "overriding project" (18), which they articulate in terms of a double displacement. First, there is a move away from the radical politics of the 1960s and 70s to an *ethicized* notion of emancipatory politics - Beech and Roberts speak of an "ethically displaced politics" (14). Second, there is a turn to aesthetics in order to conceptually ground such ethically displaced politics (18).

At the heart of the first displacement, Beech and Roberts detect a condemnation of the deeply partisan nature of leftist politics of the recent past, commanded by its allegiance to historical materialism and the centrality of class struggle. As such, they present the New Aestheticism as "a critique of the critical itself" (33). New aestheticists are said to regard partisanship as root cause of several problematic and no longer tenable commonly Leftist features. These include instrumentalist attitudes towards freedom, truth and value (14) - which are blamed for reducing the latter to mere conflicts of interests (31) - as well as an inability to come to grips with matters of individuality and subjectivity within collective politics (idem,13,29).

As said, the new aestheticists turn to aesthetics in their attempt to establish an alternative, non-partisan, non-instrumentalist form of emancipatory politics. As Beech and Roberts put it, aesthetics "seems to offer ethics, truth and freedom as the very embodiment and result of non-partisanship" (14). A central theoretical reference here is the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno (1970) and, specifically, his theorization of the "paradox of aesthetic autonomy" (Beech & Roberts,17).[76] This refers to Adorno's claim that, as they summarize it, "although art is marginal and commodified, it is only art which is capable of providing an immanent critique of instrumental reason" (idem). This would be so because of art's promise of an ethics of openness and particularity. The new aestheticists are thus said to follow in the footsteps of Adorno with their "turn... to art and aesthetics as a source of transcendental ethics, an ethics that commits the individual to a form of responsibility that cannot be reduced to abiding by the law" (14). As Beech and Roberts also put it: art is conceptualized as something that is "transcendentally emancipatory" (idem).

New aestheticist thinkers are said to have assimilated Adorno on these terms, as well as reassessed "the philosophic tradition out of which the aesthetic as an ethical category has been made" - which includes Kant, the German Romantics, Hegel and Heidegger (17-18). This is then contrasted to

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76 Beech and Roberts consider the publication of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in English in 1984 to be one of the most certain causal factors of the emergence of the New Aestheticism (2002:17).

the perceived failure of the post-1968 Left "to address matters of aesthetic value as ethical" (29).

To determine the similarities and differences between Rancière's and the New Aestheticism's reaffirmations of aesthetics as source of an alternative, ethically driven form of politics is no doubt complicated. On the one hand, the basic tenet of new aestheticist philosophy seems to be at odds with Rancière's critique of what he perceives as an "ethical turn" not only within contemporary aesthetics, but also within politics and philosophy (*AD*109-32/145-73, 2005:22-5). This ethical turn, however, refers to something rather specific and different. In general, it points to the alleged suspension, "disappearance" even, of the dissensual core of politics and aesthetics and thus, for Rancière, the undoing of their radicalness (*AD*120/159,129/170). As he puts it: "if the *soft* ethics of consensus and the art of proximity is the accommodation of the aesthetic and political radicalness of yesteryear to contemporary conditions, the *hard* ethics of infinite evil and an art vowed to the interminable mourning of an irremediable catastrophe appears as the strict reversal of this radicalness" (130/171, translation mine).

The New Aestheticism, by dismissing partisanship as core feature of leftist politics, can be found guilty of a similar move away from the radical politics of their predecessors in the 1960s and 70s.[77] In contrast, Rancière's conceptualization of politics proper in terms of a fundamental disagreement is still structured according to the logic of class struggle even though, as we saw in Chapter One (XI), he rejects its static, orthodox Marxian version. Beech and Roberts, however, hold that the new aestheticists do not reject partisanship as a whole. Rather, they are said to believe in partisanship in social and political matters, yet to critique it in aesthetic matters (33). Or still, while the social or political is considered to be irremediably subject to class division and struggle, and is conceptualized in these terms, the aesthetic is regarded as a sphere free from factional conflicts over material interests. This is why it is thought to harbour a different, non-partisan form of politics.

Rancière can be seen to turn to aesthetics for precisely the same reason. As we saw in the first chapter, central to his notion of radical politics is the assumption of a non-divided community modelled on Kant's notion of *sensus communis*.[78] In Chapter Two, we saw how against instrumental, top-down

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[77] An important difference however, is that in the case of the New Aestheticism, it is not so much that aesthetics (or politics) turns to ethics, but the other way round: recourse is made to aesthetics as foundation for an alternative, ethically grounded form of politics.

[78] We did, however, see that precisely because aesthetics is based on the presupposition of equality or commonality between people, Rancière considers it to be a dissensual force in a context dominated by the opposite belief in fundamental, natural inequalities between human beings.

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models of revolutionary politics, Rancière presents Kant's aesthetics of the beautiful as constituting a non-hierarchical, non-instrumental mode of being. As such, I hold the 'turns' to the aesthetic of the New Aestheticism and Rancière to be very similar in general.

VIII. THE PRIMARY VIOLENCE AT THE HEART OF AESTHETIC AUTONOMY

Having found Rancière's radical aesthetics and the New Aestheticism to be similar in fundamental ways, I shall now look at some of Beech's and Roberts' main points of criticisms towards the New Aestheticism. I do so with the aim of identifying and assessing some of the main weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Rancière's political-aesthetic theory.

Here also, the aim is not to offer a full account of Beech's and Roberts' extensive and complex critique of new aestheticist philosophies, which also contains proposals for an alternative approach. Rather, I shall focus on aspects most relevant to my aim of problematizing Rancière's radical aesthetics. It is beyond the scope of this study to arbitrate between proponents and critics of the New Aestheticism. This would necessitate a detailed overview of the work of the different philosophers associated with this movement and a careful consideration of each of the criticisms levelled against them.

In most general terms, Beech and Roberts argue that the New Aestheticism's reclamation of aesthetics concedes too much to what are typically rightist and liberal views on art - thereby compromising its leftist pretensions. Inversely, the new aesthetes are reproached for "degrading" and "minimalizing" the "achievements of the political cultures of the Left" (32). As one of those achievements, Beech and Roberts mention the fracturing of the "grand humanist categories... [such as the aesthetic or beautiful] according to the specificities and fault-lines of class, race, gender and sexuality" (idem). Instead of "complicating, differentiating and dialecticizing the Left's elaboration of the question of [aesthetic] value" (30), the new aesthetes are said to equate historical materialism to its orthodox version (29) and criticize it on these terms.[79] As such, Beech and Roberts contend that the New Aestheticism has not overcome the radical critiques of aesthetics of the 1960s and 70s, which they still value as a "liberating rupture within the Left" and regard as "the revolutionary spectre that... haunts aesthetics as a philosophical category" (17).

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79 As I showed earlier (Section VI), this also holds for Rancière's critique of materialist cultural theories.

Hence, Beech and Roberts can be seen to critique the New Aestheticism by confronting it with some of the valuable insights of radical leftist criticisms of the aesthetic while, at the same time, trying to avoid some of the latter's "mistakes and aporias" (32).[80] They especially want to hold on to the notion of partisanship as an essential, necessary feature of a properly leftist theory of the politics of aesthetics. As they put it: "claims to liberation through art are impossible without the categories, forms and agencies of the partisan" (14). This is reflected in the core presupposition of their critique, namely, that philosophical aesthetics and some of its key conceptual claims - such as that of autonomy and disinterestedness - are historically constituted through a series of exclusions, divisions, denials, blindnesses, closures or still, violations. This makes a return to aesthetics, as the New Aestheticism and Rancière do, all but an unproblematic affair.

Beech and Roberts consider the following to be on the receiving end of aesthetics' suppressions: the quotidian, sensual pleasures of the body - they also speak of the intoxicated, voluptuous body -, ordinary or "inexpert" forms of attention, subjectivities (46), sensitivities and knowledges (44), as well as art "as a *practical* category of living and contested culture" - or still: "the mundanity of culture as such" (13). Against all this, aesthetics is said to posit an ideal norm of a disembodied, disinterested experience and mode of attention characterized by "abstinence... [and] idleness" (15). For Beech and Roberts, however, this is only one, very specific aspect of aesthetic experience. By promoting it as the only proper one, aesthetics effects what they variously call a closure, homogenization, dedifferentiation, impoverishment (46) and attempt at control (45) of what is in fact a diversity of modes of sensibility. As such, aesthetics reflects an "inability to acknowledge the diversity of bodily pleasures and approaches to art" (15).

Beech and Roberts further argue that the specific focus of aesthetics on one aspect of sensible experience is not an innocuous one. As we shall see later on, they consider it as part of concerted effort to represent "the sectional interests of minority culture as universal ones" (35). In this sense, they also speak of "art's minority regime" (290). On top of all this, philosophical aesthetics is said to be largely unaware of the exclusions, hierarchizations and homogenizations it enacts.

For Beech and Roberts, this begs the question of "art's benevolence" (14). It is seen as quite damaging to views of art as "inestimably worthy, noble... the greatest preoccupation of humanity" (15), as well as the "assumption that aesthetics is critical by dint of being aesthetic" (33). Instead, they consider

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80 Beech and Roberts thus do not simply reaffirm post-1968 leftist critiques of aesthetics or, inversely, consider the New Aestheticism to have no merit whatsoever.

aesthetics as nothing more than "a series of ruminations and trouble spots" (14). The problem with the New Aestheticism is then that by uncritically rehearsing some of the key propositions of modern philosophical aesthetics, they reinforce their inherent exclusions and violations, as well as further mystifying their contents.

For Beech and Roberts, any radical leftist approach to aesthetics worth its salt must be based on a full recognition of these exclusions. It must be premised on the insight that art's "social being is shaped by cultural division" (35). This forms the basis of their objections to the notion of autonomy that they attribute to the New Aestheticism, in particular the way in which it is formulated in opposition to partisanship. The new aestheticists are said to conceive the relation between aesthetics and politics as that between two separated entities. The first is thought to be essentially non-partisan, disinterested, based on an "inclusive commonality" (31) and free from the partisanship, instrumental rationality and conflict of interests typical of the second. Beech and Roberts consider such division to be illicit, saying that social factors are *intrinsic*, although not necessarily internal, to art (35). The term 'intrinsic' is here understood in line with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1993) as "physically external.. but... 'existentially essential' and 'not just necessarily connected but internally related'" (Beech & Roberts:36). In line with this, and in reference to Adorno, Beech and Roberts define the autonomy of art as "an opposition to society *produced through social relations*" (42, emphasis mine).

According to them, the New Aestheticism's flawed conception of autonomy leads to all kind of misconceptions such as the view that institutional critiques of art do not to change the special, autonomous status of art (25). Beech and Roberts, on the contrary, regard art's autonomy as a "de facto institutional arrangement... established through violence, a violence that is not outside art and aesthetics, but which violates them by treating *de facto* limits as *de jure* boundaries" (26).

The basic objection of Beech and Roberts to the New Aestheticism's recuperation of philosophical aesthetics is thus clear. It considers the tradition of aesthetics to be irrevocably tainted by a primary violence (278). In this regard they also speak of art and aesthetics' "traumatic self-formation" and claim that "art's violations and self-violations... [are] essential to... art's autonomy" (277,279).

Beech and Roberts make these claims of a primary violence at the heart of aesthetics more historically concrete by referring to Tony Bennett's study *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (1998), which offers what could be regarded as a Foucaultian archæological analysis of autonomous conceptions of art and aesthetics. The study shows how in the 19th century, policies prescribing the proper conduct of working class visitors to emerging public art galleries were

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used as a key tool within a broader reformist project meant to secure the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. Significantly, this appropriate behaviour was defined in terms of autonomy, as that of a "disembodied beholder", or still, "a prudential subject" who conducts himself in a restrained way in art galleries (Beech & Roberts:284). Bennett's study is thus said to document how "cultural imperatives stand in for properly political ones" (idem). In his case, it concerns attempts by the ruling classes to "refin[e]... the working class from the inside,... softening manners, humanizing brutal men and women, and purifying their thoughts" or still, "to 'improve the working class and render it docile" (idem). Bennet's study is thus taken as a demonstration of how "the civil subject is produced through the formation of the cultural subject" (idem).

Most important for our purposes is the way in which art and aesthetics - and specifically its Idealist-Romanticist theorization - are seen to be irrevocably implicated in this reformist or bourgeois project, which is even said to form the "ground" for art's modern autonomy (285). Bennett for instance refers to the Romanticist notion of aesthetic experience as "a form of work on the self" (idem). He shows how policy makers came to the conclusion that "sobriety and prudence" among gallery goers was brought about more efficiently by replacing "direct, institutional regulation of activity" by "freedom of movement" and "self-regulation" (idem). It is not difficult to see such "self-civilizing" activity as an application of Kant's notion of "free conformity to law" mentioned earlier (285). Kant's work on aesthetic judgements as a whole can be seen as an attempt to determine the "appropriate behaviour in front of the art work" (283).

Beech and Roberts thus conclude that "the development of the theory of art's autonomy during the Enlightenment" was "haunted" by "the appetitive 'uncultured' beholder, as someone who disturbs the would-be harmonious world of aesthetic reason" (idem). Based on this, they claim   that "art's violations and self-violations as essential to... art's autonomy" (276).

Beech and Roberts thus present the primary violation constitutive of art and culture as an illegitimate universalization of the form of subjectivity and mode of conduct characteristic of a particular, bourgeois faction in society in order to secure its hegemony and further its own interests - e.g. that of creating a docile and self-disciplined working class. As they put it, "the 'harmony' sought within the public gallery was the result of a violence of an imposed false universalism" (286). This violation - of the working class by the bourgeoisie - and even *self*-violation - of the working class against itself in its attempts at 'freely' conforming to bourgeois norms and values - is then proclaimed as "a primary condition of cultural subjectivity" (282). And, as stated earlier, they consider this primary, constitutive violence at the heart of

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cultural subjectivity to have been disavowed and suppressed historically by, amongst others, aesthetic philosophy (idem).

Beech and Roberts view this dubious alliance between autonomous aesthetics and what is essentially a bourgeois class project as an "epic lost opportunity" for the constitution of a public sphere based on "ordinary modes of attention" as opposed to, as was historically the case, the latter's exclusion and repression in the name of autonomous, disembodied aesthetic experience (285). They identify this as the root cause of oppositions and hierarchies between culture in the broad and narrow sense, with the second being "separated from the exigencies of the everyday" (idem). And all this because cultural division was considered to be more useful to bourgeois class dominance.

IX. ROOTING OUT THE DISEASE OF ART

In order to correct aesthetics' constitutive violence, Beech and Roberts propose to strategically side with the violated or, as they put it, with that which is "manifestly excluded from the tastes and privileges of this [i.e. the aesthetic] world of judgement" (13). As key instances of the excluded, they mention "the philistine, the practical and the voluptuous", which they regard as "critical categories" and "means by which the truth of partisanship can be given specific form in debates about aesthetics" (15).

In their writings, they award special importance to the philistine, which they define as "partisan of the excluded pleasures, the excluded body and 'inappropriate' forms of attention" (45), all of which are "exercised without guilt" (46). The philistine is thus regarded as the "spectre" haunting art and aesthetics, "bring[ing] to bear on [them]... the costs of their exclusions, blindnesses and anxieties" (45). As such, the philistine "refuses to take a disinterested stance towards a culture which stands as a judge over [her]... pleasure without [her].. consent" (idem).

Beech's and Roberts' notion of the philistine is quite complex.[81] It for instance does not so much refer to those who reject art out of ignorance, ineptness, insensitivity or disinterest. In this regard, they refer to Jameson's (1991:152) statement that the philistine understands art "only too well" (Beech & Roberts:43). This suggests that the philistine's dismissal of art is based on an overfamiliarity with it and, in particular, the ways in which it operates a violation. The philistine is also presented as "a dialectical identity which shifts and slides along the edges of what is established as proper aesthetic behaviour" (45). As such, it is not an eternal, unchangeable category. As Beech and Roberts put it: parts of it can be "incorporated through intellectual and practical struggle, but this will... only redraw the lines of demarcation" (idem). Importantly, they present the philistine's deconstruction of the "decorum of aesthetic discourse" as "*the political*, not as a separate category of experience... but as internally related to autonomous art and aesthetics" (46, emphasis mine).

In opposition to conventional notions of philistinism, Beech and Roberts characterize their own conception of philistinism as "counter-intuitive" (291), "non-popular" (290) and "reflexive" (196). As key examples, they point to Dadaist and conceptual art practices, which they present as instances of anti-art which they define in terms of "the negation of art through non-art" (292). At the heart of both art movements, they see a "systematic negation of art and aesthetic values" (idem) or what they also call a "violation of the violation" (276) constitutive of art.

I shall only refer to Beech's and Roberts' theorization of Dada, because it drives their point home most straightforwardly.[82] In this instance, counterviolence to aesthetics is committed through the inclusion in art of

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81 Beech and Roberts base their theory of philistinism on what they see as its "deconstructive" (43) presence in Adorno's aesthetic theory (1970/2004). They take their cue here from Fredric Jameson's reading of Adorno (1991). In the latter, Jameson is said to counter the view that Adorno simply rejects the naive, pleasure-seeking behaviour of the philistine in favour of "modern art's deferral of happiness... as 'only guarantee of preserving universal happiness at the moment of recognizing its present absence'" (Beech & Roberts: 43). On the contrary, Adorno is said to "incorporate... the moment of truth of the philistine into his aesthetic theory resulting in a perception of art's social en formal culpability as the effects of art's deferral of happiness" (idem). As such, Adorno does not offer a resolution to the rivalry between modern art and the philistine, but rather holds the latter to be a "wound on the body of art" (idem). Despite all this, Beech and Roberts hold that Adorno is still prejudiced in favour of art and aesthetics by not offering a "dialectic of art and its other" but "merely the dialectic of art inscribed by its other", which they see as an assimilation of "the moment of the philistine to art" instead of the other way round (idem). Adorno is hereby said "to underestimate the critical potential of philistinism... failing to allow voluptuous pleasures and inexpert forms of attention to distract art from its intellectual duties" (43-44).

82 Beech and Roberts refer to the practice of Dadaist artists Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp.

what is regarded as "senseless" (290). Dada is said to "turn... art's critique on itself and systematically negate... art and the artistic by eliminating all pre-established traces of skill, sensitivity and taste" (291) and this "in order to cut out the disease of art at source" (292). Beech and Roberts also speak of a "subtraction" of "art from art" and the "artist from the artist" (idem). By doing so, Dada is said "to expose the trauma of art's self-formation" (idem) and its spectacularization of art's self-mutilation would constitute its "intolerable" character (idem). Beech and Roberts further seem to award a radically egalitarian effect to the fact that no special skills or modes of attention are required to appreciate Dada art, so that "anybody can attend to it" (293).[83] Beech and Roberts also identify a "wager" (idem) or risk at the heart of Dadaist art practices, the risk of...

> ... self-debasement in which the power invested in culture and art is subject to a performative 'self-disfigurement'. The subject risks and accepts the violations of his or her 'best' interests by identifying his or her autonomy with the negation of prudential values. In other words, risking the philistine means allowing yourself to be a target for the disgusted authority of others. (idem)

X. PROLETARIAN AESTHETICISM VERSUS DADAESQUE DELINQUENCY

In view of Beech's and Roberts' critical analyses of the New Aestheticism, I now continue my assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics and its reaffirmation of Idealist-Romanticist aesthetics in particular. I here come to my substantive objections to his thinking of politics and aesthetics.

I already contended that Rancière conceptualizes Kant's and Schiller's notion of the aesthetic in a one-dimensionally positive fashion in terms of the

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83 If Beech and Roberts consider Dada to be driven by a "delinquent refusal of bourgeois reason and culture", they specify conceptual art's anti-art character in terms of its "philosophical and theoretical expansion of the artist as thinker and writer" (2002:294). This would be achieved by "incorporating philosophical and theoretical reflection directly into the relations of art's production" (idem), as well as by "deflating", "draining" and "ghosting" the "sensuous surface of the art object" (295). By doing so, conceptual art can be seen to achieve what Rancière calls a redistribution of the sensible. That is, a radical contestation of the 'bourgeois' conception of the artist as "'emotor' and 'expressor'", and as someone "'not in the business' of abstract thinking" (294). According to Beech and Roberts, this also involves a "disruption in the transmission of knowledge" "from 'expert' to passive student" (295). Conceptual art is said to place emphasis on "the communal nature of theoretical learning and debate", as opposed to "external and bourgeois academic criteria of competence and success" (idem). Based on this, one could say that conceptual art does more than 'merely' suspend, negate or attack the sensible divisions at the heart of modern art and aesthetics - as Dada does -, but also redistributes these divisions.

suspension and 'de-hierchization' of all sensible divisions. For him, this is what constitutes aesthetics' radical political content.

In contrast, the work of Beech and Roberts enable us to see how the notion of the aesthetic in its modern, Kantian formulation *itself* founds a division of the sensible that operates and maintains a series of exclusions and hierarchies between different modes of sensorial experience and modes of attention. It is itself irrevocably marked by, and constituted through social and cultural division, rather than embodying the latter's utopian cancellation. One can thus say that the aesthetic regime operates according to police logic, to use Rancière's terminology. It does so by setting 'proper' norms for aesthetic behaviour to the exclusion and marginalization of others, which are thenceforth dismissed as inappropriate and inferior. One can think here of what Beech and Roberts say about philistine and aesthetic sensitivities, namely, that these are "organized hierarchically according to established cultural power and authority" (44).

In reference to Bennett's work, we further saw that the introduction and consolidation of such sensory hierarchies formed an intricate component of the bourgeois class's struggle for cultural hegemony. Aesthetics can thus be seen to have assisted this class in its efforts to elevate to universal norms those sensitivities which it considered to be most strategic in furthering its interests.

All this makes Rancière's conception of the politics of aesthetics rather problematic, based as it is on a straightforward endorsement of Kant's and Schiller's notions of autonomy as inherently emancipatory. It is oblivious to the way in which aesthetic notions played an irredeemable role in the historical oppression of the working class. Rancière's idealized theorization of aesthetic autonomy as the epitome of a non-hierarchical, non-instrumental form of life, completely bypasses its complicity in the establishment and legitimization of a hierarchical and oppressive division of the sensible. This makes his attempt at recuperating Idealist aesthetics highly problematic, even if done for merely strategic reasons. Due to its deeply embedded violence, the notion of the aesthetic cannot be reaffirmed without continuing the very same violence, at least not without serious provisos and reservations.

The problematic nature of Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics also has damaging implications for his notion of the aesthetics of politics. As established previously, Rancière misrecognizes the divisive, violating dimension of aesthetics which - it must be stressed - does not so much concern the way in which the aesthetic is manipulated by external forces for ulterior motives, but points to a violence that is deeply inscribed in its conceptual logics and substantive claims. I now want to argue that this also undermines the awarding of a radical political status to working class appropriations of aesthetics (discussed in sections III and IV).

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As we saw, Rancière argued that worker-poets succeeded in beating the bourgeois at their own game by applying aesthetic sensibilities and skills that were thought to be structurally unavailable to them. As such, they are credited for having proven their equality to their bourgeois masters. In light of what I previously said about the violence embedded in the aesthetic, however, these victories would have to be regarded as equally an ultimate defeat. By replicating "the behaviour of the aesthete and his (invariably) bourgeois 'betters'", as Beech and Roberts put it (2002:285), the workers in fact play perfectly in the hands of their class antagonists. They serve the ruling class' reformist agenda of suppressing forms of behaviour inimical to its domination and, inversely, stimulating those that work to its advantage.

In this sense, Rancière's proletarian appropriations of aestheticism can be critiqued on similar grounds as those of Beech and Roberts (287-90) in their criticisms of Tom Crow's (1996) work on post-modern assimilations of popular art genres into the mainstream, 'high' art world. Their key contention is that in most such cases, exchanges between art and its others "are done on art's terms", with "Art remain[ing]... culturally universal throughout, and impurities... incorporated into its universality without a chance that the universal might speak through the impure as symptom" (2002:289). To do away with divisions at the heart of the aesthetic, in other words, is not simply a matter of incorporating the excluded 'Others' of art into its established modes and institutional spaces. A more fundamental shift must be made. In this regard, Beech and Roberts mention the need of a "qualitative transformation in cognitive values", as well as a "transformation in art's relations of production and reception" (297).

Radical contestation of cultural division is thus not so much a case of beating the enemy at its own game - at least, not exclusively or most importantly. Rather, it demands a radical reconfiguration of the game's fundamental co-ordinates. Such game-changing act cannot be accomplished by excluded groups demonstrating that they are equal in terms of possessing the dominant sensibilities. The more radical aim should be to subvert the ruling modes of sensibility altogether and assert the legitimacy of previously marginalized and suppressed forms.[84] In this regard, the problem with

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84 As an instance of the latter, one can think of Iris Young's critique of the hegemony of Western, masculine rationalities within deliberative democratic theories (1996). For her, the challenge here is not to prove that all human beings - e.g. women, manual labourers or the lowly educated - are equally equipped to participate in such rational discourses. This would still be to endorse the dominant modes of rationality as superior ideal and norm for human interaction. For Young, the aim is rather to show how such dominant rationalities are anything but ideal and something to be universally aspire to and that there are 'other' modes of communication that are as valid and valuable, if not more so, to achieve truly democratic deliberation processes.

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Rancière's aesthetic politics of appropriation is the acceptance, even if strategic, of the 'game' and 'rules' set by the dominant order as the only valid and worthy ones.

We can take Beech's and Roberts' conceptualization of 'philistine' Dadaist anti-art to constitute such more radical form of cultural-political contestation. Its core strategy can be seen as the exact inverse of that of working-class appropriations of the aesthetic. Here, the game of art and its inherent aesthetic criteria and norms - and thus also the division of the sensible enforced by them - are confronted head-on and ruthlessly attacked. As we saw, this hatred toward the aesthetic is not attributed to an insensitivity toward, or ignorance of art. If this were the case, bourgeois aestheticists could still claim their sensible superiority. Dadaist violations of art are rather driven by a lucid understanding of aesthetics and its constitutive sensible divisions and the consequent refusal to participate in it, at least not by abiding the established rules. In this way, they aim to expose and sabotage its ingrained violations and hierarchies.

Rancière's proletarian aestheticism and Beech's and Robert's Dadaesque delinquency can also be seen to involve two fundamentally different attitudes towards the opponent. In the first instance, it is all about attempting to beat the adversary at his own game and thereby to force his recognition and earn his respect. In this sense, it involves a certain heroics, if all goes well that is. The main risk is that of not succeeding in winning. Still, for having entered the competition, given it one's all and played fairly, one will have earned minimal respect from the adversary. The bourgeois victor, for her part, will come out of the contest strengthened in her beliefs in the superiority of her aesthetic norms and values.

In contrast, Dada does not seek validation from an adversary whose legitimacy as adjudicator it rejects. In this regard, Beech and Roberts speak of "the subject's withdrawal of consent from a false universal (high culture) that regards itself as the subject's last promise of selfhood" (297). This involves a much graver risk: not that of coming out second to the opponent but that of being scorned and humiliated from beginning to end. For one, because the dominant order considers it to be more scandalous and unforgivable to radically negate it, to rob its norms and rituals of their legitimacy and worth. In this sense, Beech and Roberts say that the philistine, as a "screen for the grotesque and outcast", "cannot belong to the case of heroic characters that stand in for the agency of human emancipation" (idem). Yet, they regard Dadaist philistinism as more autonomous precisely because of its radical negation of existing, dominant norms. As they put it: "self-disfigurement is another name for the labour of autonomy" (298).

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Both key notions of Rancière's radical aesthetics - the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics - thus do not come off unscathed when confronted with some of the key objections levelled against similar, contemporary philosophical reaffirmations of the progressive political value of modern art and aesthetics. Let us recapitulate our key criticism by looking into how Rancière himself hints at some of the limitations of working-class appropriations of bourgeois aesthetics, as well as his attempts to overcome them.

By doing so, he can be seen to add another twist to the tale to his analysis of the emancipatory role played by aesthetics, of which I gave an overview in section III. We explained there why Rancière considers early working class struggles to fundamentally concern aesthetics due, involving the appropriation of time and aesthetic sensibilities. However, he does not seems to regard this as the end point or final stage of emancipation or, at least, as all there is to it.

Key here is the way in which he differentiates between, on the one hand, the aesthetic revolution of the workers and, on the other, the revolution brought about by the aesthetic regime, a distinction which I mentioned earlier. Consider for instance the following statement by Rancière that "The aesthetic revolution was not only - as in Victor Hugo's well-known poem - the 'bonnet rouge' (red cap) put on the old dictionary, meaning the new empowerment of the common people. It had its own 'equality' and its own 'people'" (2005:16). Rancière considers this people and equality, but also the politics proper to the aesthetic revolution, to have been developed historically by modern literature and, in particular, by what he calls the "aesthetic way of writing" (17), with the work of Flaubert as main example. [85]

Rancière claims that this other aesthetic revolution had "come into conflict" with workers' appropriations of aesthetic discourse (16). The cause of this conflict seems to be that for Rancière, the aesthetic revolution - but again, that proper to the aesthetic style of writing, which he describes in terms of "the cult of literature" and the interpretation of "equality as 'equality of indifference'" - somehow brings about a more fundamental, authentic liberation of the people (17). Think of the following statement: "While proletarians appropriated for themselves the leftovers of the *outmoded* high poetics and rhetoric, it [i.e. the aesthetic way of writing] framed a new poetics giving flesh to a 'voice from below', an eloquent voice of the mute" (idem, emphasis mine). Or still, when he says of the aesthetic revolution of the art of writing that it "substituted for *the borrowed rhetoric of village revolutionary orators* a voice of the soil, a voice of the motherly, nurturing earth and of the dead generations" (16, emphasis mine). And still: "literature opposed to the random

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85 See also earlier Chapter 2, I.

scattering of words, texts and rhetoric the writing of its own 'voice of the people'" (idem). In sum, the politics of aesthetics is here credited for accomplishing a degree of emancipation which the aesthetics of politics would be incapable of.

With this, Rancière on the one hand seems to offer a criticism of the strategies of appropriation at the heart of his theory of the aesthetics of politics that is similar to mine. That is, by engaging the class enemy at her game of aesthetics, proletarians did not as yet develop an own voice, merely becoming eloquent in the opponent's tongue, one that is described by Rancière as 'outmoded'.[86] Still, what remains problematic is the way in which Rancière naively awards an emancipatory potential to, in this instance, aestheticist literature, completely ignoring the latter's constitutive exclusions and violations, e.g. based on its propagation of an indifferent, disinterested style of writing.

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[86] This is not to say that appropriative strategies are to be dismissed altogether as tools for emancipation. Regardless of the issue of their efficacy in radically challenging existing divisions of the sensible, one of their benefits can be seen to be their potential to build self-confidence among the oppressed. As Rancière points out himself, to appropriate and excel in modes of sensibility one is considered to be incapable of by the existing order is also importantly "a proof given to oneself" (1990/2007:48). Todd May comments on this aspect of Rancière's aesthetics of politics by saying that demonstrations of equality by those considered to be inferior are also always a "self-demonstration", "a proof of equality that the *dēmos* offers to itself" (2009:114). Strategies of appropriation are thus directed both "to the other and oneself" (113). As May explains, if they were unilaterally directed towards the other, there is the danger of becoming "parasitic on the other", which would "undercut" the presupposition of equality (idem). Inversely, sole emphasis on self-demonstration could result in a "self-involved" or "self-centred" "identity politics" and even a "politics of ghettoization" (as opposed to one of solidarity), thus paradoxically reinforcing the police order by enacting a "reclassification"(idem).

Chapter 4: The splintered politics of aesthetics

Synopsis

This fourth chapter offers an overview of a second key component of Rancière's radical aesthetics apart from its recuperation of Idealist aesthetics. It concerns his conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era. The first section offers a brief historical and conceptual characterization of this central problematic in modern aesthetics. Next (Section II), I demonstrate how Rancière takes the aesthetic regime's paradoxical determination of art as an autonomous form of life as root cause of what he calls the 'splintering' of the politics of aesthetics into its two main, autonomous and heteronomous forms. I explain this in the next section (III) by showing how he traces the basic positions of both strands of modern aesthetic politics back to a key passage in Schiller's work, as well as how these strands, when taken together, result in an antinomous determination of the politics of aesthetics. Next (IV), I explicate how Rancière posits a necessary movement and irreducible tension between the two opposite aesthetic politics, neither being able to retain its political promise without critical mediation with the other. I then (V) offer a more detailed account of Rancière's determination of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics. This is followed (VI) by a specification of their key dialectical interaction, i.e. the way in which autonomous aesthetic politics contains heteronomous elements and vice versa, as well as the way in which such incorporation of its 'other' by each form of aesthetic politics is thought to safeguard it from transgressing an internal limit beyond which it becomes conservative and oppressive. The next section (VII) summarizes Rancière's conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics as based on a constitutive and productive contradiction which neither can, nor ought to be 'solved'. I end my exposé (VIII) by looking into some of the historical claims and implications of Rancière's alternative theoretical account of art's autonomy and heteronomy, with particular focus on his dismissal of their dominant conceptualizations and periodizations in terms of categories such as 'modernism', 'postmodernism' and 'avant-garde'.

I. THE AUTONOMY/HETERONOMY 'WARS' IN MODERN AESTHETICS

So far, I have offered a critical account of one of the most fundamental components of Rancière's political aesthetics: his re-affirmation of the radical political status of aesthetics in its Kantian-Schillerian theorization. This chapter problematizes a second key aspect: the reconceptualization of the issue of art's autonomy and heteronomy. This is arguably one of the most burning and contested topics concerning the political status of art in the modern era.

In general, this problematic can be seen to result from the increasingly autonomous status of modern art and its paradoxical effects. I already dealt with this in Chapter Two (Section III), in relation to Rancière's aesthetic regime of art. We saw that one of the most important historical developments at the basis of this regime was the severing of art from its previous, religious and courtly duties and, inversely and consequently, its increasing positioning as an independent, self-legislating force in society. We showed that this autonomization process was a double-edge sword or, still, a cursed gift. On the one hand, it enabled art to increasingly manifest itself as society's 'other', as the place where sensibilities and lifestyles can be expressed and elaborated that radically differ from the dominant ones, as well as being more emancipatory and liberatory - presumably at least. In other words, with its secularization, art gained the radical political potential to constitute a better society; one, for instance, in which the alienation and fragmentation of life in modern, capitalist societies is overcome and a whole, integrated experience of the world is reclaimed.

However, we also saw that art's autonomy came at a heavy cost because it at the same time functioned as a barrier to realizing its emancipatory potential. It prevented art from implementing the alternative forms of life embodied by it in other spheres of life - such as politics, the economy, science - who, moreover, were increasingly and exclusively regarded as key drivers of societal modernization and progress. Confined to its own autonomy, art was doomed to social impotence and harmlessness - to put it somewhat melodramatically. In the modern era, art is thus given free rein to experiment with whatever it desires in its own aesthetic principality. The latter, however, can be seen to have become its 'golden cage', with the 'real' players (economic, political, military, scientific, etc.) determining the main course and coordinates of modern society undisturbed.[87]

Increased aesthetic autonomy thus landed art in a catch-22 situation, being both that which enables *and* obstructs art's political potential. Ever since,

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87 For accounts of this development: see Bürger 1974/84, Habermas 1972, Bernstein 1992.

practitioners and theorists have been divided over how to make the most out of art's paradoxical political status, let alone put an end to. In this regard, and somewhat simplifying matters, one can differentiate between two main, opposing stances. On one side, there are those who hold that despite the mentioned drawbacks of art's autonomous status in terms of effecting real social change, its potential to do so is still situated there, in confronting society with something that is based on purely aesthetic laws and therefore radically different from the ways of the world. Consequently, art is seen to be most politically efficacious when it maintains a maximum distance from politics and sublimates into aesthetic form any political messages it might want to send out (Adorno 1970/2004, Marcuse 1977/9).

On the other side, there are those who locate art's potential for social change in its heteronomy, in its efforts to build a new society in 'real' life based on alternative principles. Art is here called upon to break through the narrow confines of its autonomy and uninhibitedly impose its "artistic will to power" - to borrow a term coined by Boris Groys (1992) - on life, using society as its 'material'.

Clashes between proponents of both camps have been a recurrent phenomenon in the history of modern aesthetics.[88] To be sure, these opposing positions toward art's paradoxical autonomy are rarely taken up in such straightforward, pure and absolute manner. Most theories of art's autonomy or heteronomy offer more nuanced accounts that include all kinds of dialectical mediations and complications, as we shall see in what follows.

The aim of this chapter is, first, to offer an account of Rancière's specific theorization of the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy. As I shall argue, his general approach can be characterized as eclectic, synthetic and dialectical. He develops a complex model in which both autonomous and heteronomous tendencies are affirmed as valid and productive. At the same time, however, they are found to be inherently and irremediably flawed, each requiring mediation with its opposite in order to mitigate the dangers of transgressing internal limitations to its application. Following this chapter's explication of Rancière's model, the next chapter will point to some of its flaws and formulate some criticisms.

II. FROM THE FORMULA OF THE AESTHETIC REGIME TO THE MAJOR FIGURES OF AESTHETIC POLITICS

Rancière's conceptualization of the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy follows from his general characterization of art within the

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88 See e.g. Adorno et al. 1977/2007.

aesthetic regime as constituting an autonomous form of life (see Chapter 2, VII). This formula succinctly expresses what Rancière considers to be the emancipatory content of aesthetics in general. What it does not specify, however, are the particular ways in which this content can, or has been put into practice - concretely, historically, strategically - by artists and art movements, as well as how it has been further articulated theoretically by philosophers and art theorists. One could thus say that while in previous chapters, emphasis lay on the politics of aesthetics in general, we now move to discussion of the more specific politics of art practice and theory. It is on this level that Rancière fully engages with the problematic of the autonomy and heteronomy of art.

Still, as already indicated, Rancière's theorization of art's autonomy and heteronomy is firmly rooted in his general formula of the politics of aesthetics. We saw that the latter was deeply paradoxical due to the complex interlinking of both autonomous and heteronomous elements. Affirmation of the autonomy of art as a singular, distinct set of techniques and practices is considered to be insufficient in itself as criterion for art's identification in the modern. It becomes so *only insofar as*, at the same time and more importantly, an experience of an autonomous form of life is offered, that is, insofar as art is *heteronomous*. We also saw that the second requirement of heteronomy transgresses the first one of autonomy because it destabilizes narrow determinations of art as a specific and specialized activity.

Going further now, Rancière holds that all major theories and practices of political art that have developed in the modern era, as well as their antagonisms and debates, can ultimately be traced back to the paradoxes and tensions of the original formulation of art's key political properties in the aesthetic regime. The complex, contradictory, conflictual, unstable, undecidable combination of autonomy and heteronomy in aesthetic art's formula is thought to open up a field of possible positions and developments, based on different emphases being put on its key terms and relations. As he says: "autonomy can be stressed over life or life over autonomy" and further, instead of the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous artistic strategies, their intersections can be stressed (*ARO*137).

For Rancière, these different interpretations of the aesthetic regime's key formula of art serve as a basis for the major "figures" (*AD, ARO*), "scenarios" or "emplotments" (*ARO*) of art's politicity in the modern era. As he succinctly characterizes these scenarios: "such oppositions and intersections [i.e. between/of art's autonomy and life/heteronomy] can be traced as the interplay between three major scenarios. Art can become life. Life can become art. Art and life can exchange their properties" (137). But again, for Rancière these different positions are already present *in nucleo*, as logical possibilities, at

the very beginning of the aesthetic regime, before being actualized by theorists and artists throughout the course of the modern era.

Based on the three readings of the aesthetic regime's paradoxical entanglement of autonomy and heteronomy mentioned above, Rancière distinguishes between three major figures of the politics of art in the modern era. However, he especially focuses on two of these that correspond to autonomous and heteronomous conceptions of art's politics. In this regard, one of his central propositions concerning the politics of aesthetics is that it is "split" between, or "splintered" into, two major, opposing, contradictory paradigms. And again, their contradictory relation must be understood as a consequence of the paradoxical relation between art's autonomy and heteronomy in the aesthetic regime. As Rancière puts it: "the contradiction [between "art for art's sake" and "political art"] is lodged more deeply, in the very core of aesthetic experience and its 'education'" (*AD*34/50-51).

Before I offer an account of these two major scenarios of aesthetic politics and their interrelations, I want to point to the more general conceptual move that is made here with regard to the problematic of the relation between art and politics. We already saw (in the introduction, Section VI) that Rancière dismisses this problematic as a false one. Or, to be more precise, he reformulates it in a more complex way as the relation between the aesthetics at the heart of politics on the one hand, and aesthetics' own, specific politics, on the other. In Rancière's theorization of art's autonomy and heteronomy, we encounter another way in which the problematic of art and politics is given more specific shape. It here features as an opposition between *two opposing types of aesthetic politics*: an autonomous one that affirms art's singularity and purity and a heteronomous one that pushes art to engage in worldly affairs. In other words, the problematic of the relation between art and politics is here *internalized*, so to speak, as that between autonomous and heteronomous strands of aesthetic politics.

Finally, I want to note that despite Rancière's main focus on two forms of aesthetic politics and their relations, he also emphasizes that, apart from a third form, there is in fact a *plurality* of forms of aesthetic politics (*AD*46/66, 2011a). This suggests that the three scenario's he distinguishes explicitly do not exhaust possible forms of aesthetic politics. One could see this as an attempt by Rancière to problematize and move away from discussions of art's politics predominantly waged in terms of an epic, Manichean struggle between - autonomous and heteronomous - archenemies.

In this chapter and the next, I shall focus mainly on Rancière's theorization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics. In Chapter Six, I shall deal with what Rancière conceives as a third major form.

III. THE ANTINOMY OF AESTHETIC POLITICS

Key to Rancière's conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics is a passage from Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* which, as we already saw, he regards as one of the founding texts of the aesthetic regime (*AD*27-36/41-53, *ARO*133-7). The passage comes immediately after the one in which Schiller defines the essence of human beings in terms of play, with which I dealt earlier. Schiller here comments on the famous marble head of the Roman goddess Juno - called *Juno* or *Hera Ludovisi* -, dating from the first century CE.

Schiller uses the statue to argue how the Greeks - although, one should actually say the Romans[89] - mastered the principle of play in a way unrivalled by any other people or culture in the history of mankind. As Rancière puts it: for Schiller, the marble head demonstrates how the play principle "lived and worked in art and in the feeling of the Greeks" (1794, last paragraph of the 15th letter). It is worth quoting the passage in full:

> ... they [the Greeks] effaced from the brow of their gods the earnestness and labour which furrow the cheeks of mortals, and also the hollow lust that smoothes the empty face. They set free the ever serene from the chains of every purpose, of every duty, of every care, and they made indolence and indifference the envied condition of the godlike race; merely human appellations for the freest and highest mind. As well the material pressure of natural laws as the spiritual pressure of moral laws lost itself in its higher idea of necessity, which embraced at the same time both worlds, and out of the union of these two necessities issued true freedom. Inspired by this spirit the Greeks also effaced from the features of their ideal, together with desire or inclination, all traces of volition, or, better still, they made both unrecognizable, because they knew how to wed them both in the closest alliance. It is neither charm, nor is it dignity, which speaks from the glorious face of Juno Ludovici; it is neither of these, for it is both at once. While the female god challenges our veneration, the godlike woman at the same time kindles our love. But while in ecstasy we give ourselves up to the heavenly beauty, the heavenly self-repose awes us back. The whole form rests and dwells in itself - a fully complete creation in itself - and as if she were out of space, without advance or resistance; it shows no force contending with force, no opening through which time could break in. Irresistibly carried away and attracted by her womanly charm, kept off at a distance by her godly dignity, we also find ourselves at length in the state of the greatest repose,

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89 One should perhaps understand it so that Schiller comments in rather general terms on the art of Classical Antiquity as a whole.

and the result is a wonderful impression for which the understanding has
no idea and language no name. (Idem)

First, in Schiller's interpretation of the statue, we can easily identify the
autonomous form of life that Rancière places at the heart of art's politics in
the aesthetic regime. It is the Goddess's mode of being based on serenity,
indolence and indifference, against that of human life ruled by purposive
action and mundane duties and cares. We can also understand how the godly
lifestyle incarnates Schiller's ideal of a union of the sensual drives ("the
material pressure of natural laws") and formal drives (the "spiritual pressure of
moral laws") in the play drive (where both drives are "made... unrecognizable"
because of being "wed[ded]... in the closest alliance"), as well as the "true
freedom" this is said to constitute. Rancière also speaks of the Goddess's
specific "sensorium" (*ARO*135) or "sensible milieu", which he defines as one
that is "foreign to the ordinary forms of sensory experience" (*AD*27/41). As
we already saw, it is because of this, that he holds art to contain the promise of
future, individual and collective emancipation. As such, he considers what he
calls Schiller's "exhibition scenario" to be an "allegorization" of the politics of
aesthetics (idem).

More tricky is to determine the specific ways in which art - in this case,
the statue - is thought to embody this autonomous form of life. According to
Rancière, Schiller's interpretation allows for two opposing ways in which art
can be said to do so. As we shall see further on, these two readings form the
basis of his two archetypes of political aesthetics in the modern era.

(i) According to a first interpretation, the statue confronts us with the
autonomous mode of being typical of the Greek Goddess through its "free
appearance" (27,29/41,44), which is said to "manifest" the "essential
characteristics of the divinity" (27/41-2). In other words, it here concerns the
formal qualities of the statue, rather than its content. It is, as Schiller puts it, the
statue as a "whole form rest[ing] and dwell[ing] in itself" or still, "a fully
complete creation in itself", that radically questions the viewer's ordinary
modes of being (e.g. instrumentalist ones) and puts her into a state of "greatest
repose", similar to that of the goddess.

One can thus say that the autonomous form of life of the Greek Goddess
is thus communicated through the autonomy of art's sensory forms and
materiality and the resistance it offers to appropriations by the subject in usual
terms. In this regard, Rancière also speaks of the "heterogeneous
sensible" (34/51, my translation). The Goddess's self-containment,
indifference, solitude, foreignness, unavailability, heterogeneity (idem,
39-40/57-8) - as Rancière variously characterizes her autonomy - is embodied
by the same properties of the statue's aesthetic form and its effects on viewers.

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This is said to constitute a certain paradox in that "The subject of aesthetic experience feels itself being promised possession of a new world by this statue which it cannot possess in any way" (35/51, translation mine). In short, according to the first interpretation, the artwork owes its political efficacy to the fact that it maintains an irremediable gap or distance between it and the viewer, between the art work as a self-sufficient and complete form in itself and the subject's practical life concerns.

(ii) The second interpretation presented by Rancière holds, on the contrary, that the formal, material, sensible autonomy of the Greek statue is not the only, or even main source of its political-emancipatory status. Here, the political potential of the sculpture is attributed to the fact that for the Greeks, it was not experienced as autonomous artistic form at all, but rather as what Rancière describes as the "translation in stone of the shared belief of a community" (idem). Of the autonomy of the statue, Rancière says that it "is in effect a result: it is the expression of the comportment of the community whence it issues" (idem). As such, he stresses, it "was not art for its author" (idem). His point is thus that the statue formed a fully integrated part of Greek society and performed an important social or political function in it. It testifies to ancient greek society as a non-alienated form of community where, other than in the modern age, the fundamental spheres of human and social existence - be it everyday life, art, politics or religion - are not sharply separated from one another (35/52). The statue thus exemplifies a type of community in which art does not exist in its alienated, modern conception as a "separate sphere of life" (idem) but, on the contrary, plays a central, integrated role in its public life.

We thus get two opposing explanations of the Greek statue's emancipatory status. The first attributes it to its being art, that is, the way in which it confronts society with a sensory mode of experience specific to art and heterogeneous to, and more liberating than, her own. The second reading, on the contrary, regards it as emancipatory because it is not only or *more than* art, because it points to the past functioning of art as an integral and operational part of a wholesome type of society. The first interpretation can thus be seen to locate the statue's emancipatory political potential in its autonomy, defined in formal, material and sensory terms. The second reading, on the contrary, attributes it to art's social integration and functionalization and thus its heteronomy.

It should, however, be stressed that in both interpretations, the radical political status of art is due to its embodiment of a form of life radically different from the existing, modern, alienated one. The difference, rather, concerns the opposing ways in which art is thought to do so. That is, according to one, by playing out the radical heterogeneity of aesthetic form, thereby

resisting any easy, immediate applications in the life of the community. According to the other, by sublating the difference between art and life, taking up an active role in building an alternative, non-alienated society where different aspects of life no longer function separately from one another

We thus get the following double, paradoxical determination of the politics of art in the aesthetic regime: art is art, as well as political-emancipatory, "insofar as it is also non-art,... something other than art" (36/53). This makes the logic of modern aesthetic politics to be deeply *antinomous*. It is based on two in itself valid arguments; one locating art's politicity in its autonomy, the other in its heteronomy. When taken together, however, they contradict one another.

IV. THE INTRINSIC LINK BETWEEN ART'S AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

The autonomous and heteronomous interpretations of art's politicity are, however, not simply opposed; each existing independently from the other. For Rancière there is a necessary movement between them or, as he puts it, a "shift [glissement] from one rationality to another" (idem). As we saw, the first interpretation situates art's radical political promise - Rancière also speaks of art "prefigur[ing] another configuration of the common" (34/50) - in its sensory heterogeneity to the life of society. However, art is only thought to be able to keep this promise by suppressing itself as an autonomous object belonging to a specialized sphere of life. That is, by attempting to transform society based on the alternative form of life it incarnates in autonomous fashion. As he puts it: "The [art] work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life" (36/53). Or still: "On the one hand,... the collective life to come is enclosed in the resistant volume of the art work; on the other, it is actualized in the evanescent movement which outlines a different common space" (34/50).

Rancière thus suggests that art has to become heteronomous if it wants to stay true to what it promises in its autonomy. At least, if it wants to practice what it preaches and not fall prey to a performative contradiction. It concerns the contradiction between, on the one hand, art as incarnation of a form of life without hard separations and hierarchies between different spheres (e.g. art, science or politics) and, on the other, art as key instance of such a separated, specialized field in its modern, autonomous conception. If modern art is serious about the integral, non-alienated life it incarnates, it cannot be at ease with its autonomous mode of existence, which has the opposite effect of

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further fragmenting modern life. Art should thus attempt to overcome or, at least, contest its autonomous status.

In this sense, we can understand Rancière when he states that "In order that... [autonomous] 'avant-garde' art stay faithful to the promise of the aesthetic scene, it has to stress more and more the power of heteronomy that underpins its autonomy" (*ARO*148). Or still, when he says that "the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime is not that of the work of art, but of a mode of experience" and stresses that the (first) autonomy of art as a specialized activity has to be "dismissed" for the sake of realizing the second one, that of a form of life no longer based on a separation between different, specialized domains of which the first autonomy is still a symptom (idem).

Rancière is, however, not simply arguing for the total abandonment of art's autonomy and, inversely, full endorsement of its heteronomy. The latter also is said to pose a threat to art's radical political potential. Proponents of heteronomous aesthetic politics hold the actualization of the emancipatory promise contained in art's sensory autonomy to be an inevitable, necessary step. They argue how art "cannot fulfil the promise of living truth that it finds in aesthetic suspension *except at the price of* revoking this suspension, that is of transforming the [artistic, aesthetic] form into a form of life" (*AD*39/56-7, emphasis mine).

For Rancière, however, the catch is that one hereby risks throwing away the baby with the bath water. According to him, what is eliminated by such radical heteronomous aesthetic politics is the "sensible heterogeneity which founds aesthetic promise" (39/57). Rancière thus seems to say that by eradicating that which founds the aesthetic's promise - i.e. art's material autonomy - in attempts to realize it, the promise *also* disappears.

We here encounter the crux of the complex, contradictory relationship between autonomous and heteronomous politics of art as Rancière conceives it. On the one hand, he sets an inherent limit to heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics in that they should never totally sacrifice art's sensible heterogeneity in using it as a tool to build a more emancipated, less fragmented society. On the other hand, and inversely, he contends that neither can art merely embody the promise of a better life through its formal and material autonomy without attempting to actualize it in 'real' life. The latter is said to equally compromise its emancipatory potential.

This double bind can again best be understood in terms of a pragmatic paradox, with art embodying a non-alienated, integral form of life through the autonomy of its form and materiality, yet doing so in an alienated way by positing itself as an isolated sphere of life or activity. In the long term, so one can further argue, such a split, hypocritical position is difficult to uphold. It

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undermines belief in the seriousness of art's commitment to radical change, making it appear complicit with the existing sensible order instead.

A similar performative paradox can be seen to apply to heteronomous politics of art. Here, the discrepancy is that between, on the one hand, the critique of instrumental rationality inherent in aesthetic experience and its promise of a non-instrumental mode of being and, on the other hand, the use of art as a mere tool or vehicle for realizing this promise. With this, it can be seen to apply the same instrumentalist logics it claims to break away from. In this regard, Rancière observes the transformation of "'free play' [characteristic of aesthetic experience] in its opposite,... the activity of a conquering spirit" (37/54, translation mine).

One could say that here as well, it concerns a conflict between means and ends. In attempting to transform the world based on the different form of life it embodies in its sensory form and materiality, art sacrifices precisely what made it heterogeneous, thereby undercutting the success of its attempts. One could even say that heteronomous art threatens to bring about the opposite of what if wants to achieve because of surrendering to the same ways of the world it wanted to eradicate.

Based on the above, we can now fully understand Rancière's key formulations concerning the dynamic, tensional relations between the autonomy and heteronomy of art. On the one hand, he holds that "when art is no more than art, it vanishes" (*ARO*142). We can understand this in light of his claim that art is "autonomous [only] in so far as the will that produces it is heteronomous" (idem). At the same time, however, extreme heteronomy, with art becoming non-art, is not desirable in that art's emancipatory promise of an autonomous life hereby also 'vanishes'. One can thus characterize the relations between autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics in terms of a logic of irreducible tension between extremes. While an artwork cannot be content to merely prefigure the promise of a better life through its formal autonomy, neither can it simply comport itself as instrument in the realization of this promise.

One of the essential features of Rancière's approach to the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy is thus, on the one hand, to affirm both, to consider the two major paradigms of aesthetic politics based on them to be equally valid. On the other hand, however, he holds both to be invalid, self-contradictory and self-defeating when applied in absolute fashion. In other words, it is a case of 'both... and...' which at the same time is one of 'neither ... nor...'. Rancière affirms *both* major forms of aesthetic politics, but only partially, which is to say that he affirms *neither* of them completely or wholeheartedly, positing an internal limit to their application which, when

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disregarded, causes their emancipatory potential to cancel itself out or even turn into its opposite.

V. POLITICS OF THE RESISTANT FORM AND METAPOLITICS OF THE AESTHETIC REVOLUTION

We now understand Rancière's claim that in the aesthetic regime of art the opposing forms of aesthetic politics are intrinsically linked, tied together or still "implicated" (*AD*44/63) from the very beginning. The two interpretations of the above passage in Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* - which is said to constitute the "contradictory nature of the aesthetic regime of art and its politics" (2005:21) - each forms the basis of one of the two major forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era. We here again encounter Rancière's claim that the division of modern aesthetic politics along the autonomy-heteronomy axis was already programmed, so to speak, from the get-go, from the onset of the aesthetic regime. It is inscribed in its founding texts and subsequently plays itself out in history in increasingly complex permutations in both in art theory and practice up to the present day, where it is still thought to determine what Rancière calls the "paradoxical constraints" (*AD*44/63) of art's politics.

Before drawing some final conclusions with regard to Rancière's reconceptualization of the problematic of the autonomy and heteronomy of art, I shall first offer a more detailed account of how the two major paradigms of aesthetic politics are specified in his work.

(i) Rancière uses various phrases to characterize the heteronomous politics of art. These include: the (meta)politics of the "aesthetic revolution", "revolution of the sensory world", "politics of the becoming-life of art" and art's "active appropriation of the common world" (*AD*36-9/54-7, 43-4/62, 50/71-2).[90] He describes the key aim of this type of aesthetic politics as that of "transform[ing] aesthetics' suspension of the relations of domination into the generative principle for a world without domination" (36-7/54). Here, it is thus a matter for art to transgress its own boundaries, which are thought to limit or even undo art's emancipatory promise. Artists are encouraged to intervene directly in life in order to revolutionize it, using society as its artistic material. Rancière's key examples of heteronomous art movements are the artistic avant-gardes in early communist Russia (e.g. the Constructivists and Productivists), the Arts and Crafts movement, the Werkbund, Bauhaus, the Situationists, Joseph Beuys and the Symbolists.

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90 In Chapter 2 and 3 we saw that Rancière also uses the term 'aesthetic revolution' in a more general way to refer to the radical break of the aesthetic regime with the representational regime.

Rancière presents the heteronomous form of aesthetic politics as "essentially a metapolitics" (37/55), a term which we already encountered in Chapter One (Section VIII).[91] He argues how the type of revolution that is sought here is not the political-statist version, aimed at taking over political power. One can think of Leninist conceptions of revolution geared towards establishing a so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a transitory form of government by socialist parties on the road towards communism proper, until the state "withers away", as it is believed (Lenin 1917). Rancière, on the contrary, holds that capturing state power does not constitute much of a revolution because it mostly leaves untouched the underlying, unequal division of sensibilities between those who govern and those who are governed or, in the case of socialist regimes, between the revolutionary party and the masses of workers and peasants. We already expounded on Rancière's critique of conventional notions of revolutionary politics in Chapter Two (Sections V and VI) and its indebtedness to Schiller's critique of the French Revolution.

The politics of aesthetic revolution, in contrast, is a metapolitics in that it aims at radically changing what it considers to be a more fundamental level of political struggle: the sensible hierarchies dividing human beings. It holds this to be the primary site for enacting emancipation and "the formation of a[n] [equal] community of feeling [sentir]" (37/54, translation mine). In this regard, Rancière considers the aesthetic revolution to stand for a new idea of political revolution, that of "a common humanity still only existing as an idea" (*PA*27).

Although Rancière here contravenes Marxist-Leninist *doxa*, one of his key theoretical references is the notion of a "human revolution" (38/55) present in the early works of Marx (1844/2007). Another key philosophical reference is the short, programmatic text *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1779), written (presumably) by Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin. Rancière specifically focuses on the way in which a contrast is staged between "the dead mechanism of the state and the living power of the community nourished by the sensible embodiment of its idea" (*AD*37/54), as he summarizes it.

(ii) The main term used by Rancière for the second, autonomous form of aesthetic politics is the politics of the "resistant form" (*AD*39-43/57-62). In line with Rancière's first interpretation of Schiller's passage on the Greek statue, the autonomy of art is here not regarded as an impediment to unleashing art's potential to enact emancipatory change in society - as the

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91   I already explained earlier that Rancière's use of the term metapolitics in his aesthetic writings is somewhat confusing and inconsistent (Chapter 2, IX and especially Footnote 60). At times, he uses the term to describe the politics of aesthetics in general. In this instance, however, he presents it as a distinctive feature of heteronomous politics of aesthetics and uses it to contrast it with the autonomous politics of aesthetics.

metapolitics of the aesthetic revolution holds. On the contrary, it is regarded as precondition for its political efficacy. It believes that art can only challenge oppressive sensible divisions by nurturing a radical foreignness to life and politics.

Rancière variously situates art's heterogeneity in its 'objectal' status, its appearance, form, materiality and mode of sensibility.[92] The politics of the resistant form is thus based on the transferral, as Rancière explains, of "the properties of... aesthetic experience... [i.e. of an autonomous form of life] to the work of art itself, cancelling their projection into a new life and invalidating the aesthetic revolution" (*ARO*141). Hence, this form of aesthetic politics is also characterized in terms of "life becoming art" (137).

Rancière attributes a paradoxical quality to the autonomous form of aesthetic politics because it is based on an injunction to stay clear from any direct political engagement. Hence, Rancière describes it as "apolitically political" (*AD*42/60), as being political in an apolitical way. He also explains this paradoxical politics by saying that the promise of a new "art of living" - intrinsically linked to art in the aesthetic regime - "is negatively preserved,... through the separation between artistic form and other forms of life" (36/54). Based on such formulations, it is no surprise that the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno is Rancière's key philosophical reference of the autonomous strand of aesthetic politics, as we shall specify in the next section.

VI. THE 'IMPOSSIBLE FULLNESS' OF AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

In line with what we said earlier (Section IV) about the irresolvable tension between the two most important paradigms of aesthetic politics - and contrary to what our presentation in the previous section might suggest - these paradigms are not to be taken as pure, absolute positions, each straightforwardly and consistently affirming either the autonomy or heteronomy of art.

First, it is crucial to understand that Rancière conceives the two major figures of the politics of aesthetics as irreducibly *dialectical* entities, as combinations of both autonomous and heteronomous elements, albeit with different emphases and weightings. A second, related aspect of Rancière's conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics is that their dialectical mediations function as internal fuses,

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92 More specifically, Rancière locates art's heterogeneity on the level of the "heterogeneous singularity of the art object" (*AD*21/33), "artistic form" (36/54), the "[art] work's sensible heterogeneity" (42/61), the "material difference of art" (idem), "the radical strangeness of the aesthetic object" (50/71).

safeguarding each paradigm from applying itself absolutely or non-dialectically. If this were to happen, so Rancière argues, each paradigm's emancipatory potential turns into its opposite, with art becoming a conservative, oppressive force. In the following, I elucidate each key aspect in turn.

(i) The first point is most explicitly articulated by Rancière in the case of autonomous forms of aesthetic politics. He emphasizes that the political potential of autonomous works of art "does not reside in the simple solitude of the work, no more than it does in the radicality of artistic self-affirmation" (40-1/59). He relies heavily on Adorno's work on aesthetics (1977/2007) when he argues that in autonomous aesthetic politics, art's emancipatory promise is located, rather, in the "internal contradiction" of autonomous artistic form itself, in a "dissonance" at its heart, in the form of inscriptions of the contradictions of a "non-reconciled world" that operate a "return of the repressed" (41/59).

Rancière refers to Adorno's prototypical example of this logic: Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone musical system. Of the latter, he says that "in order to denounce the capitalist division of work and the embellishments of the commodity effectively, the work has to be even more mechanical, more 'inhuman' than the products of mass consumption" (idem). In a second moment, this inhumanity is said "in its turn... [to] disturb... the autonomous work's beautiful technical arrangement by recalling that which founds it: the capitalist separation of work and enjoyment" (idem).

Based on this dual determination of the criticality of the aesthetic politics of the resistant form, Rancière concludes that its autonomy is "in fact a double heteronomy" (idem, *ARO*147-8). Rather than a straightforward, heroic affirmation of autonomous art's politicity, he thus proposes a deeply self-contradictory, torsional form of aesthetic politics, one irremediably infected with its opposite. Consequently, he also characterizes art works within the paradigm of the resistant form as "autonomous/heteronomous" (*AD*42/60).

Rancière does not offer a similar, dialectical account of the heteronomous politics of aesthetics. In the next chapter I shall offer an interpretation of this unbalance in his conceptualization of the major forms of aesthetic politics. Still, it is not difficult to find similarly complex, internally split accounts of the heteronomous paradigm of art's political radicality. We can refer to Peter Bürger's (1974/84) influential theorization of the deeply heteronomous tendencies of the artistic avant-gardes of the 1910s and 20s - which he calls the "historical avant-garde". This work can be seen as dialectical counterpart to Adorno's work on aesthetics.

Bürger's theory is clearly sympathetic to what is held to be the avant-garde's central project of heteronomy, i.e. of overcoming the autonomy of art

and its separation from life and society. Still, he admits that the powerfully heteronomous impulse of early 20th century avant-garde art movements was ultimately self-contradictory and doomed to fail. As main reason for this - and in similar to Rancière's main objection to heteronomous aesthetic politics mentioned earlier - he mentions that by destroying art's autonomy, the avant-gardes did away with the "precondition" of a "critical cognition of reality", as he calls it (1974/84:50). In other words, by immersing themselves completely in revolutionary politics, avant-garde artists were thought to lose the critical capacity owed to artistic autonomy.

Consequently, Bürger offers a more qualified, dialectical account of the heteronomous desire of the historical avant-gardes, one that attempts to avoid art's assimilation into existing society and its bad practices. Such an account is clear from his specification of the avant-gardes's heteronomous goal in terms of "organiz[ing] a new life praxis *from a basis in art*" (49, emphasis mine). As such, avant-garde art's involvement in the building of a new, better society is firmly rooted in the aesthetic mode of experience and its inherent emancipatory potential which Bürger, like Rancière, conceives of in terms of Kantian and Schillerian autonomy. It is thus not a case of doing away with aesthetic experience altogether, but rather of taking it as "starting point for the organization of a new life praxis" (50) or still, to "direct... [it] towards the practical" (33). In this way, it cannot be simply said that heteronomous political art strategies sacrifice emancipatory aesthetic principles on the altar of revolutionary social change and are hereby doomed to uncritically adapt to the ways of the world, even though they have often been interpreted in this way or ended up doing so in practice.

We thus understand that for Rancière, autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics are always locked in a dialectical embrace or dance with their opposites, causing them to be necessarily thwarted, contaminated, contradictory. Borrowing a term coined by Slavoj Žižek (1999), we could also speak of the "impossible fullness" of both major paradigms of the politics of aesthetics.

(ii) We now further have to understand more precisely how for Rancière the highly dialectical character of both major forms of aesthetic politics isn't merely a result of accidental causes (e.g. historical contingencies, political compromises), but constitutes a key strategy of each form to cope with an ineradicable internal obstacle. As we already saw, Rancière holds that each paradigm has an internal limitation to its application in the sense that if allowed to pursue its strategy unabated, it ends up losing its emancipatory potential, becoming conservative and counterrevolutionary instead. As he describes this logic in relation to the autonomous form of aesthetic politics - yet equally valid for heteronomous forms - it has a "limit at which its very project

cancels itself out" (42/60) or still, it "accomplishes itself at the exact moment that it is cancelled out" (43/62). In relation to this, Gay Dail (2009:397) says that each paradigm has a "vanishing point" that coincides with its absolute, pure application.

In case of the politics of the resistant form, straightforward application is said to result in the reinstatement of "aesthetic difference" (*AD*41/59) or distinction, as Bourdieu would call it. It does so by positing as superior the mode of sensibility of autonomous art which, as Rancière says, is "jealously preserved" (43/62) by artists and connoisseurs as their exclusive preserve. The latter is than opposed to the 'bad' or inferior mode of sensibility to which the remainder of humanity is doomed in its ordinary, everyday endeavours. As such, absolute affirmation of art's aesthetic autonomy enacts a partitioning of humanity on the basis of a hierarchy between two forms of sensibility. Obviously, this goes against the grain of what Rancière considers to be the essence of emancipatory politics and its presupposition of sensory equality. This reversal into conservatism would be the "heavy consequence" (41/59) of unreservedly endorsing the autonomy of art.

Rancière further says that the autonomous strand of aesthetic politics "tends to… oscillate between two positions" (42/61). On the one hand, it tends towards what he calls the "republican" stance by pleading for the preservation of the material singularity of art against corrupting, worldly forces. This position would be similar to resistance in the realm of education against the latter's democratization. On the other hand, the aesthetic politics of the resistant form is said to be vulnerable to the "ethical dissolution of aesthetic heterogeneity" (43/62), with art summoned to bare witness to the power of the Other. Rancière detects this danger in François Lyotard's reading of Kant's theory of the sublime (1994). He associates the latter with "a whole current of thought in which political dissensuality is dissolved into an archipolitics of exception" (*AD*43/62).[93]

For the aesthetic politics of heteronomy, Rancière identifies the main danger in the assimilation of the heterogeneity of aesthetic experience into the

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93 Interesting in this regard, is how Rancière compares Lyotard's work on aesthetics to that of Adorno. According to him, Lyotard has pushed Adorno's "'hard' version of modernism" to its point of reversion (2005:22). In Adorno, the political potential of art would still be "linked… to its radical separation from social life (commodity culture) and to its [i.e. art's] inner contradictions" (idem). As such, Adorno is said to have "still kept the Schillerian promise of emancipation [and]… an unalienated life" (idem). In contrast, in Lyotard's reading of modernist art, the operations of "external separation and inner contradiction" are said to testify to the contrary of emancipation: "to an immemorial dependency of human thought on the power of the Other, that makes any promise of emancipation a deception" (idem). Rancière thus criticizes Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime for its "reversion of the modernist paradigm" and the latter's liberatory "political implications" (idem).

existing order, for example in the forms of an "aestheticized life" (40/58), whether communist, fascist or capitalist. He considers this to be one of two "threats" from which the aesthetic politics of autonomy wants to protect its counterpart, the other being the "transformation into a metapolitical act" of aesthetic experience (idem). We already saw earlier (Section IV) why Rancière considers this to turn art's emancipatory potential into its opposite.

VII. MAINTAINING THE PRODUCTIVE TENSION BETWEEN OPPOSITES

Let us now summarize the key features of Rancière's conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetico-political strategies in the modern era.

First, it is important to stress that the opposition between the two forms of aesthetic politics is thought to be *constitutive* of the politics of modern art and aesthetics. In this regard, Rancière speaks of a "founding paradox" and "originary contradiction" that are "incessantly at work" in the aesthetic regime (*AD*36/53). In other words, for Rancière, the two forms of aesthetic politics are there from the very beginning, "opposed and... tied together" (2006), as he puts it. Hence he also speaks of the "fundamental" or "constitutive" "undecidability" of modern aesthetic politics (*AD*60/84).

For this reason, Rancière explicitly distances himself from views that regard the autonomy/heteronomy problematic as the result of compromises made by artists in their attempt at realizing art's emancipatory promiese (44/63). For example, with artists sacrificing or downplaying art's heterogeneity in order to gain some currency in the 'real' world, desecrating aesthetic purity for the sake of creating opportunities 'to make a real difference'. Such acts can then either be affirmed as necessary, pragmatic, heroic even, concessions, or they can be opposed for 'selling out'.

Rancière, however, dismisses such accounts in terms of a "conflict between art's purity and its politicization" (32/48). For him, the conflict is situated rather "within purity itself" (34/50), or still, "the contradiction is lodged more deeply, in the very core of aesthetic experience and its 'education'" (34/50-51). Based on our account of the politics of aesthetics (see Chapter Two), we understand this to refer to the fact that aesthetic experience is from the very beginning, in its original formulations, conceived as an impure, 'bastard' concept, paradoxically determined by both autonomy and heteronomy, torn between art and life.

Secondly, the "original and persistent tension" (43/62) between autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics is not regarded by Rancière as a handicap or impediment to their efficacy. On the contrary, he

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affirms it as the driving force behind both. Or, to be more precise, the irreducible tension between the two main strands of aesthetic politics is conceived as *both* a "threat" *and* "what makes it function" (44/63).[94] Based on what was said previously (Sections IV and VI), we can understand why this is the case. We saw that for Rancière, the major politics of aesthetics are internally 'capped' as to the application of their principles. For both, it is the dialectical infusion of the opposite form of aesthetic politics that functions as a kind of internal resistance, preventing them from overreaching and surpassing the point of self-cancellation or "self-suppression" (*AD*129/169). In this regard, Rancière says that the aesthetic regime "has always lived off the tension between contraries" (40/60) or still, the "clash between two formulae" (*ARO*142). It is thus crucial for each of the two archetypes of aesthetic politics in the modern era to preserve the tension with its opposite in order to prevent itself from transgressing the limit beyond which it loses its emancipatory potential.

Thirdly, this implies that for Rancière the two major forms of aesthetic politics are irrevocably interdependent. Each needs the other as critical supplement in order to maintain its progressive political status. They are thus emancipatory only in relation to one another when, in a self-critical act provoked by its opposite, they abstain from absolutely implementing their own project.

In this sense, Rancière calls the contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy at the heart of modern aesthetic politics a positive and productive one (*PA*5,59). In other words, it is not only so that the paradoxical, tensional manifestation of aesthetic politics in the modern era *cannot* be solved, untangled or finally decided upon - at least, not without dissolving the aesthetic regime itself. Such a decision or final solution, moreover, is also *undesirable* because art in the modern era is held to owe its political productivity precisely to this irreducible tension between opposing logics. It is thus not a problem of having to decide between the two major forms of aesthetic politics - at one place, Rancière speaks of the "vain debates over the autonomy of art or its submission to politics" (19). Instead, the key task for art theorists and practitioners is that of engaging in a complex "negotiation" (*AD*46/66) between the two in order to safeguard their productive antagonism.

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94 Note the conceptual similarity with the way in which the presupposition of equality, in Rancière's political writings, is theorized as both ruin and support of a social order (see Chapter One, III).

VIII. MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM AS DIFFERENT ACTS IN THE AESTHETIC PLOT

I conclude this exposition of Rancière's account of modern art's autonomous and heteronomous politics by taking a look at how he hereby contests and offers an alternative account to dominant labelings and periodizations of art in the modern era and of its politics in particular. His main targets here are theoretical-historical formations such as modernism, postmodernism and the avant-garde. He specifically opposes what he considers to be their shared, linear-teleological and historicist approach to modern art's politics. That is, the way in which they posit a sequence of historical phases and movements - each characterized by certain singular features - as well as a determinate, necessary logic of their succession. Rancière holds his own account not only to be more correct (factually) but also more productive (politically). Looking into this aspect of his theory of art's autonomy and heteronomy will also allow us to determine some final, key features of the aesthetic regime of art, thereby completing our account of Rancière's regime theory of art started in Chapter Two.

First, with regard to their factual correctness, Rancière holds accounts of art's politics in terms of a modernist and postmodernist phase to be mistaken and confused. He accuses them of "manipulati[ng]... history" (2007a:257) and dishing up "imaginary stories" (*PA*19), as well as trading with "notions that pass off conceptual prejudices as historical determinations and temporal delimitations as conceptual determinations" (10). As we shall see in the following, many more reproaches are added to these, including incoherence, simplification, reducing complexities and separating processes from their context.

Rancière holds dominant, historicist accounts of art's politics in the modern era to be mistaken on at least two (interconnected) counts. First, rather than constituting separate periods, art movements like modernism and postmodernism form integral, even if contradictory, parts of one larger (aesthetic) historical regime. Second, rather than succeeding one another in necessary, temporal order (diachronically), they - and the contradictions between them - are present continuously and simultaneously (synchronically), at any one time, throughout the modern era, since the aesthetic regime's inception. In this regard, he says of dominant periodizations of modern art's politics that they "misguidedly project, in the form of temporal succession, antagonistic elements whose tension infuses and animates the aesthetic regime of art in its entirety" (*AD*42/60). Rockhill characterizes Rancière's position here in terms of an "explicit rejection of chronological sequences" (2004:64).

Rancière thus conceives configurations such as modernism and postmodernism as variations, elaborations or, as he also puts it, "antithetical mutations" (*ARO*134) of the constitutive paradox at the heart of the aesthetic regime, which I have previously presented in detail. Rather than separate, historical configurations, they are so many 'acts' within one and the same 'plot' of the aesthetic regime, playing out its core contradictions in ever different, more elaborate guises.

Let us now look more specifically into Rancière's criticisms of the labels of modernism and postmodernism, starting with the first. Rancière rejects the validity of the notion of modernism, claiming instead that the aesthetic regime is actually the "true name for what is designated by the incoherent label 'modernity'" (*PA*24). Modernist theories of art are reproached for offering a "simplistic historical account" conceived of in terms of simple ruptures and transitions - for example, from the old to the new or from representation to anti-representation. In this regard, Rancière criticizes the dominant modernist narrative - attributed to the work of Clement Greenberg - that identifies the rise of artistic modernism with the transition to non-figurative representation in painting, as well as the further elevation of this particular development into the overall, anti-mimetic programme of modernist art in general.

For Rancière, going beyond 'mimesis', does not mean the refusal of figurative representation. He holds, rather, that the difference between representational and non-representational art forms should be thought of in terms of a more profound opposition between two regimes of historicity, between two different ways of "relating [the present] to the past" (25). In his view, the contrasting of old and new - with the two divided by a radical rupture - typical of the modernist master narrative is characteristic of the representational regime of the arts. This is then opposed to the aesthetic regime where "the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly re-stages the past" (24). Instead of being structured in terms of radical breaks between old and new and past and present, art in the aesthetic regime is said to "devote... itself to the invention of new forms of life on the basis of an idea of what art *was*, an idea of what art *would have been*" (25). We can relate this back to Rancière's second, heteronomous reading of Schiller's interpretation of *Juno Ludovici* in the above (Section III), with its affirmation of the mode of existence of art typical of ancient Greek society - i.e. as an integral part of public life - as a model to overcome art's contemporary alienated state in the future.

According to Rancière, this core confusion at the heart of modernist accounts of art has two main forms. Both are said to misrepresent and "mask" (21) the core contradiction of the politics of art in the aesthetic regime. That is, the fact that in the modern era, art is defined as an autonomous form

of life that establishes "at one and the same time both the autonomy of art and "art as a moment in life's process of self-formation" (26). As we saw, these two forms correspond to the two major figures of the politics of aesthetics distinguished by Rancière.

The problem with modernist accounts of these two figures, however, is that they affirm one side of the contradiction of art in the aesthetic regime in isolation from the other side. On the one hand, there are modernist theories that exclusively assert the autonomy of art, leading them to absolutize the ideal of a pure art and its "pure potential, through exploring the capabilities of its specific medium", whether literary, pictorial or musical (26). Rancière considers the many declarations of the end of art with the advent of postmodernism to be related to the crisis of such modernist theories of art's autonomy.

On the other hand, and in contrast with the former, Rancière distinguishes modernist theories that place single emphasis on art works' heteronomy as "forms that accomplish a task or fulfil a destiny specific to modernity" (26-27). Here, art is one-dimensionally valorized as "form and self-formation of life" (27). Rancière takes the failure of Marxist revolutions all over the world to have delivered a deadly blow to this heteronomous modernist paradigm.

Against the one-dimensional character of these main modernist accounts of art's autonomy and heteronomy, as well as their underlying, linear conceptions of the modern art's history,[95] Rancière holds that the autonomy of art is not exclusively a thing of the past, while its post-modern heteronomization is not exclusively a thing of the present. Rather, both are considered to be "in line with a process of border-crossing that went along with the whole development of the aesthetic regime of art" (21). By obfuscating this, modernist theories are said to prevent a thorough "understanding [of] both the transformations of modern and contemporary art and the link between art and politics" (20).

With regard to postmodernist conceptions of art, Rancière's key claim is that they simply "reverse" (*PA*28) the modernist, revolutionary, teleological

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95 In case of modernist theories of art's autonomy, Rancière refers to their presupposition of "a simple link between a historical process of political emancipation and a historical process of the autonomization of artistic practices" (*PA*21).

model.[96] Their basic modus operandi would be to confront modernist theories with everything that doesn't fit into their models, for example art practices that mix different art genres or combine representative and abstract elements. Rancière, however, does not consider this to constitute a temporal break or new era, but merely the "late recognition of a fundamental act of the aesthetic regime" (idem). Rancière thus rejects any hard opposition between modernism and post-modernism. Instead, he considers both to "agree on the same form of identification of artistic modernity" (2005:19), i.e. the belief that "modernity meant the autonomy of art" (20). Or still: both are said to agree "on a very simplistic idea of the modern break with the representational tradition, resting on the idea that representation means resemblance and figuration" (idem).

In short, also with regard to the opposition between modernism and postmodernism - as with the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous conceptions - Rancière's basic criticism is that they are "one-sided interpretation[s]" (21). While the first exclusively posits the "separation of the artistic sphere", the second stresses "the blurring of the borders... between art and non-art" (idem). In this regard, Rancière also speaks of "symmetrical

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96 As Rancière states: "the same theology of Time... is overturned" or reversed (Rancière 2005:23). It would no longer concern "the promise of a revolution ahead of us" (as in the case of modernism) but "the event of Extermination that lies behind us" (idem). Lyotard's theory of the sublime (1994) is taken as prototypical example of such reversal. According to Rancière, Kant's notion of the sublime is (wrongly) read by Lyotard as positing a "founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation" (*PA*29). This is said to have become the model of other "scenes of original distance/sin" (idem). As examples, he mentions Heidegger' Gods, Freud's unsymbolizable object, the death drive, the Absolute Other and murder of father. In all these instances, notions of the unrepresentable, intractable, irredeemable are said to be mobilized against the idea of self-emancipation.

one-way narratives of progress or decadence" respectively (20).[97]

Rancière's main criticism of linear-historicist accounts of art's politics is thus that they "make clear-cut distinctions in the complex configuration of the aesthetic regime" (*PA*25), separating "ruptures" or "iconoclastic gestures" from "the context that allows for their existence" (25-6). They strive "after one meaning and direction in history" (26) which results in an overall simplification of the developments of art in the modern era. Rancière's reproach to these theories is thus, on the one hand, that they mistakenly hypostasize into opposites what is intrinsically linked, interdependent and, on the other hand, that they falsely historicize in successive phases what has been simultaneously present from the start.

In contrast, Rancière claims that his own historical methodology - i.e. of his regime theory - stays true to the aesthetic regime's "complexity and contradiction" (2005:21). It is said to "take... into account the inner tension of a regime of art... and the multiplicity of its lines of temporality", its "multi-temporality" or still, the "co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities" (*PA*21), against any notions of 'beginning' or 'end'.

Questions of historical accuracy aside, Rancière also accuses historicist accounts of art's politics for maintaining that "an essence of an 'epoch' defines what you can or cannot do" (23). They are reproached, in other words, for prescribing what art can and cannot achieve politically in a certain era. As he puts it: they use "defined periods and great historical ruptures to impose interdictions" (2007a:257). He also speaks of "the yoke of the great historical schemata that announce the great revolutions to come or that mourn the great

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97 With regard to the notion of the avant-garde - which Rancière takes to refer to the subject suited to the modernist project and the task of connecting the aesthetic to the political - the confusion is said to be that between two very different conceptions and the "covert connection" established between them (*PA*29). Rancière labels the first conception as "topographical", "military" (idem) or still, "strategic" (30). It is based on the linking of "political subjectivity to a certain form: the party, an advanced detachment that derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history" (29). A second, aesthetic idea of the avant-garde is said to refer to "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" (idem). Rancière holds the second notion to be proper to the aesthetic regime of art. In many modernist theories, however, he alleges that the use of the term is misused, for instance by defining artistic avant-gardes in a strategic, military sense as "advanced detachments of artistic innovation" (idem). Rancière fundamentally disagrees with such linking of aesthetics and politics. For him, the stakes of confusing the two conceptions of the avant-garde are high because it conflates two opposing "ideas of political subjectivity" (30). On the one hand, there is the "archi-political" conception, which elevates a select group into the position of all-knowing, revolutionary subject. On the other hand, Rancière distinguishes the "meta-political" conception which is more democratically structured, based on "the idea of global political subjectivity", defined as "the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come" (30).

revolutions past only to impose their proscriptions and their declarations of powerlessness on the present" (idem).

Rancière criticizes this tendency of historicist theories of modern art's politics for producing a debilitating, disempowering effect on the agency of contemporary artists. At a certain point he even considers artists to be "taken hostage" (idem) by theories of modernism and postmodernism.[98] According to him, "the historicists' partition between the thinkable and the unthinkable seems to me to cover up the more basic partition concerning the very right to think" (2000b:13).

In contrast, Rancière claims that his regime theory offers "a topography of the configuration of possibilities, a perception of the multiple alterations and displacements that make up forms of political subjectivization and artistic invention" (2007a:257). In this sense, he identifies as one of the general aims of his work on aesthetics to create some "breathing room" for artists with regard to the political possibilities of their practice (261).

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98 Rancière claims that "Contemporary art was taken hostage in the operation of the 'end of utopias' caught between so-called postmodern discourse, which claimed the 'end of grand narratives', and the reversal of modernism itself, as modern thinkers ended up polemicizing against modernism, ultimately condemning emancipatory art's utopias and their contribution to totalitarianism" (2007:257).

Chapter 5: Towards a third way between autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics?

Synopsis

This chapter offers a critical consideration of Rancière's reconceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era, overviewed in the previous chapter. I start (Section I) my problematization by arguing for a close resemblance between the core conceptual logic of Rancière's model and that of third way political thought of the 1990s. I thus suggest to characterize his approach to art's autonomy and heteronomy as a typical third way one. This interpretative manoeuvre allows me to bring out some key presuppositions underlying Rancière's theory of art's autonomy and heteronomy, which further expose a string of contradictions, problems and weaknesses. Most of these are related to the rejection of radicalism characteristic of third way approaches. First (II), I argue that it reveals Rancière's reliance on, and endorsement of deeply tragical, late twentieth century accounts of art's autonomous and heteronomous politics by Adorno and Bürger respectively. I further contend that the latter's validity and relevance for developing a radical aesthetics suited to today's political circumstances can be questioned. I then (III) look critically at one key manifestation of the inherent anti-radicalism of Rancière's third way model: its rejection of straightforward applications of both autonomous and heteronomous political art strategies. I question his stance in this regard through a critique of what I call the tactical approach to art's autonomy and heteronomy, which I regard as a possible, practical translation of Rancière's model. I also (IV) criticize a second aspect of Rancière's third way conceptual model: the granting of equal validity to autonomous and heteronomous political-aesthetics approaches. I reproach him, on the one hand, for being too generous in its assessment of the radical political agency of the first and, on the other hand, for being too pessimistic in its assessment of the second. In order to allay Rancière's overcautious stance toward heteronomous aesthetic politics, I illustrate, through two concrete cases, that for politically engaged artists it is not so much a case of avoiding being 'too' heteronomous, but mostly of never being enough so. I sum up (V) the first part of my problematization, focused on the third way conceptual structure of Rancière's approach toward art's autonomy and heteronomy, by characterizing his position as that of a post-utopian utopianism. I then start a second line of critique concerned with some of the historical claims at the heart of Rancière's conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics. I first (VI) offer some further specifications of Rancière's historical method and the way in which he considers it

> *to be more open toward novel forms of aesthetic politics than competing methods. I then (VII-VIII) problematize this claim, arguing that Rancière's aesthetic regime unduly effects a closure with regard to new configurations of art and radical politics, even though it concerns a 'paradoxical' closure.*

I. JACQUES RANCIÈRE AND THIRD WAY POLITICS

In this chapter, I shall problematize Rancière's theorization of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era, of which I offered an overview in the previous chapter. My critique mainly focuses on two aspects. The first one (elaborated in sections I to V) concerns the general conceptual structure of Rancière's model, which I hold to be a typical example of a 'third way'. A second, problematic aspect (Sections VI to VIII) is related to some of his historical claims concerning art's autonomous and heteronomous politics.

I shall begin by problematizing Rancière's most important conceptual move with regard to the issue of art's autonomy and heteronomy. Based on our account in the previous chapter, one can characterize his basic stance as that of refusing to side with either one of the two traditional, antagonistic models with regard to the politics of aesthetics in the modern era. With this, however, Rancière does not simply dismiss these models and propose an own, entirely different model. Or, rather, to the degree that he does propose a third model, it is basically made up of both opposite paradigms, with emphasis placed on what I called the 'impossible fullness' of each, as well as the irreducible yet productive nature of their antagonistic relation.

By doing so, Rancière can be seen to dismiss as false conceptualizations of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics in terms of a dichotomy or dilemma, instead considering them to be entangled from the get-go, each needing the other in order to maintain its radical political potential. Theorization of the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy, and the emancipatory status of each, is thereby shifted from arguing in favour of one against the other to articulating the *manner in which both are to be practiced or applied*. Based on our previous account, the mode of application that Rancière considers to be appropriate - i.e. in view of maximizing art's emancipatory potential - can be characterized as self-critical, cautious, moderate, prudent even. Key to both paradigms' radical political agency is a constant awareness of their own, inherent limitations, of which their antipode acts as constant reminder. Inversely, Rancière considers their emancipatory promise to be lost

or even reversed when these limits are ignored, i.e. when the models are practiced in absolute, orthodox, rigorous, pure, overconfident fashion.

So again, philosophy's task here is not to make an argued decision in favour of one of the two competing models, which is thence to be taken as superior. As we saw, Rancière on the contrary considers the problematic to be fundamentally undecidable. Moreover, in light of the above, an exclusive choice for one of the two paradigms is thought to result in the loss of emancipatory potential as it leads the assumedly superior model to believe in the possibility of offering a satisfying solution on its own terms. For Rancière, on the contrary, the challenge is to specify the way in which each paradigm can optimally deal with its own irreducible impurity and in-self-sufficiency and develop a modus vivendi with it.

With this, Rancière is not propagating a middle position, with political art practices having to find a golden mean or do a balancing act between the two extremes of autonomy and heteronomy. Again, his conceptualization rather stresses the key importance of *the way in which* both positions - whichever one chooses - are put into practice, how they are executed. It is on this level that the emancipatory potential of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics is won or lost.

Significant in this regard is how Rancière's theory not only offers a synthesis of two of the most influential existing accounts of aesthetic politics, but also how he uses the most complex, self-critical, dialectical varieties of each. He thus takes on board - sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - some of the key self-reservations, hesitations and disclaimers of theorists of both autonomous and heteronomous 'camps'. Or still, he focuses on the moments in each of these theories in which they take recourse to opposing accounts in order to articulate or even remedy the inherent limitations of their own position. Again, this must be understood in line with Rancière's attempt to deconstruct undialectical interpretations of each position, as well as to expose the falsity of their presentation in terms of a simple, external and exclusive opposition.

I shall start my problematization of this basic conceptual structure of Rancière's theorization of art's autonomy and heteronomy by arguing that it can be thought of best as a 'third way' approach.[99] I understand the latter in a

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99   As we shall see later (in Chapter Six), Rancière himself uses the term 'third way' in his writings on the aesthetics of politics (*AD* 47,50,51/67,72). He does so, however, to describe the key feature of a third major figure of aesthetic politics characterized by the mixing and alternating between autonomous and heteronomous forms. I argue that the term third way, understood in its recent, political meanings, is also apt to describe the key conceptual structure and underlying values of Rancière's model of modern art's autonomy and heteronomy.

specific sense in line with political third way configurations that became *bon ton* in some of the main Western countries in the 1990s, exemplified by politicians such as Tony Blair (UK), Wim Kok (the Netherlands), Gerhard Schröder (Germany) and Bill Clinton (US). In the first instance, I want to argue that both share not only the same general conceptual structure, but also similar political assumptions and values. This will then serve as basis of, and starting point for a first series of criticisms of Rancière's approach toward autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics.

Similar to what I said about this approach, and contrary to what the name suggests, third way politics also does not so much develop a third model, radically different and separate from the main competing models that hitherto prevailed. It rather proposes a form of politics that pragmatically and undogmatically - or so it claims - mixes basic ingredients of these models, ignoring their conflictual history and dismissing claims as to their structural incompatibility. In case of political third way movements of the 1990s, the main models concerned are, on the one hand, redistributive, 'welfare state' policies and, on the other, free market paradigms. Instead of resolutely opting for one of these configurations over the other, third way politics holds that both have their merits, as well as their flaws. Consequently, the key challenge is to make the most of the strengths of each model while, inversely, avoiding its weaknesses.

In this sense, third way politics' diagnosis of the key problems of predominant political economic models such as social-democratic welfarism and neoliberal capitalism are not so much focused on intrinsic merits of these models. Rather, they take issue with the hubristic, partisan, rigorous, complacent way in which they have all too often been applied. That is, by disregarding opposite viewpoints and being blind to inherent and contextual limitations. In contrast, third way politics' guiding ethos is essentially realist, holding that every paradigm, no matter how advanced, leads to disasters if applied too rigidly, due to their inevitable fallibility as human constructs.

These insights form the basis of third way politics' deep pragmatism and dismissal of all absolute remedies. Instead, it propagates an approach that selects policy instruments based on their track record in 'delivering the goods' and regardless of their ideological persuasions, and combines them in unprejudiced, eclectic fashion. Third way politics, for example, typically held that by stimulating free market processes in the public sector, the welfare state is kept efficient and affordable. Inversely, redistributive state policies were promoted as instrumental for nurturing the ideal conditions for sustainable economic growth (e.g. by maintaining a relatively low degree of inequality and enabling high quality education for the majority).

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As such, third way politics attempted to get the most out of the two most dominant ideological paradigms of the twentieth century, using the strengths of the one in order to keep the weaknesses of its opposite in check, each keeping the other on its toes, preventing radical, monolithic applications. It can thus be regarded as a paradigm suited to the supposedly post-ideological, post-utopian and post-political spirit of the 1990s, with 'politics' understood here in radical terms of a partisan battle between ideological enemies. It can be seen to have played a key part in the endeavour of predominantly liberal-progressive politicians to renegotiate their ideological alignments in the post-cold war period.

I want to argue that Rancière's theorization of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics follows a similar pattern as that of third way politics. It also advocates an eclectic system in which two paradigms that were hitherto regarded as opposite and incompatible, are both affirmed, yet, at the same time, neither of them completely or unreservedly. It is equally a model in which the tensions between opposite models are utilized as a way to keep their excesses in check, preventing them from overestimating their powers in their ideological self-righteousness. And, finally, it also places more stress on the manner in which models are applied, instead of their inherent validity and value.

These conceptual similarities allow me to draw out some problems, inconsistencies and weaknesses of Rancière's conceptual modelling of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics, as well as his project for a renewal of radical aesthetics in general. The subsequent sections (II to V) will each focus on one specific problematic aspect. I end this section by going through some general implications of Rancière's third way approach.

For starters, it raises questions as to how his model of art's autonomy and heteronomy is compatible with his conception of radical politics. Rancière's approach can be seen to share third way politics' core assumption that every form of radicalism can only result in catastrophe, is ultimately self-defeating and, consequently, needs to be curtailed, tempered, redirected by 'dialecticizing', cross-fertilizing or hybridizing it with other models. Or, rather, if there is any radicalism involved in third way politics, it is that of refusing to exclusively opt for one strategy or model, instead endorsing several, ideologically diverse solutions in an unbiased, non-partisan way. With this, however, he seems to affirm the same post-ideological or post-political stance dismissed in his political theory for suppressing the proper operation of politics, which I dealt with extensively in Chapter One.

Secondly, and for the same reason, Rancière's approach to the problematic of art's autonomy and heteronomy sits uncomfortably with one of the core ambitions of his radical aesthetics, namely, the development of an

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alternative to what he calls the "post-utopian present" (*AD*19/31) in both art theory and practice. As we saw in the Introduction, at the basis of this tendency, he detects "the conviction that we are over and done with aesthetic utopia, with a certain idea of artistic radicality and its capacity to perform an absolute transformation of the conditions of collective existence" (idem). Rancière's third way-style conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetico-political strategies, however, seems to enact a similar dismissal of radicalism and utopianism.

Finally, the refusal to take a side between the two traditional antagonists with regard to the politics of art - and, instead, the focus on the beneficial nature of this antagonism itself - can be seen as a rather atypical move for Rancière as "thinker of dissensus" (Rockhill & Watts 2009:1). He can hereby be seen to depolarize and depoliticize debates on the politics of aesthetics - again: with politics understood in its radical, partisan sense. By integrating the fundamental disagreement between the two main historical manifestations of aesthetic politics into a functional dialectic - albeit one based on the logic of supplementarity -, he can be seen to neutralize and even downplay their antagonism. This would make his political aesthetics an instance of the very same 'realization/suppression' of politics, he criticizes the tradition of political philosophy for in *Disagreement*.

For all this, however, the antagonism between autonomous and heteronomous art strategies has not stopped from manifesting itself in different guises and situations in recent times. Think of the heated debates between 'new philistines' and 'new aesthetes', discussed in the previous chapter, which signals all but consensus on a third way 'settlement' to the autonomy/ heteronomy 'wars'.

II. ART AND RADICAL POLITICS BEYOND TRAGEDY

A first, more specific limitation of Rancière's third way approach concerns the way in which he builds a model of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics based on some of its most self-critical past models. By doing so, one threatens to inherit what I see as their deeply tragical outlook on achieving radical political change through art. As I showed (Chapter 4,VI), the thinking on art and politics of Adorno and Bürger can be identified as the two key sources of Rancière's third way model. It concerns two of the most influential theorizations of art's autonomy and heteronomy respectively in the second half of the twentieth century. Both can be seen to display a deep awareness of the flaws and limitations of their aesthetic politics of preference.

As we saw, Rancière draws heavily on Adorno's art theory in his elaboration of the aesthetic politics of the resistant form. Although Bürger's

political art theory is not explicitly mentioned by Rancière in his account of the politics of the aesthetic revolution, I want to argue that it is a perfect instantiation of it. It is also ideally suited as counterbalance to Adorno in his conceptual model of art's autonomy and heteronomy as a whole.

Taken together, Adorno's and Bürger's theories can be seen to found what I propose to call the 'tragical consensus' on the autonomy and heteronomy of art. I hold the latter to have exerted an important influence on the thinking of art's relation to radical politics in the final third of the previous century. It refers to the increasing way in which both autonomous and heteronomous accounts of art's politics came to share a tragic sensibility of their own limitations. This was no doubt a result of the negative experiences of experiments with combining art and politics in both totalitarian and capitalist societies.

In case of autonomous art, Adorno (1970) argued that by offering temporary relief from the alienated conditions of life, it threatens to play a comforting, pacifying role, thereby doing away with or, at least, lessening, the felt need for radical change.[100] In order to prevent itself from fulfilling such escapist, 'counterrevolutionary' function, autonomous art is urged to violate and sabotage its own autonomy. As examples of such self-tormenting autonomous art, one can think of works of formal aesthetic experimentation (with colour, lines, composition, material, sounds) that in their rigidity and indifference frustrate sensory enjoyment. By doing so, they can be said to confront their recipients with their similarly deprived, impoverished existence in current society, thus creating a feeling of suffocating closure that, so it is argued, might potentially bring the subject to take radical political action.

As we saw, central to Rancière's elaboration of the politics of the resistant form is what can be regarded as the ur-example of such self-sabotaging autonomous art works: Schönberg's twelve-tone music. In line with Adorno's interpretation, he emphasizes how the latter's formal inhumanness and mechanicalness deprives its recipients from any unproblematic aesthetic satisfaction, reminding them, inversely, of their state of alienation in existing society.

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100 Stewart Martin (2000), for example, has recently argued that if art positions itself as absolutely autonomous, it becomes "compensatory or concealing" and thereby "a parody of its critical claims" (203). He considers this to be the main reason why, as he demonstrates, for Adorno, autonomy is always necessarily caught up in a dialectical relation with heteronomy, which goes against his dominant presentation as unreserved champion of the autonomy of art. According to Martin, in Adorno's aesthetic theory, heteronomy is integrated into autonomous art as a "critical mediation" of its autonomy (idem). He quotes Adorno to this effect, stating that autonomous art is no longer thinkable without the element of heteronomy.

In case of heteronomous art strategies, it became a commonplace that its claims to restructure life according to alternative aesthetic principles proved to be too weak compared to political and economic directives, resulting in art's instrumentalization. We already saw (Chapter 4,VI) how Bürger diagnosed the artistic avant-garde's assimilation to revolutionary politics in terms of the surrender - voluntary or involuntary - of the aesthetic principles owed to its autonomy, which served as precondition for its political potential.

In a later text, this led Bürger to define art's political status in the modern era - or, as he specifies it, "bourgeois society" - in typically tragic terms as "simultaneously necessary and impossible" (1991:9,12). He derives this characterization from Hegel's (1975) diagnosis of the general malaise of the subject in the modern era. The latter is said to be plagued by a fundamental "disjuncture" between his/her supposed capacity for free action, on the one hand, and the objective conditions of "dependency on processes... no longer governed by conscious thought", on the other hand (Bürger 1991:10). Bürger lists "the exigencies of capital accumulation" and "rivalries between power blocs" (idem) as key instances of such inhuman processes. Given this state of alienation, the modern subject's recourse to art is necessary because, as Bürger puts it, "Even the bourgeois subject... is incapable of living without any purpose beyond the simple reproduction of physical existence" (idem). Hence, the need for art as "site of imaginary self-realization" (idem). This recourse to art, however, is found to be structurally impossible and "illusory" because of the inevitable fact that "alienation necessarily penetrates into the realm of art" (idem).

On the one hand, there is thus a lucid insight into the impossible, split political status of art as both harbinger of subjective freedom and the latter's ultimate defeat. To this, Bürger grants no chance of a possible solution or synthesis; there would only be an "endless play of displacements in new guises" (13). On the other hand, and despite all this, recourse to art is still thought to be an existential necessity for the modern subject. As Bürger puts it : "some people stake their entire life on it" (14). This leads him to conclude that "Art's attempt to assimilate itself to political agitation is *the impossible gesture that must be for ever enacted and then retraced*. The new life will not come, but it remains an alternative we must continue to suggest" (idem, emphasis mine). This is for sure a most tragic formulation of the heteronomous form of aesthetic politics.

Two of the most influential accounts of aesthetic politics in the post-WWII era - one sympathetic toward art's autonomy, the other toward its heteronomy - thus theorized art's politics as a deeply tragical endeavour, as imperative to exert, yet ultimately and inevitably bound to fail. Or still, art's radical political potential is affirmed while, at the same time, any chance of

genuine success is denied to it. Both major forms of aesthetic politics were thus thought to have reached an insurmountable impasse, a limit to their political potential which they could not cross without undoing themselves or becoming self-defeating in their attempts at radical emancipation.

One could regard both tragic stances as opposite responses to what I earlier (in Chapter 4, I) called the catch-22 situation of art. This was caused by art's increasingly autonomous status in the modern era, this being both the condition of possibility and impossibility of its emancipatory potential. On the one hand, Adorno can be seen to take the view that because art *cannot* fulfil its emancipatory promise, it should therefore not *want* to fulfil it. He even asserts that art can only fulfil its political promise *by not attempting to fulfil it*, thus turning art's impotence into a virtue - i.e. abstinence from politics.[101] Still, he does so with the crucial proviso - wherein lies its tragic nature - that art cannot simply withdraw inside the safe haven of its own aesthetic sphere *either*, pretending to embody a non-alienated existence. As we saw, art thereby risks becoming an accomplice of the same alienated society it rejects by providing a surrogate for genuine political transformation and facilitating avenues for political escapism.

Adorno's dim view on art's potential to effect radical change is based on the perceived absence of the necessary conditions for a true overcoming of its alienated form of existence as a separate field of specialization. For him, this required a complete overhaul of existing modern society which, so he thought, could only be accomplished by a practical revolutionary project. He, however, saw no hope for this in his day and age due to the perceived lack of a revolutionary subject to take on such a project. As a result, each attempt of art to realize its political promise in heteronomous fashion was thought to be doomed to fail because it could only be perverted by, or succumb to, the more general state of alienation of society sooner or later.

Bürger, for his part, can be seen to draw the opposite conclusion from the paradoxical trappings of art's modern autonomous status, claiming that the only appropriate strategy for art is *to become practical*, as we saw in the previous chapter. And further, that it can only do this by suspending its status as a separate, autonomous domain of life and by becoming a fully engaged actor in society. However, as we also already saw, this is not to say that Bürger believed any more than Adorno that art stood a good chance of any

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101 This move of art to turn defeat into victory is affirmed most explicitly in the work of Jay Bernstein (1992). The latter holds that the aesthetic owes its inherent promise of a better life *precisely to its isolation and relative impotence*. Because it is treated as 'weaker brother' of science or politics, it is considered to be able to function as harbinger of a different, more satisfying form of life. One could say that art is hereby enjoined to nurture, even celebrate, its marginal status as its most precious, political asset.

substantial success in its heteronomous pursuits. Bürger can be seen to share Adorno's pessimistic assessment of the possibilities for revolutionary change (Schulte-Sasse 1984). Still, despite all the known pitfalls - of instrumentalization, recuperation, perversion, etc. -, he regards it almost as an ethical duty of art to transgress its own sphere and expertise and have a go at radically transforming society, lest it reneges on its emancipatory promise.

It is clear how Rancière's third way model of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics replicates some of the key, deeply tragical conceptual logics of both accounts. To be sure, his model can be seen to be driven by a more optimistic, operationalist rationale. It attempts to turn these self-critical conceptions into a working model for aesthetic politics, as well as to use them to set the limitations and conditions for its (relative) success. Despite this positive twist, however, Rancière's theorization remains deeply infused with his main predecessors' tragic awareness and concomitant cautious attitude toward art's attempts at radical social change.

One can question whether such stances are still warranted today. That is, whether the tragic consensus on the politics of aesthetics - both in its autonomous or heteronomous variety - should still be upheld as appropriate framework for thinking art's emancipatory potential in the contemporary period. I regard it as somewhat outdated and restrictive in a historical juncture characterized by a resurgence of politically radicalized, highly heteronomous, activist art practices. As I pointed out in the Introduction, these form part of a broader surge in radical social movements geared toward systemic change, from the alter-globalist movements to the Occupy movement. Considering this, one might argue that Rancière's third way position is still too much determined by the traumatic experiences of the encounters between art and revolutionary politics in the twentieth century (Boie & Pauwels 2011). And this, despite his declared aversion to what he perceives to be the general melancholic mood regarding art's political potential sparked by these events (*AD*60/84).

III. GOODBYE RADICALISM?

I shall now address two more problematic features of Rancière's third way conceptualization of art's autonomy and heteronomy, both closely related to his implicit endorsement of tragic stances in this regard. Both critical points can be seen as manifestations of the denial of any emancipatory force to radicalism in political art practices, which I proposed earlier in general terms as a key feature of his third way approach.

It concerns, first, the refusal to choose one form of aesthetic politics over the other. As we saw, a central feature of Rancière's approach is the awarding

of equal validity to autonomous and heteronomous politico-aesthetic strategies. Secondly, I shall focus on his dismissal of absolute applications of each strategy. I shall problematize both aspects in turn, starting with the second (in this section) and then the first (in the following section). Against these two key characteristics of Rancière's theory of art's autonomy and heteronomy, I want to maintain that radicalism is an inevitable and necessary component of art's emancipatory political force, as well as assert heteronomy as more valid, politico-aesthetic strategy in today's socio-political circumstances.

As we saw (Section I), as a typical third way configuration Rancière's theory of autonomous and heteronomous political art forms rejects any radicality of application. It admonishes both major forms of aesthetic politics against pursuing itself too rigorously and, inversely, encourages them to adopt moderation and temper their enthusiasm by practicing self-criticism through dialectical mediation with its antipode. I further argued (Section II) that this could be seen as Rancière's appropriation and formalization of the mainly tragic, late twentieth century accounts of the interconnections between art and politics. The crucial question, however, is whether Rancière hereby does not throw out the baby with the bathwater. That is, whether one doesn't risk losing art's political potential altogether by proscribing any radicality to it.

In order to make this point, one can for example look at the kind of political art practices that Rancière's third way model of aesthetic politics seems to endorse. It can be argued that its central injunction of moderation and self-criticism, as phrased above, encourages art practices to operate in a safe mode, guarding and censoring themselves from being either too autonomous or too heteronomous. It might thus justify art practices that 'play it safe', that never go 'all the way' in the pursuit of autonomy or heteronomy.

As an example, we can refer to what one might call the *tactical* approach to art's autonomy and heteronomy (Kanouse 2007). This refers to art practices that have no fixed, principled, 'passionate attachment' toward either autonomy or heteronomy but, rather, strategically play with and switch between both forms of aesthetic politics. This can be seen as an effective way for art to resist political neutralization by taking maximal advantage of each form of aesthetic politics while avoiding the liabilities caused by too rigorous applications of one form over the other.

For instance, adopting a heteronomous stance might prevent art's politicity from being discarded by other social actors as 'merely artistic'. However, if art were to travel too far along the heteronomous route, it might be thought to become vulnerable to being refuted based on usual political criteria. It might, for example, be reproached for not being 'realistic', 'constructive' or 'democratic'. In order to exempt itself from such political criticism - still

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according to this tactical model - art is then called upon to draw the autonomy card and play out its irreducible otherness as experience, practice and expertise. This also, however, artists shouldn't take too far or do consistently, because they then again open themselves up to attempts at downplaying their political value by presenting them as 'only' art which, as we saw, formed the impetus for adopting a heteronomous stance in the first place. Such cunning playing of both sides depending on the circumstances or opposition one faces, can be seen as an elaborate and effective strategy for art to be political in its own terms, to maintain an uneasy presence that is difficult for established social powers to place and manage in conventional terms. [102]

There are, however, also several problematic aspects about this tactical approach. Continuous oscillation between autonomous and heteronomous positions can be seen as precisely what is problematic about a lot of political art, namely, its opportunism and 'no strings attached' political commitment. It can be reproached for mostly staying clear of taking a consequential stance towards what it opposes, being careful not to take its radical political goals to the point of implementation, e.g. by taking on conventional politics on its own terrain. Think of artists who use political engagement in order to present their work as socially relevant while, inversely, continuously stressing their autonomous status as artists as a way to shy away from any too direct political involvement. This could be seen as a clever way for artists to have it both ways. They can be politically involved (heteronomy) without any real ramifications or accountability, all the while enjoying the privileges and status of being artists (autonomy) beyond reproaches of asocial elitism or otherworldliness. Note also the post-modern overtones of such a position: i.e. the ironic, reflexive, calculating distance of artists toward their political stances and objectives.

Still phrased differently, one could criticize the tactical model to allow artists to flirt with heteronomy, yet to do so within the safe haven of the art world. This can be found to be the case, for instance, for a lot of so-called

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[102] As an example of such tactical approach, one can refer to an action by Thomas Hirschhorn (in collaboration with many others) called "Swiss Swiss Democracy" (2004-5) (Boie & Pauwels 2011). As protest against the shift to the right in Switzerland's national politics - especially with regard to immigration stances - Hirschhorn 'occupied' Switzerland's cultural centre in Paris for several weeks. Through all kinds of media – collages, newspapers, philosophy lectures, theatre performances – Hirschhorn and his collaborators exposed Switzerland's obscene, racist underbelly. However, despite the activist means deployed and clear political intent, Hirschhorn constantly emphasized that as an artist, he was primarily preoccupied with the formal, aesthetic aspects of his actions - i.e. how to give *shape* to resistance - and not so much political ones. In line with this, he categorically refused to discuss his political motivations and the social and political issues broached in his work, being only willing to talk about his artistic choices and motivations – for instance the specific use of material and colour in the decoration of the space - and insisting that the political value of his activities is to be judged on this basis alone.

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relational art practices. The latter can be seen as one of the most dominant heteronomous art movements of the past two decades, with its focus on experimenting with new social relations, typically through installations and events (Bourriaud 2001). The highly aesthetic character of the social experiments orchestrated by relational artists, as well as their predominant location in art-institutional contexts, however, mostly puts a serious damper on their heteronomous intent. It prevents them from having a significant impact outside the narrow confines of the art world and, instead, being mostly self-serving for artists and art institutions. In this regard, Hal Foster, for example, has criticized relational art practices for mainly organizing what he calls "arty part[ies]" (Foster 2003).

All this casts serious doubts on the radical political intent and potential of third way-style aesthetic politics. To be sure, in true third way vein, it might be argued that such tactical zapping between autonomous and heteronomous positions, adopting each only in carefully portioned fashion, is the 'new radical which is founded on the courage to renounce all 'easy', extreme choices. Still, this would constitute a rather paradoxical - albeit, dare I say, characteristically Rancièrean - notion of radicality, coinciding as it does with its opposite: moderation and prudence.

IV. WHO'S AFRAID OF HETERONOMY?

As indicated, the other key component of Rancière's third way account of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics that expresses a clear dismissal of radicalism is his equal endorsement of both these forms. We saw that this is also to be taken as affirmation of their equal fallibility, with each having a limit point beyond which their emancipatory potential is cancelled out. This then served as basis for Rancière's argument that just as heteronomous politico-artistic strategies need to be tempered by autonomy in order to secure their progressive transformational potential, so should autonomous strategies be tempered by heteronomy.

A first thing to note here is that this equal treatment is not entirely equal. More specifically, one could argue that Rancière is slightly biased towards autonomous forms of aesthetic politics. First, there is his far less complex, dialectical account of heteronomous aesthetico-political strategies, which I noted earlier (Chapter 4, VI). Second, one could point to his suggestion that the lack of an attempt by an autonomous art work to realize the emancipatory promise contained in its aesthetic heterogeneity does not affect its radical political status (*AD* 60-5). In this regard, he speaks of an "objective politics" (*PA* 60) inherent to the art work, which would remain unchanged by the fact that artists are engaged or not. All this implies that autonomous

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aesthetic politics is not limited to the same degree as its heteronomous counterpart.

In this regard, Gail Day (2009) has argued that Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics equally suffers from what she detects as a generally prevailing "fear of heteronomy" among contemporary art critics and philosophers. With this, she refers to an overly cautious attitude toward heteronomous art practices, overemphasizing the dangers of instrumentalization and assimilation while, inversely, downplaying the political problems and costs attached to autonomous art strategies. Gerald Raunig, for his part, has claimed that heteronomous politico-artistic practices are taken seriously by mainstream philosophy only after being "purged of their radical aspects" (2007:19).

Indications of preferential treatment of autonomous aesthetico-political strategies notwithstanding, one can maintain that their theorization - both with regard to its strengths and weaknesses - is all in all not far from symmetrical. However, the problem with the equal endorsement of the two major forms of aesthetic politics is perhaps not so much the fact that one is treated as somewhat more equal than the other - with the symmetry slightly skewed toward autonomous forms - but rather *this symmetrical treatment as such*. Rancière might hereby be found to be too fair or even generous in his assessment of autonomous art forms' emancipatory force compared to that of heteronomous forms. What can be regarded as problematic, in other words, is the continued prominence awarded of autonomous aesthetic politics in thinking art's radical political potential.

For starters, this flies in the face of the heteronomous turn in contemporary political art practices mentioned in the Introduction. Further, even in the most dialectical instances of autonomous art works that sabotage their autonomy - mediating themselves, in self-critical vein, with their opposite of heteronomy - the drama of self-violation still mostly plays itself out within the narrow confines of art institutions.[103] It can also be seen to reinforce the

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[103] One could take the philosophizing on art's political dimension of one of Rancière's main radical philosophical contemporaries, Alain Badiou, as case in point. Badiou can be seen to firmly situate art's potential for radical change in its autonomy. Or, to be more precise, in its capacity to invent new aesthetic forms that capture perceptual experiences that lie outside routinized ways of experiencing the world, thereby revolutionizing the latter (Badiou 2003/6, 1998/2005). Art is here not thought to be directly political, but only *indirectly* and *in its own singular way*, by performing its revolutionary activity within its own aesthetic domain. Apart from going against the grain of the strongly heteronomous tendencies in contemporary art, it basically asks artists to retreat from all worldly affairs into its supposedly proper sphere of sense-experience and devote themselves to formal, aesthetic experimentation. *De facto*, this delivers art to processes of institutionalization that restrict the transformational effects of artworks' revolutionary sensory forms to the marginal sphere of the art world.

known ills of existing society by merely offering an aestheticized equivalent of the general malaise.

To be sure, proponents of autonomous aesthetic politics might argue that the hermetic construction of sensible forms in isolation from political processes, is better suited to today's strongly politicized times *precisely in its untimeliness*. Better, that is, than direct engagement of artists' creative powers in current radical social movements. Eagleton (1976:57-8), for one, has drawn an inverse relation between the political engagement of art and the degree of politicization of the historical period. He regards direct political engagement (heteronomy) to be prerequisite for art in politically sterile periods. Inversely, art is asked to refrain from involving itself explicitly in politics (autonomy) in times of passionate political struggles. Such a view, however, seems to rest on the assumption that art and politics can never be aligned, with art always having to act as counterpoint to the political movements of the times, never able to effectively join forces with the latter in order to enact societal change. This can be seen as another variation on the tragic consensus on the political potential of art.

In light of obvious limitations of autonomous aesthetico-political forms, as well as the current climate of increased experimentation with new socio-political models, one can ask whether a contemporary model of art's autonomy and heteronomy should not adopt a much tougher stance toward autonomous art's hermetic and ritualistic acts of self-flagellation. Inversely, it should be asked whether, instead of trying to be fair toward both sides, artists should not, in a heteronomous spirit, be encouraged to seize the opportunity to make a concrete contribution to on-going radical political experiments. The question, in other words, is whether in today's radicalized climate, one should not uphold heteronomy as more valid and urgent politico-artistic strategy, against Rancière's inclusive, eclectic approach toward art's autonomy and heteronomy.

Rancière's third way model can thus be found to be problematic for its tragical attitude (Section II), for accommodating self-serving, tactical approaches (Section III), as well as for its overly generous and somewhat dated assessment of the political potential of autonomous forms (this section). As such, another critique can be that rather than offering a novel solution to the problematic of the radical political status of autonomous and heteronomous art forms, he *deproblematizes* it. He can be seen to dish up the problem - the ambiguous, self-contradictory, undecidable politics of art practices, forever caught between the 'Scylla' of autonomy and 'Charybdis' of heteronomy - as solution by holding this torn position to function as safety valve that protects radical aesthetic politics from itself. To be sure, it could be granted that the contradictory nature of the politics of aesthetics cannot be

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discarded as being *only* problematic. As Rancière upholds, it has in fact allowed art to realize its emancipatory promise - even if only partially and momentarily. Still, the crucial question is whether this is so *despite*, or *because* of its ambiguous status.

Against the dismissal of radicalism inherent to Rancière's third way model, its implicit endorsement of tactical approaches toward art's autonomy and heteronomy, as well as 'fear' of the latter, one can argue that for a lot of today's politically committed artists it is more a case of never being heteronomous *enough*, as opposed to carefully guarding against being too much so. In this regard, and in order to counter the doom-mongering regarding heteronomous politics of art, it might be useful to ask the question of what would happen if an artist were to foray 'too far' in the direction of heteronomy, radically opting for this form of aesthetics politics and following it through to its logical end. For instance, does this necessarily lead to the loss of political-emancipatory potential of art due to assimilation into the vicissitudes of revolutionary politics, as Rancière's third way model assumes?

We can explore this question through a concrete case of radical artistic heteronomy narrated by Kristin Ross in her book *May '68 and its Afterlives* (2002), in which Rancière's work features prominently and positively. It concerns the militant involvement of a group of art students in the creation of posters in support of the revolutionary movements of May '68 in Paris.[104] The students' initial plan was to exhibit their political posters in an art gallery and sell them in order to raise funds to support the movements. However, as Ross narrates the ensuing course of events:

> There is no time... for the art object to remain a commodity, even one that had been redirected in the service of the movement. On the way to the gallery, the copies are snatched out of the arms of the student carrying them and plastered immediately on the first available wall. The poster becomes a poster. (16-17)

Ross further describes how this 'reality check' - she also speaks of "the absolute penetration of art and event" (16) - led the students to start experimenting with poster formats that could be mass produced and put to more direct use by the student movements.

To be sure, on that day in the Parisian streets, some version of art was eliminated or "dismantled", as Ross puts it, in its encounter with the revolutionary turmoil. We can specify this as the 'bourgeois' variety of art that is produced for, and mainly oriented towards the traditional gallery market, no matter how 'politicized'. Its radical heteronomization, however, proved to be

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[104] She bases this on the account of one of the participants called Gérard Fromanger.

far from a tragedy or 'yet another' instance of artists getting burned due to coming too close to 'the real' of politics. Neither did it result in the loss of art's critical potential, unless by critical is meant the post-utopian attitude of always being critical of everything, as opposed to choosing a side and criticizing things from that position. On the contrary, it led to both artistic *and* political innovation. It thus also doesn't simply constitute a case of artists becoming political activists.

To affirm heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics as more attuned to the current climate of crisis and revolt is thus not to plead for a seamless identity or smooth co-operation between art and revolutionary movements.[105] Although one should be wary of exaggeratedly high estimations of the risks of art's instrumentalization when engaging in radical politics, such risks are very real and always present. Within current alter-globalist movements, for instance, artists are often deployed merely to visually illustrate and propagate critiques of multinational capitalism or they are used as carnivalesque props in protest marches (Lesage 2007).

Just as frequently, however, today's forms of artistic activism operate as autonomous units within larger social movements and do not shy away from critically engaging with these movements. Indeed, they are often at the forefront of challenging conventional models of transformational politics - taking issue, for instance, with the latter's hierarchical power relations or mechanistic visions of societal change - as well as the search for alternative conceptions.

As an example of such an art practice, we can take the interaction between an experimental theatre collective (called 'Volxtheater Favoriten') and a radical social movement formed by the inhabitants of the squatted building from which it operated (called Ernst-Kirchweger-Haus) that took place in Vienna from the mid-1990s onwards, as theorized by Gerald Raunig in his book *Art and Revolution* (2007, Chapter 8).[106] He shows how, on the one hand,

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105 Among Rancière's fellow contemporary radical philosophers, Antonio Negri's thoughts on art and revolutionary politics could be seen to advocate such a rather straightforward heteronomous model of the link between art and radical politics. Negri locates the political potential of art not in re-imagining the world but, rather, in its *becoming action* and its integration in a communal political project (Negri 2009/11, 2008). The strict distinction between art and life is here dissolved as art's creative power is directly employed in and by radical social movements.

106 Raunig (2007) conceptualizes the different "concatenations", as he calls it, between art and revolutionary activism within a theoretical framework based mainly on the works of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Antonio Negri. In this regard, he also speaks of "a poststructuralist theory of revolutionary micropolitics". He presents Volxtheater Favoriten as a key example of what he calls the "transversal concatenation" of art and revolutionary politics, where the relationship between the latter is that of a "temporary overlap", an "alliance and exchange" or still, a "mutual permeation".

the theatre groups was deeply engaged in this social movement and subscribed to its key political aims. On the other hand, however, it maintained a constant critical discussion with the squatter movement, attacking its rigid power structures and outmoded revolutionary models.[107]

Significantly, it was the group's experiments with forms of theatre based on core aesthetic principles such as that of non-hierarchical and non-instrumentalist relations (between director and actors, actors and audience, script and execution), as well as the relentless practice of self-criticism this involved, that served as key impetus and resource for their criticism of processes of hierarchization within the larger squatter community.[108] Equally crucial, however, is what Raunig calls Volxtheater Favoriten's "complex setting of being sustainably rooted in a political project" (218). This is said to have helped it to avert "the dangers of spectacularization and co-optation" (idem). Thus, while dismissing what he calls the "total heteronomization of art", he does consider close heteronomous artistic engagement in revolutionary social movements to be a "productive precondition" (219) for art to maximally fulfil its radical political role.

In general, we can thus say that the radical political value of art practices engaged in oppositional social movements is dependent on the degree to which they, in their heteronomous endeavours, rigorously apply principles that constitute the emancipatory core of the autonomous conception of art as a playful, disinterested type of activity that is non-hierarchical, non-instrumentalist and non-totalizing - as theorized by Rancière for example. Apart from preventing uncritical adherence to problematic, out-dated models of radical politics, adoption of core aesthetic values by heteronomous art practices also enhances their capacity to renew these models, which is where their true transformational surplus-value lies.

In contrast to Rancière, however, aesthetic autonomy here does not so much function as a safety valve that has to prevent radical applications of heteronomous aesthetic politics, but rather as a set of emancipatory principles that heightens the latter's efficacy. It does so by allowing for a *contest* between artistic and political practices over truly emancipatory models for achieving radical socio-political change. In this regard, we could also speak of an *agonistic*

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107 In this regard, Raunig (2007) mentions Volxtheater Favoriten's resistance to tendencies towards "particularity" and "segmentation", the adoption of "identitary models", "classic cadre obedience, rationality, self-discipline and subordination under the flag of a primary contradiction", "patriarchical structures" and "processes of structuralization and closure".

108 Raunig (2007) differentiates between three types of criticism practiced by Volxtheater Favoriten: social (i.e. against the existing order), institutional (against the "internal structuralization" of resistance against the existing order) and self-criticism (against its own institutional power structures).

model of art's autonomy and heteronomy, of art and radical politics. Importantly, such competition is here thought to be open-ended, with art not necessarily being either the underdog or assured loser. In new social movements such as the Occupy-movement, for instance, core aesthetic principles are incorporated as core values of alternative organisational structures. With regard to the problematic of political representation, for example, one can think of the commonly applied rule that everyone is allowed to speak for this movement, albeit in their own, personal capacity.

I take such agonistic interactions between engaged artists and transformational political movements to better capture the radical potential specific to the heteronomous turn in contemporary art. In any case, better than an account that due to its bias against radicalism and its preference for art's autonomy cannot but cast doubt on the transformational value of today's radically engaged art practices and reproach them for sacrificing their aesthetic principles in order to become propaganda props of the new social movements.

V. TOWARDS A POST-UTOPIAN UTOPIANISM?

In the previous sections, I have addressed several, particular problems regarding Rancière's third way conceptualization of art's autonomy and heteronomy. In conclusion, and based on the previous, I now want to make a more general critical claim concerning one of the central ambitions of his radical aesthetics: to challenge the current, 'post-utopian' consensus on art's politicity. As we already saw in the Introduction, Rancière mainly takes issue with the way in which connections between radical art and politics are either severed or interpreted in a more modest, realistic way. This would be caused by a general disillusionment with the outcomes of previous encounters between art and revolutionary movements throughout the modern period.

We should ask, however, whether Rancière's third way solution of the problematic of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics ultimately offers nothing but a more sophisticated version of this very same post-utopian paradigm. As suggested by my criticisms in the previous sections, his conceptualization of the relationship between art and politics in terms of a tension between autonomous and heteronomous tendencies also appears to be severely marked by some of the traumatic experiences of radical political art practices in the twentieth century. Despite his reproaches toward certain contemporary art practices - such as relational art - for being post-utopian because of no longer believing in a radical transformation of the existing order, his own theory *as well* can be read against the backdrop of the now dominant view that in the previous century, art came too close to revolutionary politics,

that in its radical political passion and enthusiasm, art crossed a critical line that led to its annihilation.

Rancière's plea to maintain the tension between art and politics, between autonomy and heteronomy, can then be seen as a defence mechanism, a way to prevent artists' political enthusiasm from 'boiling over' once again resulting in art's 'self-sacrifice' on the altar of revolution. His theory of political art thus seems to be motivated by an ultimately defensive reaction to the various experimental hybrids of art and emancipatory politics in the twentieth century, despite its claims to the contrary. We might say that insofar as Rancière's radical aesthetics re-affirms a utopian or radical political core to art and aesthetics, it concerns a *post-utopian* utopianism, based on a *deradicalized* notion of radicality.

VI. BETWEEN HISTORICISM AND SPECULATIVE LEFTISM

I now start with a second line of criticisms of Rancière's theory of art's autonomy and heteronomy. The latter are directed not so much at its core conceptual schema - as the previous criticisms do - but to some of its historical claims (I offered an overview of these in Chapter 4, VIII), as well as the underlying methodology, i.e. Rancière's regime theory of art (see Chapter 2, I-II).

As we saw, Rancière's genealogical reading of the two main, competing forms of aesthetic politics in the modern era conceives them as permutations of the   same, fundamental paradox of the aesthetic regime of art. We also saw, further, that he considers such an account to be more open and flexible than dominant, historicist interpretations of art's politics in terms of a linear succession of different phases - such as modernist and postmodernist theories. Against this, I shall argue in the next two sections that there is a similar sense of historical closure in Rancière's account with regard to the development of new forms of political art practices - i.e. similar to the one attributed by him to historicist accounts. I argue that he places equally strong, normative limitations on art's possible politics. In order to argue this point, I shall first present some more features of Rancière's historical method and the way in which he positions and opposes it to competing approaches.

Illuminating in this regard, is the way in which Bosteels (2009) sums up what he perceives to be the general modus operandi of Rancière's work. He considers it to consist of a "double procedure": first, "to reinsert something ... in its [historical] system of constraints and [second] to derail this system of constraints itself" (161). Applied to Rancière's notion of radical politics discussed in Chapter One, one could understand this so that, although there is a sense that this notion is historically specific to the modern, democratic age, it

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is not confined to it. As we saw, there would have been earlier historical instances of politics proper, such as during the brief episode of democracy in Ancient Greece.

We saw (Chapter 2, I) that the same holds for the aesthetic regime of art and its politics. Even if this regime is most typical for the modern era, it has historical precursors, such as the tragedies of the classical era. Insofar as the historical regimes impose a 'system of constraints' on possible forms of aesthetic politics, this system is thus at the same time 'derailed' because Rancière does not conceive it in rigid, determinist-historicist fashion.

For Bosteels, this more loose historical approach offers the advantage of circumventing the risks attached to a one-dimensional focus on either one of the two procedures. On the one hand, it avoids reduction of "the historicity of art or politics... to mere historicism" (175) which, as we saw, is vehemently criticized by Rancière. On the one other hand, it prevents theorizing of the politics of aesthetics from turning into "a radicalism pivoting on its own emptiness, a thinking of the pure 'there is' of art and politics cut off from any inscription in a place and according to specific historical modes" (idem). Bosteels also specifies this second danger in terms of succumbing to "speculative leftism" (2009:175), a term we encountered earlier (Chapter 1, IX).

Also illuminating is the way in which Rancière himself differentiates his regime theory from what he presents as its key inspiration: Foucault's archaeological approach. The latter is based on a reading of history based on so-called 'epistemes' (1986). These are ensembles of conditions determining the possibility of certain discourses (e.g. scientific, ethical, etc.) to become normative in a certain historical era. Rancière specifies the key difference as follows: "where Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closures and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression" (2000b:13). He also claims that his own genealogical account displays a greater sensibility towards "crossing-overs, repetitions and anachronisms in historical experience" (idem).

About the difference between the historical methodologies of Foucault and Rancière, Rockhill says that a distinctive feature of the latter is that it "avoid[s]... conflating... regimes of art with precise historical epochs" (2004:64).[109] Instead, Rancière's regimes would constitute "malleable system[s] of action that cannot exist in complete isolation from the other regimes that share its historical context" (idem). Further, the regimes are said to be "made up of autonomous elements that have their own unique

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109 To be sure, Rancière's interpretation of Foucault's notion of 'epistemes' can be found to be somewhat simplistic. From its initial formulations onward, Foucault increasingly lent a higher historical suppleness to the concept.

historicity" (idem). Rockhill thus stresses that an art regime does not function as "a unified aesthetic framework that transcendentally determines the limits of possible action and thought" (idem). Instead, it would be a case of "hybrids made up of autonomous components from different regimes or conflicting elements within a single regime" (idem). In the modern era, for instance, it would concern "an irresolvable tension between diverse elements from the representative and aesthetic regimes of art" (idem).[110]

For Rancière, the stakes involved in avoiding a tight fit between art regimes and historical periods are quite high because, as we saw, it is equally a rejection of "claims... [that] establish what is thinkable or not for a particular era" (2000b:13). He says this apropos Foucault, but it is also his key objection to historicist accounts of art's politics in general. Rockhill thus warns that "it would be a grave mistake to conclude from the loose outline of these regimes that Rancière is postulating a totalizing logic that aims at systematizing cultural history" (2004:60). According to him, "Rancière avoids establishing an abstract, tripartite system of art and politics by analyzing the three regimes of art as immanent constellations that only exist in relationship to one another through historically specific forms" (idem). A further factor of Rancière's regime theory that prevents it from exerting a totalizing or systematizing effect mentioned by Rockhill, is the fact that "Rancière never fully enumerates the principles of each regime and... avoids systematizing them into a closed set of axioms" (76).

VII. PARADOXICAL CONFINES, YET CONFINES NEVERTHELESS

Despite all these claims, I want to relativize the greater openness of Rancière's regime theory towards atypical manifestations of aesthetic politics and novel configurations of art and radical politics. I do so for several reasons.

To begin with, there is the basic temporal structure of the aesthetic regime. As we saw (Chapter 4, VIII), this regime is founded on an original, birth 'scene' (*ARO*135), in which the basic conceptual co-ordinates of the relations between art and life, autonomy and heteronomy are set. This founding moment then functions as the germ from which all future configurations of aesthetic's politics are sprung, as ever more complex elaborations of the aesthetic regime's basic co-ordinates. Or still, as so many attempts at interpreting its paradoxical tendencies and devising practicable artistico-political strategies based on it. The rise and tide of the many different forms of

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110 Eric Méchoulan thus also speaks of the "coexistence" of Rancière's three regimes of art (2009).

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aesthetic politics that have manifested themselves throughout the modern era up until today, as well as the many confrontations and debates between them, are thus all thought to be already contained in the aesthetic regime's 'startup settings', so to speak, even if only as undeveloped possibilities.

Despite Rancière's mixed feelings toward psychoanalysis (2001a/2009), one can thus establish a close analogy between the aesthetic regime's mode of temporality and that of the subject in psychoanalysis. The latter takes major developments in the subject's adult life to be so many attempts   at coming to terms with an original trauma. The life of human beings is thereby treated as one extended revisiting of the *Ur*-scene of one's childhood. Similarly, Rancière's aesthetic regime is overdetermined by a past event - considered to be a 'revolution' -, with art practices and theories afterwards geared towards making sense of, and putting to work its key propositions and contradictions.

To be sure, what lends great diversity to modern aesthetic politics and generates a complex dynamics between its different manifestations, is the highly paradoxical nature of the aesthetic regime's initial determinations (as discussed in Chapter Two and Four) and its highly "unstable" nature, as Elie During describes one of the aesthetic regime's core features (2001). This inherent and, no doubt, productive instability might lead one to view the aesthetic regime as endlessly open to new configurations of aesthetic politics. In line with this, one can also understand Rancière's characterization of the confines of the aesthetic regime - i.e. with regards to possible forms of aesthetic politics - as "paradoxical" (*AD*44/63).

Still, however paradoxical the confines of the politics of art in the modern era might be, it can be seen to *remain confined nevertheless*. However divergent and novel developments regarding art's politics in the modern era might appear, they owe this appearance only to the fact that they are permutations of the regime's original, paradoxical formulations. In this regard, one can also draw an analogy between the aesthetic regime and mathematical systems, in which a handful of core axioms allow the development of a seemingly endless, increasingly intricate series of theorems. However, as the latter move ever further away from the initial propositions, they are never able to break through the boundaries of the virtual space of possible statements opened up by the inaugural axioms, at least not without becoming 'invalid' or invalidating the system as a whole. Similarly, in Rancière's construct of the aesthetic regime, art practices and philosophies are doomed to offer variations or combinations of a dynamic set of two or three major aesthetic forms of politics.

To illustrate this point, we can take Rancière's interpretations of contemporary developments in art discourse and practice, and the politics they propose - of which I shall offer a full, critical account in Chapter Six. I

shall focus specifically on his interpretation of the political status of the relational art paradigm, which was briefly mentioned before (Section III). Very influential in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, this paradigm can be seen as one of the most important, recent attempts to articulate a progressive politics of art suited to contemporary conditions (Bourriaud 2001). In a nutshell, it advocates a type of art practice that, as the name already suggests, focuses on, and works with, relations, whether between human beings or between human beings and things or even the world as a whole. It treats them as its main artistic material, to be given form with the aim of constructing and experimenting with new types of social relations or rearranging old ones. In doing so, more traditional artistic media or forms of expression are used mainly - if used at all - in function of the creation of new models of social interaction. At practices are thus thought to play an important political role as social incubators, facilitating a general renewal of societal models.

For his part, Rancière offers a rather ambivalent, indecisive assessment of relational art's political status. On the one hand, he considers it to be one of the "two great conceptions of art's 'post-utopian' present" (*AD*19/31), as a form of "'post-utopian' art" (22/34). This implies that he considers it to be a fundamentally anti-aesthetic configuration. Rancière presents aesthetics as "proper name" of the "alliance between artistic radicality and political radicality" (21-2/34). The mentioned post-utopianism, however, is precisely thought to undo this alliance by declaring the end of "aesthetic utopia" and its "idea of artistic radicality and its [art's] capacity to perform an absolute transformation of the conditions of collective existence" (idem).

More specifically, Rancière takes relational art to distance itself from both the idea of "artistic radicality" and that of "aesthetic utopia" (21/33). As he states, it proclaims "art's new modesty... not only as regards its capacity to transform the world, but also as regards claims about the singularity of its objects" (idem). Especially relational art's modesty - in this regard, Rancière also presents it as a "micro-politics" (22/34), with artists creating "micro-situations" (21/34) or small interventions - stands in stark contrast with the belief in an "absolute transformation of the conditions of collective existence", typical of a 'properly' utopian, aesthetic art. Rancière attributes this modesty to a heightened awareness of the limits of the political potential of art.

At times, all this brings him to deny any radical political agency to relational art practices or, at least, to consider its political status as undecidable. He says, for example, that they are "sometimes not very far from the community politics advocated by our governments" (22/34-35). This seems to be a rather damaging association in light of Rancière's dim view of contemporary consensus politics and its suppression of politics proper.

Somewhat in line with the previous, he also says that in an age in which official politics increasingly retreats into the narrow sphere of government proper and lacks vital inventiveness, relational art practices more and more take on a "substitutive political function" (60/84). Again, this could be read in a critical way, with art compensating for the fundamental deficiencies of the current order, covering for its lack of any genuine interest in the people they represent and thereby propping up the status-quo. Rancière, however, leaves open the question whether relational art practices "can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them" (idem).

Rancière can thus be seen to point to several problematic aspects of relational art's politics, making it seem at variance with the politics proper to the aesthetic regime. On the other hand, however, he holds it to be only "*ostensibly* anti-aesthetic" (22/34, emphasis mine). That is, he still considers it to be derived from "the logic of the 'aesthetic' relation between art and politics" (idem), to constitute a "sliver [éclat]" of an "originary configuration, namely that which links the specificity of art to a certain way of being of the community" (25/39). He thus says that relational art, despite its post-utopian, anti-aesthetic features, reaffirms an "essential idea" of the aesthetic regime: namely that "art consists in constructing spaces and relations to reconfigure materially and symbolically the territory of the common" (20/35). This is also to say that it enacts a redivision of the sensible, "a new form of dividing up the common world" (idem). In other words, for Rancière, "[u]topia or otherwise", relational art would "register [s'inscrire dans] the same logic" of the politics of aesthetics defined in terms of "suspending the normal co-ordinates of sensory experience" (25/39).

What to think of such dual assessment? First, it does seem to relativize the importance of the opposition between utopian and post-utopian stances toward art's radical politics. Rancière affirms relational aesthetics' micro-politics as a valid form of the politics of aesthetic *regardless* of its reservations towards the utopian powers of art. But why then place such emphasis on characterizing contemporary art practices as post-utopian? This determination here ceases to be a critical one, instead becoming merely a neutral description of a specific, differential feature of current art practices in comparison to past ones, without any specific consequences regarding to its radical political value.[111]

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111 In a later text, Rancière could even be seen to have changed his mind completely with regards to the relation between utopian politics and the politics of aesthetics when he rejects grand revolutionary schemes and, instead, states that "the politics of aesthetics involves a multiplicity of small ruptures, ... small shifts, that refuse the blackmail of radical subversion" (2007:267).

All in all, one gets the impression that the ultimate aim of Rancière's readings of contemporary formations of artistic politics such as relational art, having scrutinized all its differential features, is not so much to assess their worth in terms of achieving radical political transformation. As we saw, he seems to suspend all judgement or, at least, to judge their radical political status as undecidable. Instead, his interpretations serve a more minimal, self-serving purpose, namely, to demonstrate how despite the seeming novelty of contemporary strands of political art they are still, in the ultimate instance, firmly rooted in the aesthetic regime, constituting nothing but yet another mutation of the unchanging genetic code of aesthetic politics. His analyses of concrete art works and movements thereby always end up confirming the same fundamental theses, even though he sometimes has to pull out all interpretative stops to do so, as we saw with regard to the notion of (post) utopia.

Moreover, by inscribing all new developments regarding art and politics in the same grand plot of the aesthetic regime, Rancière takes on an unlikely, *policing* role. He seems intent mainly on proving how there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to art and politics, that despite appearances of radical novelty, the basic co-ordinates of the aesthetic regime remain firmly in place.

Based on the above, one could reverse Ross' conceptualization of Rancière's work in terms of a resistance to the 'spatial turn' and what she perceives to be the "massive and relentless dismantling of the event or eventfulness" (2009:21) it enacts. There is a strong sense in which the regime theory of art 'spatializes' the aesthetics of politics in a similar way. It does so by conceiving it as a static entity - even if highly unstable and paradoxical - that spawns ever new configurations of art and politics which ultimately only reaffirm their genealogical lineages and debt to its progenitor. As such, it knows no real development and transformation over time, only a spatial expansion and elaboration of the aesthetic regime's hegemony.

To be sure, as already indicated, Rancière's historical method allows for manifestations of the other two regimes in the modern era. In this regard, he also speaks of the presence of "a multiplicity of lines of temporality" (2005:23). One exemplary instance of this in his work, is what he calls the critical art paradigm, which he considers to be made up of elements of the ethical, representational and aesthetic regimes (I shall extensively deal with his account of this paradigm in Chapter Six). However, as I shall demonstrate later, Rancière uses a clear normative grid to critique critical art, dismissing its representational or ethical components for being outmoded, anti-emancipatory, unsuited to modern, democratic conditions.

In this sense, one can say that Rancière's regime theory, despite its professed allergy to theories of art's politicity based on a strong historical directionality - what he called "one-way narratives of progress" (2005:20) -, is also clearly driven by a teleological notion of progress. The most advanced forms of political art are considered to be those that obey aesthetic logic, which is considered to be the counterpart within the field of art to modern egalitarian politics. In this regard, his regime theory can also be found to be historicist. This not so much because it excludes the possibility of the existence of certain art forms in a certain time-period but, on a *normative* level, because it regards some to be more emancipatory than others, to be more suited to the modern era's dominant ethos. This leads Rancière to dismiss certain political art practices - such as critical art - as anachronisms, regressions even.

VIII. A TIME FOR REGIME CHANGE

Taken together, all points addressed in the previous section create a strong sense of closure with regard to the contemporary development of novel forms of aesthetic politics in response to today's radical social movements. It causes Rancière's theory of the politics of aesthetics to resemble a record-player's needle stuck in the groove of a record album. Because, what does it in fact recommend to artists engaged in today's social struggles who find the contradictory aesthetic politics of the past too limited - its merits notwithstanding - and therefore start to experiment with more efficacious forms? It seems to say in response that the level of political efficacy of art in the modern era cannot and even *should* not be augmented.[112] At least, that is, if one doesn't want to commit the same errors as past art movements that in their revolutionary fervour strayed too far in the direction of heteronomy. His main message to artists committed to radical politics seems to be that one should learn from the inevitability of these failures, for instance, by steering clear of radical applications of both forms of aesthetic politics, as well as keeping in mind the inherent limitations to art's political efficacy. And, further, that only if artists heed to this can they accomplish the maximum level of political efficacy achievable to modern art.

This is for sure a rather realist position, defending the status-quo with regards to art and radical politics. This must be experienced as hugely unsatisfactory, unacceptable even, to those seeking to push the boundaries of what art can achieve in terms of radical social transformation. Rancière's cautious stance can of course be seen as the result of his main theoretical

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112 One could even say that Rancière would not see the need for this, since he seems rather satisfied with the accomplishments of the politics of aesthetics (*ARO*133).

position, which I mentioned in the Introduction. Against some of our previous criticisms he might reply that even if existing forms of aesthetic politics are found to be deeply unsatisfactory - e.g. due to their ambiguous, undecidable character - it is not up to him, as a philosopher, to offer a way out by speculating freely about what could be a more efficacious or desirable form of radical art, for instance, because this is beyond his power. Instead, he might argue that the only thing he can do is to contribute to the theoretical clarification of the precise nature of the politics of aesthetics as it exists currently and has existed throughout the modern era and expose certain misconceptions. It is by offering such theoretical clarifications of the specificity and limitations of the politics proper to art, so he might contend, that he contributes to the development of mature and self-critical political art practices.[113]

In this regard, Rancière can be seen to endorse Hegel's views on the possibility for philosophy to "to teach the world what it ought to be" (1820/2001:20). Philosophy is here held to be incapable of preempting historical processes. According to Hegel, it is merely able to offer an understanding of an existing "form of life" when it has already "grown old" (idem). Such theoretical positioning can of course be challenged. Think of Marx's famous observation that "philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways", while for him - and, so one could argue, for radical theory in general - "the point is to change it" (1845/1969).

One of the implications for those wanting to push the envelope of art's radical political potential beyond the aesthetic regimes' constraints, is that the only hope lies with the advent of a new, fourth regime of art.[114] Again, Rancière might consider such a 'regime change' to be neither impossible or undesirable, yet hold it to be overreaching as a theorist to speculate about its becoming, let alone attempt to contribute to bringing it about from within the space of philosophical thinking.

Still, what adds to the sense of closure of his regime theory discussed so far, is his rather optimistic and straightforward defence of the aesthetic regime and its politics, regarding it as optimally efficacious and a perfect counterpart to politics 'proper'. In this regard, Rockhill has argued that despite the generally historical approach of Rancière's radical aesthetics, there are certain "ontological" residues (2009:215). According to him, this creates the

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113 One could see this as an instance of what certain commentators have identified as a more general defect of Rancière's work, namely, the lack of a theory of 'the new' or event. Peter Hallward (2006), for instance, has criticized Rancière's political theory on this score.

114 Sven Lütticken (2000), for example, has argued that the aesthetic regime of art is no longer dominant today. He considers it to be replaced by the "informational regime" of art.

impression that Rancière believes it possible to determine the relation between art and politics "objectively" by "philosophically bracket(ing) the sociohistorical struggle over the politics of art" (idem). Against this tendency in Rancière's work, Rockhill insists that "there is no permanent politics of art; there are only various modes of politicization. And these take place in different dimensions: not only at the level of historical regimes, but also at the level of production, circulation, and reception" (idem, 215).

And then there is also Rancière's rather cautious view on the power of art practices to contribute to the establishment of a new regime. As we saw (Chapter Two, IX), despite his deconstruction of aesthetics and politics as separate entities, he maintains an all in all fairly neat and traditional distinction and division of roles between art practices - no matter how politicized - and politics proper - no matter how aestheticized.[115] Art practices are thought to be able to contribute to a redivision of the sensible only in an indirect way, through creating 'effects of dissensus', rather than dissensus itself, which is held to be the forte of politics proper. We also saw that the politicity of art practices was limited to the realm of representation, e.g. the invention of new forms of experience, rather than the creation of collective, contestational subjects, which is seen as prerogative of political practice. The latter seems to be awarded more agency in effecting the kind of paradigm shift necessary for the development of configurations of art and politics that break the mould of the aesthetic regime.[116]

Against this, it is more productive to treat Rancière's third way determination of aesthetic politics not as a quasi-eternal formula of the politics of art proper and equal to the radical, egalitarian ethos of modern societies. Rather, it should be regarded as a historical configuration that might possibly be exhausted today. Or, at least, that might be found wanting because of its

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115 I also address this problematic later in Chapter 6, X & XI.

116 As such, Rancière seems to share Adorno's and Bürger's view of the relative powerlessness of art in the modern world to contribute to a radical transformation of the existing order, only being able to contribute to it indirectly and marginally. By contrast, today's heteronomous art movements, sparked by the revolutionary sentiments of the alter-globalist or Occupy movements, firmly believe that a different world is possible and act out this conviction in their practice, not waiting for a complete overhaul of the current socio-political system to be achieved through traditional revolutionary means and channels. They do so, moreover, by crossing the boundaries drawn by Rancière between artistic and political practices (see Chapter 2, IX), e.g. through processes of subjectivation and the creation of radical communities. One can think of the come-back of collectivism in art over the past decade, with artists not only producing collaborative artworks, but also organizing their lives in actual or virtual communities on the basis of radically different political and economic principles - e.g. direct democracy, open source systems, etc. (Roberts 2009, Schulte-Sasse 1974). Although small in scale and often experimental in nature, the 'microtopias' of contemporary artists are conceived as precursors and laboratories of a radically different socio-political system to come.

ineffectiveness to generate sufficient political effects in today's social struggles. We should, in other words, never be inhibited to question the established definitions of what political art is or might be, *those of Rancière included*, as well as experiment freely with more hybrid combinations of art and politics, specifically those who push art beyond itself, and towards engagement with radical politics rather than in the opposite direction.

Chapter 6: Rancière as a critic of contemporary political art

Synopsis

This final chapter examines a third key component of Rancière's radical aesthetics: his analyses and evaluations of political art practices of the contemporary period (from the 1960s up until the present), to which he also refers as 'critical art'. This part of his work offers some of the most concrete formulations concerning what he considers to be a truly emancipatory art practice in today's circumstances. I start (Section I) by looking into Rancière's theorization of critical art as a form of art aimed at creating awareness about social and political issues by employing a third, hybrid form of aesthetic politics that mixes autonomous and heteronomous modes. I then (II) look into his two main criticisms of this traditional critical art model: one aimed at its general goal of consciousness-raising, the other at its adherence to an outdated representational conception of art's social efficacy. The next two sections deal with two subsequent attempts to overcome some of these flaws. A first formation (III), which I call 'post-critical' art, offers a self-critique of conventional artistic procedures of denunciation, especially focused on their hackneyed and automatic nature. I show how Rancière argues that such art ultimately relies on the very same critical mechanisms and tropes it wants to delegitimate. A second formation (IV) establishes a cleaner break with traditional critical art by shifting its key role from that of a mediator in the process of social transformation - i.e. as provider of deeper understanding of unjust social processes - to that of an agent of immediate change who initiates real-life actions aimed at solving urgent social ills. I show how Rancière is also quite critical of this second transformation of the critical paradigm, reproaching it for adopting an ethical model of art's efficacy that he considers to be untenable today. In the next three sections, I then systematize the alternative politics of critical art suggested by Rancière following his critical overview of recent political art. First (V), I explain how in line with his theory of the aesthetic regime, his alternative position is based on the assumption of an irremediable tension between art work and social process, as well as how this is to be understood more concretely by looking at his interpretation of two contemporary art works. From this, I then (VI) deduce the alternate role that a truly emancipatory art should adopt according to Rancière, as well as the best way to fulfil it. I conclude (VII) my elucidation of Rancière's different politics of art by looking into a final characteristic: what I call its discreet criticality. The chapter's last four sections then point out

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> *several problematic aspects of Rancière's critical assessment of contemporary political art and his proposed alternative. I especially take issue with the purist affirmation of aesthetic approaches toward emancipation over and above representational (VIII, IX) and ethical (X, XI) ones and argue for a more inclusive conceptualization that recognizes the radical political power of the latter approaches.*

I. THIRD AESTHETIC POLITICS AND THE CRITICAL ART DISPOSITIVE

Previously in this study, I have systematized and problematized two main components of Rancière's radical aesthetics. First, his affirmation of the radical political content of modern aesthetics, its Kantian and Schillerian formulations in particular (Chapters 1 to 3). Second, his conceptualization of the two main forms in which this content has been realized in the modern era along the axes of autonomy and heteronomy (Chapters 4 and 5).

This final chapter takes a critical look at a third important part of Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics. It concerns his theoretical analyses and criticisms of political art practices from the 1960s up until today. He here puts to work some of his core theoretical propositions and notions regarding art's politicity, using them to categorize and assess recent art practices. He also comes closest to offering recommendations to artists by articulating what he calls a "different politics of art" (2009a:80). This part of his politico-aesthetic writings thus brings out some of the most concrete implications of his radical aesthetics for contemporary political art practice.

An in-depth treatment of this part of his work is thus very important for this study's general purpose of a critical assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics. Adding to this, is the fact that it is relatively neglected in overviews and commentaries. These are generally more concerned with the general, philosophical tenets of Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics. In contrast, the texts under consideration in this chapter often verge into art criticism.

I shall start by offering an overview of some of the main definitions, theoretical concepts and historical-taxonomic determinations at the heart of Rancière's reflections on contemporary art's politics. As with the other components of his thinking, there are some inconsistencies one has to navigate. This is mainly due to the fact that this aspect of his work has been developed in several texts over a period of ten years or so, with restatements,

refinements and additions that do not always add up.[117] After my presentation of the key elements of Rancière's reading of contemporary political practice, I shall point to some of its problematic aspects.

I thus begin by defining the central conceptual category and main protagonist in Rancière's analyses and critiques of contemporary political art practice: what he refers to as 'critical art' or the critical art "*dispositif*" (2010:144). He considers the latter to have been hegemonic over the past fifty years or so, claiming, for instance, that the politics of art has come to be identified with it (idem). He defines critical art in mainly two ways: first, according to what he calls its "general expression" (*AD*54/60) or "project" (45/65); second, and more specifically, within his model of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics. I shall specify both in turn.

In general, Rancière takes critical art to refer to practices that use art as a means to "build[...] understanding" (idem) of societal processes that are deemed to be problematic - say, capitalist exploitation, social marginalization, cultural commodification.[118] This is done, further, in the expectation of mobilizing those subjected to these processes into taking action against them. In this regard, he also speaks of the "traditional" model of "politically engaged art" (2007a:258). Critical art is thus aimed at creating a "critical awakening" (259) among the oppressed as a way to "provoke political action" or, as Rancière also phrases it, to "mobilize minds and bodies for the struggle" (258-9). One could thus say that it concerns art practices that perform functions traditionally done by political propagandists and agitators, using specific artistic expertise to fulfil similar roles: raising consciousness, educating, provoking, mobilizing and so on.

The second main theoretical specification of critical art is more specific to Rancière. It situates it within his larger theory of the major figures of aesthetic politics in the modern era, discussed in Chapter Four and Five. I mentioned there that despite a strong focus on autonomous and heteronomous politico-aesthetic paradigms, Rancière also distinguishes a third major figure. This

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117 Key texts here are the following book chapters: "Critical art and its transformations" (*AD*45-60/65-84), "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community" (2009a, Chapter 3), "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics" (2009b) and "The Paradoxes of Political Art" (Rancière 2010, Chapter 10), as well as an interview entitled "Art of the Possible" (2007a).

118 Although Rancière offers no theoretical references in this regard, a recent example would be Fredric Jameson's aesthetics of "cognitive mapping" (1987). The key role of contemporary cultural producers here is to found a new pedagogic political culture that heightens people's consciousness of their objective place in the global capitalist system. By doing so, it is thought to counteract what Jameson perceives as the generalized distortion and fragmentation of such knowledge in post-modern societies.

"'third' aesthetic politics" (*AD*47,51/67,72), as he calls it, is regarded as the "fundamental aesthetico-political logic" (47/67) of critical art practices. Inversely, he presents critical art as the key historical manifestation of this logic. Consequently, third aesthetic politics is presented as the appropriate "framework" (51/72, translation mine) for theorizing critical art. As he puts it: "If there is a political question in contemporary art... It will be grasped through an analysis of the metamorphoses of the political 'third' [i.e. third aesthetic politics]" (idem). I shall thus first specify this third aesthetic politics.

As with the other two forms of aesthetic politics, the third form is theorized as a specific way of dealing with the paradoxical determination of art in the aesthetic regime in terms of both autonomy and heteronomy, art and life (discussed in Chapters Two and Four). The founding insight of third aesthetic politics is that these two sets of terms are in reality always already blurred and confused, with the two constantly "exchang[ing] their properties" (*ARO*137), the border between them "permeable", "always there and nevertheless already crossed" (*AD*48/68). It thus identifies a two-way traffic or "double movement" (50/71) between art and life - for example, with art becoming a commodity and commodities becoming art works. Or still, it does not consider "sensory heterogeneity" as preserve of the world of art, but claims that it "can be found anywhere at all and most especially on the very terrain from which the purists want to divert it" (49-50/70). In line with Rancière's broader historical claims concerning art in the modern era (see Chapter 4, VIII), such co-contamination of art and life is not regarded as a relatively recent, 'post-modern' development. Instead, it is presented as a condition "as old as 'modernity' itself" (49/69).

Third aesthetic politics is then said to put to work this "dialectical work within things" (50/71) for political effect. As he says, it is "founded on the play of exchanges and displacements between the art world and that of non-art" (51/72). Consequently, it enacts a "blurring [of] the basic opposition between the two great politics of aesthetics" (50/71), constituting a combination or "conjunction" (50/72) of autonomous and heteronomous aesthetic politics. As Rancière puts it: third aesthetic politics takes "the form of an adjustment of heterogeneous logics" (46/67, translation mine), thus also speaking of "the politics of mixing heterogeneous elements" (51/72). The latter is said to "play... both on the union and the tension of aesthetic politics" (49/69), to combine "two powers" (46/67), to "negotiate between the tension which pushes art toward 'life' as well as that which, conversely, sets aesthetic sensoriality apart from the other forms of sensory experience" (46/66). More concretely, Rancière singles out the artistic practice of collage as "principle" of third aesthetic politics, stating that "Before combining paintings, newspapers, oilcloths or clock-making mechanisms, it

combines the foreignness of aesthetic experience with the becoming-art of ordinary life" (*AD*47/67).[119]

As said, Rancière presents critical art as an exemplary instance of third way aesthetic politics. In light of its first definition, which mainly specifies the general aims of critical art, we can understand his second specification to refer to the way in which these goals are realized - i.e. through the mixing of heterogeneous elements. In this regard, he further differentiates between two different ways in which this can be done. First, heterogeneous forms and materials can be combined so as to "attest[...]... to the incompatibility of two worlds", thereby "incit[ing]... feelings of intolerability" (idem). Alternatively, this can be done in order to "bring[...]... to light... the hidden link [or also: "causal connection" (47/68)] between two apparently foreign worlds" (47/67).

One could describe the key operation of the first strategy in terms of an escalation of the contrasts between social processes - say, between über-consumption of top earners and abject poverty of homeless people in capitalist societies - to the point of incomprehensibility, disbelief and outrage as to how one can exist alongside the other. The second strategy, for its part, can be seen to expose how the processes in question are separate in appearance only. That is, how, if one digs deeper, they are in fact intricately connected. Thus, to stay with the previous example, it might aim to demonstrate how excessive wealth of an elite is possible only because of the constant reproduction of a structurally unemployed underclass.[120]

Rancière considers the second form of mixing heterogeneous elements to have been the dominant form taken by third aesthetic politics. The predominant modus operandi of critical art is thus said to be that of "generat-[ing] clashes between heterogeneous elements and dialectical oppositions between form and content, which... served to denounce social relations and the place reserved for art within them" (51/72).[121]   More concretely, he for

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119 In terms of general art movements, Rancière's key references of third aesthetic politics are Dadaism, Surrealism and 1960s protest art. Individual artists or specific works include Bertolt Brecht's play *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*, photomontages of John Heartfield and Martha Rossler and works by Andy Warhol, Wolf Vostell, Krystof Wodicsko and Hans Haacke.

120 Rancière's key example of the first strategy is Surrealism, of the second: photomontages of John Heartfield and Martha Rossler, as well as Sixties protest art in general. In reference to Brechts's play *The Resistable Rise of Arturi Ui*, however, he also says that the two strategies can be combined, with art works "play[ing] on the line of indiscernibility between the force of sense's legibility and the force of non-sense's strangeness" (*AD*47/68).

121 Other terms used by Rancière to characterize critical art's dominant modus operandi include "polemical revelation", "dialectical provocations" (*AD*53/74), "political critique" (57/81) and "provocative dissensus" (58/81).

instance says that it exposed "capitalist violence beneath the happiness of consumption; and commercial interests and violence of class struggle beneath the serene appearances of art" (51/73). Using Rancière's political theory, this second variety could also be classified as 'metapolitical', because it relies on a distinction between a 'false' surface appearance and a deeper underlying level of 'truth' (see Chapter 1, VIII). The task of critical art is then to pierce through beautiful appearances and expose the ugly realities hidden beneath them.

II. FROM THE QUANDARIES OF CRITICAL ART...

Rancière identifies several problems of the critical art paradigm. He can be seen to take issue with both (i) its general aim, i.e. that of consciousness-raising and consequent political mobilization, as well as (ii) the manner in which this is predominantly attempted. I shall look into both objections in turn.

(i) With regards to critical art's political aim of awareness-raising, Rancière notes a "quandary", which he considers to be "well-known" (45/65). As we have already seen previously in relation to Bourdieu's sociology of art (Chapter 3, V), Rancière holds that the real problem in situations of exploitation or oppression, as well as the cause of prevailing inaction, apathy or resignation among those at the receiving end, is not primarily a lack of insight into the why and how of oppression. On the contrary, he claims that the oppressed themselves mostly have a sufficiently clear understanding of the insidious workings of power or capital.

Rather, the true problem is said to be the lack of confidence among the marginalized and exploited in their abilities to effectively change their unenviable situation. For Rancière, the most important obstacle to political action is thus not so much insufficient insight but rather a missing sense of agency. In this regard, critical art is thus essentially misguided by considering consciousness-raising to be the royal road to political activation. As such, it is based on a wrong estimation of the true needs of the oppressed, satisfying a non-need or offering a solution to a non-problem instead.

We have also already encountered Rancière's further argument that consciousness-raising in fact has the opposite effect when it comes to politically activating people: i.e. it negatively affects confidence in their powers of transformation. By offering systematic expositions on the inner workings of processes of exploitation or domination, they are said to take away their anomalous character, granting them a sense of rationality and inevitability, providing solid reasons why things are the way they are. This critique seems to be levelled more specifically at the second, metapolitical variety of critical art distinguished earlier (in Section I).

Also earlier, I explicated how the naturalizing effect of meta-explanations of social injustices and inequalities led Rancière to speak of a "vicious circle" (46/66): i.e. the more critical art exposes the unjust workings of the existing order, the less those suffering from its injustices feel confident to take on and radically change the status quo.

(ii) Rancière's second key objection to the critical art paradigm concerns its underlying model of art's social efficacy. His critique here rests on his conceptualization of art's political efficacy within the framework of his regime theory. As we saw earlier (Chapter 2, VIII), he differentiates between ethical, representational and aesthetic modes of art's efficacy, positing the third mode as most suited to the egalitarian ethos and radical politics of the modern era. The basic claim concerning critical art's model of efficacy is that it is either (a) straightforwardly representational, or (b) a combination of representational and aesthetic modes in which the second plays a submissive role. Considering Rancière's primary normative commitment to the aesthetic model of art's efficacy, its absence or suppression in critical art practices is found to be highly problematic.

Before I elucidate this second critical point, it is important to note how it might seem incongruous with Rancière's presentation of critical art's basic mode of operation - that of the mixing of heterogeneous elements - as a properly aesthetic one. As we saw, he regards critical art as exemplar of a third form of aesthetic politics in the modern era, one completely valid in its own right. At the same time, however, he holds that the critical art paradigm "conflates" (2010:142) aesthetic, representational and, as we shall see later, ethical logics. One way to make sense of this, is to take Rancière's critique to be mainly oriented toward the way in which artistic procedures and political ambitions are connected - and according to him, wrongly so - in terms of their efficacy and not so much toward the deeper politico-aesthetic logic on which these procedures are based.[122] Further, his critique seems to be mainly directed against one specific form - albeit the dominant one - that third aesthetic politics has taken historically which I characterized earlier as 'metapolitical', and thus not against this politics as such.

In what way now does critical art adopt a predominantly representational model of social efficacy? This is most obvious in the case of art practices aimed at awareness-raising in a direct way. Think of art works that present cognitive maps of the multiple connections between large corporations and

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122 Note also how theorization of critical art as a form of third aesthetic politics features most prominently in one of the earliest texts on the subject (*AD*). This is less so in later reformulations (2009a, 2010) where the critique of critical art's predominantly representational mode of social efficacy is first developed and takes centre stage.

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political elites or gripping testimonials of the oppressed.[123] It is not hard to detect the presence of a "cause-[and]-effect schema" that - as we saw earlier - Rancière regards as typical of the representational model of art's efficacy, with its "straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means" (2009a:74) or still, its unproblematic, smooth movement from art work to awareness to mobilization.

Rancière, however, also distinguishes a more indirect and complex way in which awareness is created by critical art which might even be viewed as more proper to it. Here, specifically aesthetic qualities - he speaks of "sensory oddity" (2009a:75) or also, the "strangeness of an artistic form" (2007a:258) - are employed in order to stimulate its recipients' powers of enquiry. He explains the chain of causes and effects assumed by such more complex forms of critical art in terms of "the conjunction of three processes: first, the production of a sensory form of 'strangeness'; second, the development of an awareness of the reasons for this strangeness and third, a mobilization of individuals as a result of that awareness" (2010:142). Again, Rancière's prototypical example is the genre of collage, where the staging of a "clash of heterogeneous elements is assumed to provoke a rupture in ways of seeing and, therewith, an examination of the causes of that oddity" (2009a:75).

Also in this more sophisticated, aesthetic strand of critical art, Rancière considers the representational model of art's social efficacy to be dominant. It is said to equally assume "a calculable transmission between artistic shock, intellectual awareness and political mobilization" (2010:143). As such, rather than a properly aesthetic critical art form, it is said to constitute a case of "the aesthetic break [being]... absorbed into representational continuity" (2009a: 75). One could also speak here of representational art 'with an aesthetic face'.

Rancière considers this formation to be ultimately contradictory. As he puts it, to "aim... to produce an effect of [aesthetic, sensory] strangeness in order to engender an awareness of the underlying reasons of that strangeness... is tantamount to suppressing it" (2010:143). He thus reproaches critical art for playing a "double game" (2009a:76). It pretends to operate

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123 Rancière doesn't offer an example of such direct forms of awareness-raising art. For an example, one could think of an art work that features prominently in a text by Alain Badiou, (2004), one of his main fellow contemporary radical philosophers. It concerns a work by American artist Mark Lombardi entitled *George W. Bush, Harken Energy and Jackson Stephens, ca 1979–90* (1990). It consists of a diagram drawing of the many interconnections between G.W. Bush, oil corporations and the Bin Laden family as reported in the media.

according to aesthetic logic, while it actually subscribes to the opposing, representational logic.[124]

As we saw (see Chapter 2, VIII), Rancière holds the aesthetic mode of art's social efficacy to be most in line with the modern era's radical democratic ethos. He can therefore not hide his amazement at the fact that the representational model - which he considers to be outdated, defunct and deeply anti-emancipatory - is still prevalent in contemporary political art. In this regard, he detects a "strange schizophrenia" (2010:135). On the one hand, he detects an injunction in the current art world to "interminably" "re-situate" art in its current context in order to keep it "actual" (idem). On the other hand, there is an "attachment" to a paradigm of the efficacy of art that was "debunked at least two centuries ago" (idem).

Rancière does not go into much detail about the reasons for the anachronistic persistence of representational modes of efficacy in critical art. At one point, he links it to the strength or "pseudo self-evidence" (142), as he calls it, of certain "patterns of intelligibility and forms of mobilization" (2009a: 75) characteristic of revolutionary class politics. With the end of the latter - he also speaks of the "undermining of political action" (idem) - these patterns and forms would also have lost their force.

One could think here for instance of the declining hegemony of Leninist models of revolutionary change, say from the 1960s onwards, that were once an unsurpassable point of reference for radical political movements. Such models advocate a specific apparatus and way of proceeding to achieve radical societal transformation. At the centre of it all there is Marxian science that - in metapolitical vein - relentlessly theorizes the objective laws of capitalist society. This 'hard' knowledge is then translated by a vanguard of 'professional' revolutionaries into practicable strategies of revolution. Further down the line, there are the propagandists who produce materials for the purpose of educating and activating the exploited and oppressed. At the same level, there are the so-called agitators whose task it is to exploit the day-to-day struggles of the masses in order to ignite their radical political passion and steer it within the grand schemes of radical change devised by the vanguard.

Within this tightly ordered revolutionary machine, the awareness-raising activities of critical artists could then be classified as propaganda, functioning

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124 Apart from the way in which art and politics are connected in simplistic, causal fashion, Rancière also criticises their distinction *as such* as "two well-defined things" and "independent spheres" (2007a:258). It more specifically concerns their distinction in terms of, respectively, "mode of presentation" and "determination to act" (idem), "representations" and "engagements", "forms of consciousness" and "acts" (259). For Rancière, on the contrary, it is not simply a question of "how representations will translate into reality. Artistic forms are not purely subjective while political facts are objective realities" (264).

as a half-way house between Marxian science and agitation. Such models of radical social transformation, however, can be seen to have increasingly lost their legitimacy in the contemporary period due to both exterior developments and internal criticisms - think of Rancière's own critiques of Marxian style politics mentioned in Chapter One. With this, traditional forms of critical art can also be seen to have entered an identity crisis.

Apart from the decline of such mechanistic, top-down conceptions of 'engineered' revolution, Rancière also points to the decline of the Marxian model of society as such as an important cause of the decline of the traditional critical art paradigm. This class model is said to have always relied on the "self-evidence of a dissensual world" (2010:143). This can be understood to refer to the automatic, metapolitical interpretation of social processes in terms of a struggle between different societal groups for material means and political power. Rancière considers critical art to be "always buoyed" (idem) by such a view on society in terms of endless conflicts and disagreements. However, he considers the latter to have undergone a crisis due to the recent rise and establishment of consensual models of society. The latter are based on the opposite belief in "one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification" (144). Rancière mentions "economic globalization" as an example of such a 'unique reality'.

III. ... AND DUPLICITIES OF POST-CRITICAL ART...

Whatever the underlying historical causes of traditional critical art's crisis, what became increasingly clear, according to Rancière, was the fundamental *undecidability* of the relation between an art work and its political 'messages' and impact.[125] We saw earlier (Chapter 2,VIII) that this formed the core of Rancière's conceptualization of the specifically *aesthetic* social efficacy of art. At one point, he refers to an unnamed contemporary exhibition of photographs of genocide victims in order to demonstrate the political undecidability of art works. Of the exhibition's possible political significations or responses he says the following:

> Does it count as a form of rebellion against the perpetrators? Does it amount to anything more than an inconsequential sympathy towards the victims? Ought it generate anger towards the photographer who

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125 Rancière nonetheless holds the dominant form of critical art to be "still the order of the day when it comes to legitimizing works, installations and exhibitions" (*AD*52/73). Still, he says that "this discursive continuity covers over a significant transformation" (idem). In this regard, he also speaks of an "*apparent* continuity" (53/74).

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turns the victims' pain into an aesthetic matter? Or else to indignation against those who view them degradingly only in their identity as victims? The list can be extended. The element that is left over once all these reactions are subtracted is the supposed 'beauty' or 'power' of the photograph itself. (2010:136)

According to Rancière, the belated realization of the structural uncertainty of art's meaning and effects, engendered several "transformations" (*AD*45/65) and "metamorphoses" (51/72) of the critical art paradigm. One such important transformation which he seems to regard as first response to the impasse is what one could variously call the self-critical, reflexive or post-critical turn of critical art. This refers to art works or exhibitions that based on a critical awareness of the limitations of traditional critical art, its fundamental undecidability in particular, actively produce and play with the latter (54/75, 2009:75), thereby suspending its signification (*AD*53/75). As Rancière also puts it, it concerns works that "play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning" (59/83). In reference to works by Charles Ray and Maurizio Cattelan he for instance says that they are "equally open to being symbolized either as pop derision, the critique of commercial entertainment, or the positive power of play" (53/75).[126] By playing with art's undecidability, such works are said to create awareness of the "automatic functioning of the canonical procedures of delegitimization" (52/74) or still, to expose their "hackneyed" and "worn-out" (2010:146) character. As such, they would "delegitimize the procedures of delegitimization at the same time as their object" (*AD*52/74).

In his analyses of this self-critical strand of critical art, Rancière mainly takes issue with what he considers to be its typical and dominant form, of which he says that even today, it "still feature[s] on all agendas" (2009a:75-6). It concerns art works that offer reduplications of social phenomena they are supposedly critical of or, at least, phenomena that were archetypal targets of previous critical art practices. As examples of such usual objects of critique, Rancière mentions "the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power" (76). For examples of such art, one can consider the type of works described in the following quote:

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126 The works in question are (respectively): *Revolution Counter-Revolution* (1990) and *Stadio* (*Stadium*) (1991), both of which were part of the group exhibition *Let's Entertain!* at the Walker Art centre in Minneapolis (US) in 2000, curated by Philippe Vergne. The first work consist of a merry-go round in which the frame moves in opposite direction as the horses and carriages; the second work is an enlarged football able that allows twenty-two players to compete.

> ... parodies of promotional films; reproduced disco sounds; advertising icons or media stars modelled in wax; Disney animals turned into polymorphous perverts; montages of 'vernacular' photographs showing us standardized petty-bourgeois living rooms, overloaded supermarket trolleys, standardized entertainment or the refuse of consumerist civilization, and so on and so forth. (Rancière 2009a:75-76)

Again, the core assumption in such works is that "these artefacts offer a radical critique of commodification by the very fact that they are the exact reduplication of commodities" (*ARO* 146). At one point, Rancière describes the modus operandi of such art in terms of "stereotypes that critique stereotypes" (2007a:266) referring to "giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle" (idem).

Rancière sees such reduplications as applications of the subversive cultural practice of *détournement* developed by the art movements the Letterist International and Situationist International in the 1950s and 60s.[127] This is a critical artistic technique in which forms, discourses or strategies of the dominant order - or, more generally, of that which is criticized - are misappropriated in order to subvert their conventional purposes and meanings, instead conveying their problematic nature. Think for example of the deliberate misuse of catchy advertisement slogans of multinational corporations in relation to horrendous working conditions in their offshore production plants.

Rancière, however, notes a crucial difference between traditional critical art's use of such tactics and that of its self-critical successors. In the latter instance, reduplications would "no longer invite... us to read signs on objects in order to understand the mechanisms of our world. It claims at once to sharpen our perception of the interplay of signs, our awareness of the fragility of the procedures of reading these same signs, and our pleasure in playing with the undecidable" (idem). In other words, rather than serving the function of exposing some dark, hidden, dirty secret behind social phenomena, *détournement* is now used to problematize this metapolitical pretence at the heart of critical art *itself.* It aims to lay bare the problematic nature of 'procedures of reading' uncritically applied by previous generations of radical artists. One can think here of the assumption of an unambiguous class signification of social phenomena or the upholding of a deterministic-instrumentalist model of communication between an art work and its addressees.

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127 Détournement is derived from the French verb 'détourner', which can be translated as diverting, rerouting or hijacking.

Although self-critical varieties of critical art can be seen to critique traditional political art in a way not dissimilar from Rancière, he is rather dismissive of it. In initial articulations of this configuration (*AD*), his evaluation is still phrased cautiously and somewhat ambiguously. He for instance says that in post-critical art practices, "procedures of delegitimization have almost become indiscernible from those spun by the powers that be and the media or by the forms of presentation specific to commodities. Humour has become the dominant way to exhibit commodities" (54/76).

Rancière can here be seen to remark, first, on the fact that the slight deflections of social objects and processes, as well as the critical effect it is supposed to generate, are "all too easy to miss" (idem). At one point, this makes him speak of the "indiscernibility of critical discourse" (*ARO*146) or still, of the undecidability of the critical "status" or "value" of post-critical art works (*AD*53-4/75). Secondly, he seems to cast some doubt on the critical power of humour, which he identifies as key "virtue" of post-critical art, with "humorous distantiation [having] take[n] the place of the provocative shock" (52/74). He does so by holding this "passage from the critical to the ludic register" (54/76) to be local manifestation of a more general contemporary tendency in which "deriding power in general has taken the place of political denunciation" (52/74).

In both instances, the critical status of Rancière's comments is difficult to divine as they oscillate between seemingly neutral observations of post-critical art's key tendencies, slight suggestions of their problematic nature (e.g. in terms of a proximity to dominant forms of commodification) and defences of it. For an instance of the latter, one can think of his claim that "In a society which functions within the accelerated consumption of signs, playing on this undecidability [i.e. of the critical status of art works] is the only remaining form by which to subvert the meaning of protocols for reading signs" (idem). One might be tempted to say that Rancière's theorization of post-critical art mimics what he considers to be its central trait, namely, the play with undecidability and consequent indiscernibility of critical status.

In later revisitations and elaborations, however, Rancière's critique of post-critical art practices is phrased in more decisive and dismissive terms. His main reproach to post-critical art practices here becomes the ultimately hypocritical nature of their critique of traditional critical art. While being overly aware of, and actively exposing, the fundamental undecidability of its critical procedures, they are found to still "capitalize" (2009a:76) on them. Rancière for example says that post-critical art still assumes that performing misappropriations "help us discover [such things as] the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power" (idem). As such, it still operates according to critical art's presupposition of a

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straightforward causal relation between art and political effects characteristic of the representational model of art's social efficacy. In other words, "the 'old' procedures still work" but now "by turning on themselves" (*AD*52/74).

One could formulate Rancière's objection so that, on the on hand, post-critical artists know very well that the old, polemical procedures of critical art are no longer effective and that its archetypal targets have become stale and that they operate in the space opened up by this realisation. Yet, on the other hand, they still act as if they don't know all this by relying on the very same procedures and targets in order to give a critical edge to their works. As Rancière states it: post-critical artists "continue to act as if reproducing a commercial idol in resin will engender resistance against the 'spectacle', and as if a series of photographs about the way colonizers represent the colonizers will work to undermine the fallacies of mainstream representation of identities" (2010:136).

As he did in the case of traditional critical art, Rancière consequently also accuses its post-critical successor of playing a double game. His characterization of post-critical art in terms of "double play" (*AD53*) or also, a "double discourse" (*ARO*146), can be understood both descriptively and critically. On the one hand, it points to one of the key modi operandi of this art configuration, i.e. offering reduplications of things as a means of criticizing them. On the other hand, it refers to the duplicitous nature of this strategy. While pretending to be highly critical of traditional critical art's claims of raising awareness of problematic social processes, it in fact makes similar claims by bargaining on the subversive effect of the same critical procedures and protocols it exposes for being flawed and exhausted.

Rancière then goes further to say that because "nobody is unaware" of the phenomena criticized - a basic claim of Rancière we encountered in the previous section - post-critical art's "mechanism [i.e. that of   reduplication] ends up revolving [or also: "spinning" (2010:144)] around itself and capitalizing/playing on that undecidability" (2009a:76). One can understand this so that with nothing left to denounce, post-critical art can only turn on itself, make itself the centre of attention. At one point, Rancière explains this self-revolving state as follows: "In the end, the *dispositif* feeds off the very equivalence between parody *as* critique and the parody *of* critique. It feeds off the undecidability of these two effects. This undecidability in turn boils down to the simple parodic *mis-en-scène* of its own magic" (2010:144-45). We here again encounter Rancière's reproach of the duplicitous nature of post-critical art, the fact that it both parodies traditional critical art in order to delegitimate and suspend its effects, yet, in doing so, somehow still upholds parody as an effective critical strategy of delegitimization, which is thereby exempted from critical scrutiny. Rancière argues that it is by maintaining this inconsistency

that post-critical art exerts its magical grip on its recipients. However, he also seems to suggest that, ultimately, such trickery is unsustainable and that post-critical art is thus destined to reach a "dead end point" or point of "self-cancellation" (idem).[128]

IV. ... TO THE 'ANTICIPATED REALITIES' OF ACTIVIST ART...

According to Rancière, the impasses of both traditional critical art practices and their self-reflexive variety led to the rise of a third major form of political art in the contemporary period. He identifies two major shifts as central to this formation.

First, there is a resolute break with critical art's "political/polemical vocation" and, instead, endorsement of "a social or community-oriented vocation" (*AD*56). In reaction to the internal, self-reflexive and, in Rancière's verdict, ultimately self-destructive games of post-critical art, what came to prevail was a more "constructive", as well as "modest" attitude (2010:145). In contrast to its main predecessors, the key aim of critical art is here no longer thought to be that of "reveal[ing] the hidden contradictions of our world, [but rather to] help to restore... basic social functions [that are] threatened" (idem). In relation to the lack of social cohesion typical of contemporary societies, for instance, Rancière says that it is increasingly considered to be the "incumbent duty of artists to repair it" (*AD*57).

Secondly, this hands-on approach is said to reflect a deeper shift on the level of the three fundamental politico-aesthetic logics as theorized by Rancière in his regime theory of art. It concerns a shift away from the representational logic - dominant in both traditional forms of critical art and their post-critical mutations - and towards an *ethical* one. As we saw, art works in the representational mode attempted to achieve radical change through conscientizing their audience with regards to society's ills and injustices. This was then expected to radicalize people to the point of taking action. Art is here thus awarded a mediating role, that of transmitting 'revolutionary' knowledge about the existing order to its victims, leaving it up to them to take action to radically change the system. In the ethical mode, in contrast, critical art practices themselves resort to action, rolling up their sleeves, so to speak, and,

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128 For Rancière, another problem with post-critical art's "parodic *mis-en-scène* of its own magic" is that "this mode of manifestation is also that of the commodity itself" (2010:145). Although he doesn't explain this claim any further, we might understand it to refer to the fact that commodities also increasingly function in a self-critical mode. On the one hand, they underscore their disconnection from any use value and autonomous existence as pure sign or spectacle. On the other hand, they owe their magical spell on consumers exactly to their parodying of commodity fetishism.

in more direct and constructive fashion, devise and execute initiatives aimed at eliminating injustices and contributing to a better world.

Taxonomically, Rancière distinguishes between two main varieties of this second metamorphosis of critical art in the contemporary period. A first strand still operates through relatively conventional artistic means and platforms. Art is here employed as a tool to engender a "sense of taking part in a common world", predominantly by "giv[ing]... us a new perception of the traces of our history and of our community" (2010:145). Although using more or less the same "materials, images and messages" as (post)critical art practices, they are no longer subjected to "strategies of critical clash" (idem). Instead, typical methodologies used are those of "inventory" (*AD*54/77), "testimony, archive and documentation" (2010:145). One of the key aims here is to "repopulate the world of things, seize back their potential for... [a] shared history" (*AD*54-5/77). The role of the artist here becomes that of an "archivist of collective life and... collector/witness of a shared capacity" (55/78).[129]

A second major strand can be seen to take the social vocation of art up a notch, taking it as an imperative "to step outside itself" and conceive of itself as "an intervention in the 'real world'" (2010:145). The aim here is "no longer to produce duplicates of objects, images or messages, but instead real actions... or objects... that engender new forms of social relationships and environments" (146). In this sense, Rancière conceives of such an art practice as "a form of direct [as well as "collective" (149)] action" (idem). It is no longer satisfied with playing a merely mediating role in the process of radical social transformation as previous critical art practices did. Instead, it takes the art work to be a "direct presentation of another form of community in which artists are directly fashioning new social bonds" (2009a:76).[130]

Emphasis on instant, real-life impact - Rancière also speaks "a form of hyper-commitment to reality" (2010:148) - places demands on artists to operate outside of the context of museums and galleries, in urban environments for example. It is believed that "art has to leave the art world in order to be effective in 'real life'" (137). Or, inversely, the outside world has to be brought inside art institutions, e.g. by 'occupying' them or, as Rancière phrases it, by "turning the art exhibition into a place of political activism" (idem). In sum, what is attempted by this second strand of social art

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129 Key examples are Chris Burden's *The Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991), Christian Boltanski's *Les abonnés du téléphone* (2002), as well as works by Hans Peter Feldmann, Peter Fischli & David Weiss (*Visible World*, 1997) and Bai Yiluo (*The People*, 2005).

130 Examples include works by René Francisco and Lucy Orta (Rancière 2010:147).

is the "overcom[ing] [of] the separation between the museum and its outside, or between artistic performance and social activism" (146).[131]

Rancière's first reservation toward this second major response to the crisis of traditional critical art concerns its adoption of an ethical conception of art. This is not surprising considering his general objections toward the ethical regime of art (see Chapter 2, VIII). I shall here not repeat his criticisms on the presupposition of a real world as an unproblematic, self-evident, univocal given. Instead, I shall focus on his more specific critique of contemporary resuscitations of ethical art forms. Stated briefly, the core argument here is that their claims to real life efficacy can in fact not be maintained, which leads them to fall back on representational strategies that, considering Rancière's criticisms of the latter, does little to redeem them.

Key to this criticism is Rancière's observation of what he takes to be a key feature of contemporary social art practices: the way in which they present the art work as "anticipated reality of what it evokes" or still, as "anticipated identity between the work's representation of its signification and the embodied reality of that signification", as something "that already makes present what it is about" (2010:146, 2009a:77). As such, rather than a pure instance of ethical art, contemporary social art is said to consist of a "conjunction between representational distance and ethical immediacy" (2010:146) or still, a "double play... between the work and its supposed effect" (idem).

This mechanism is considered to be most obvious in the second, activist strand of contemporary social art. Of artistic strategies of infiltration, for instance, Rancière says that the alleged "obviousness" and "self-evidence" of its subversive effects in real life owe a lot to the way they are "anticipated" or even "mimicked" through representations, "monumentalizations" and "iconization[s]" of the artists involved and their actions in media and museum spaces (148). As an example of such hybrid ethico-representational configurations, he refers to a tendency within activist art "that plays on the reality of occupying an exhibition space as a way of proving the real effects of subverting the social order" (idem).

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131 Rancière further differentiates this second, activist strand of the social turn in contemporary art through what he takes to be two of its most characteristic concepts or strategies: "*relation* and *infiltration*" (2010:146). In the first instance, art is called upon to "restore a sense of community", "to create new forms of relationships" (idem), both inside and outside the museum. The key reference here is to so-called relational art, which I dealt with in the previous chapter. The second strategy of infiltration refers to art works that launch real-life actions that exploit market and media processes in order to subvert or overturn them. A key example here is an action by Matthieu Laurette (*Money-back Products*, 1991–2001) in which he takes full advantage of consumers' rights to ask back their money if they are not satisfied with the product, as a clever, opportunistic way to use commodities without ever having to pay for them (147).

The problem with this resort to representational devices is that it is meant to prop up claims to the immediate, 'real life' social efficacy of engaged art practices that are fundamentally unattainable, as Rancière contends. One could say that ethical art's adoption of representational devices is here taken as negative proof of the failure to realize its claims to efficacy and, as such, to be a cop-out. As he puts it: contemporary social art "short-circuits reflection on the powers of artistic practice by relying on the combined effects of the self-evidence of sculptural evidence, action in 'the real world' and rhetorical demonstration" (idem). The main reproach, in other words, seems to be that the ethical revival in recent engaged art cannot make good on its promise of effecting radical social change in the here and now and that instead of this leading to honest reflection on art's limited capacities to achieve such transformation, representational appendages are adopted to obfuscate failure.

Moreover, as I already indicated, supplementing ethical political-aesthetic strategies with representational ones, does little to salvage them for Rancière, on the contrary even. By doing so, he says that activist art "risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy" (idem). One could understand this so that, by putting out all stops to stick to claims of real-life efficacy that are ultimately impossible, activist art only draws more attention to its structural impotence while making a farce of traditional activist practices.

This critique of today's activist art practices in terms of parody is also levelled by Rancière in the context of what he perceives to be the "substitutive political function" they are increasingly asked to perform due to the "lack of politics in the proper sense" (*AD*60/84). He attributes this to today's "time of consensus, with its shrinking of the public space and effacing of political inventiveness" (idem, 2010:145). For Rancière, saddling contemporary critical art with such expectations is found to be somewhat paradoxical because it occurs at a time in which, according to him, art is most "uncertain of its politics" (*AD*60/84). Here, however, he leaves open the question as to whether art - as "space of refuge for dissensual practice" (2010:145) - can "reshape political spaces[,] or whether they must remain content with parodying them" (*AD*60/84).

A final line of critique of socially engaged artists' employment of both representations and actions, both inside and outside of art institutions, is that the strategy of "oversaturation" it thereby constitutes, is in fact "the very law of consensus itself" (Rancière 2010:148). Rancière doesn't further explain this claim. In view of his political theory, 'consensus' must be taken negatively as antipode of politics proper, because it is based on claims to an univocal reality that enjoys universal agreement. For him, however, such claims to consensus are always false and unenforceable - something that is constantly exposed through radical political contestation. We can then understand Rancière's

above objection so, that consensus can also only maintain itself by 'oversaturating' the social field through the eclectic usage of ethical and representational strategies.

V. ... AND, FINALLY, TO THE 'AESTHETIC COMPLICITIES' OF A DIFFERENT POLITICS OF ART

Rancière's assessment of political art in the contemporary period is thus quite damaging. He considers it be "caught" between the two defunct models of "representational mediation" and "ethical immediacy" (2010:137). We saw that this is in fact more complex, with the first, representational strand incorporating elements of the aesthetic model and the second, ethical one resorting to representational tactics. In this light, we can understand Rancière's characterization of the critical art paradigm in terms of a *conflation* of elements of the aesthetic, representative and ethical regimes of art (142).

Rancière's critique of representational and ethical strands of contemporary political art is succinctly expressed in the statement that "Practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses *for* politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective action" (149). He doesn't leave it at this, however, and goes on to articulate a more desirable alternative. In this regard, he speaks of a "different politics of art" (2009a:80) and "a new idea of what critical art could mean today" (2010:149). The latter more or less follow from his critiques of representational and ethical paradigms of critical art. In a characteristic move, he claims it possible and necessary to "escape" (2009a:78) the choice between these two models, affirming a third path instead. Not surprisingly in light of Rancière's broader regime theory of art, his alternative politics of contemporary art is one that functions purely according to aesthetic logic to which it is said to owe its radical political potential.

Unfortunately, Rancière is not terribly clear about his alternative position. He does not so much offer an abstract, theoretical account of his different aesthetic politics but mostly articulates it in relation to concrete themes and particular works of art, and even then in a rather dense and cryptic fashion. Part of the work in the following three sections will be to draw out the general features of his proposed alternative more clearly.

In this section, I shall first explicate how Rancière locates the radical political potential of art in an aesthetic 'complicity' established between itself and its subjects. In the next section, I spell out some of the implications for the role of the artist in achieving emancipation, as well as for the ways in which this role should be fulfilled. The following section then looks into a final,

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somewhat independent aspect of Rancière's alternative politics of art, what I call its 'discreet criticality'.

A good starting point for an overview of Rancière's alternative politics of art is to specify the most general ways in which he distinguishes it from representational and ethical strands in contemporary critical art covered in the preceding sections. Key here are the different conceptualizations of the relations between art work and social practice. Summarizing, we can say that representational forms still maintain a separation between the two. As we saw, they attempt their political aims only indirectly by expecting social actors to be ignited by their explications of social injustice and take appropriate action. They thereby maintain an unproblematic, causal movement from the sphere of art to that of social action. The ethical strand of critical art, for its part, abolishes the separation between the artistic and social domains. Artists here believe that they can contribute most effectively to creating a more just society by becoming instigators of change themselves. In contrast to both, Rancière affirms a politics of art based on the assumption of an irreducible *tension* between art and social process, with the art work conceived as "exploration" of this tension or "construct[ed]... as th[is] very tension" (idem).

These general formulations are further articulated in relation to the problematic of the production of a sense of community through art which, as we saw, Rancière considers to be a central theme in contemporary political art. He here distinguishes between two common ways in which his tensional model of art and politics, as one might call it, is practiced. The first is said to function "by questioning the ways in which... community is tentatively produced", the second "by exploring the potential of community entailed in separation itself" (idem). He uses two art works to specify these two approaches. With regard to these works, I shall not to go into too much detail. My main aim is to determine Rancière's alternative aesthetic politics in more general terms.

As an instance of the first approach, Rancière refers to Albanian artist Anri Sala's art video entitled *Give me the colours* (2003).[132] This work deals with a project of a mayor - who happens to be an artist himself -, in which dilapidated blocks of flats in his city (Albania's capital Tirana) were painted in bright colours in an effort to enhance social cohesion. It thus concerns a direct attempt at using aesthetic experience to construct a sense of community and, in Rancière's terms, an exemplar of the ethical model of art's politics. Sala's video is said to problematize this project by contrasting the mayor's optimistic claims to its beneficial effects with the less bright reality on the ground, as well

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132 The original, Albanian title is *Dammi i colori*.

as the rather apathetic stance of inhabitants. Apart from this, Rancière also mentions the way in which Sala's video visually fragments the painted walls into "abstract strips of colour" (2009a:78). Of this, he says that the artist "uses the resources of 'distant' art to question a politics of art which tries to fuse art and life into one single process" (idem).

Rancière seems especially appreciative of this more properly aesthetic mode of critique in Sala's video. Still, considering both the work's aims and means (e.g. the use of the rather standard critical narrative strategy of contrasting good intentions with cold facts), it could just as well be classified as a rather typical example of traditional critical art as theorized and criticized by Rancière. Aesthetic devices are hereby put to work in an essentially representational schema of art's social efficacy.[133] As such, it makes the reference to Sala's work somewhat problematic for determining the distinctive features of his alternative politics of art.

Rancière's example of the second category of art works - i.e. ones that "explor[e]... the potential of community entailed in separation itself" - can be found to be more instructive. He also devotes most attention to this example and seems to award more importance to it. It concerns an art video by Portuguese artist Pedro Costa entitled *In Vanda's Room* (2000).[134] This work deals with the precarious existence of a group of drug addicts squatting in a run-down neighbourhood on Lisbon's outskirts while it is being demolished. Rancière characterizes the artist's general approach in the video as follows:

> Pedro Costa paradoxically focuses on the possibilities of life and art specific to that situation of misery: from the strange coloured architectures that result from the degradation of the houses and demolition itself, to the effort made by their inhabitants to recover a voice and the ability to tell their own story amid the the effects of drugs and despair. (2009a:79)

As an instance of Costa's focus on the inhabitants, Rancière makes much of one specific scene in the film featuring one of the addicts, called Vanda Duarte. It shows how her frenetically removing stains from an old table with a

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133 A more generous interpretation would be to understand Sala's video as itself 'constructed as the very tension' - to use Rancière's own expression mentioned earlier - between the three main contemporary politico-artistic strategies distinguished by Rancière: i.e. critical-representational, anticipatory-ethical and distant-aesthetic ones. His claim that in the video, "several modernisms and politics of art are confronted" (2009a:78) could be interpreted in this vein. Even so, however, it is not clear in what sense representational and aesthetic strategies are confronted or questioned by ethical ones. Instead, it seems as case of the first two launching a unilateral and fatal attack on the third one.

134 Its original, Portuguese title is *No Quarto da Vanda*.

knife because of a dislike of "dirtiness" (80), in the midst of the imminent demolition of her temporary abode. Rancière's central interpretative move is to see Vanda's activity here as manifestation of her "aesthetic sense" (idem). Unfortunately, he does not offer much of an explanation for this.

One could understand Rancière's reading so that while the obsessive cleaning betrays some sort of existential importance to the subject, it is not done with a view of material self-interest and is in fact wholly pointless. As he remarks, "the table was never [her]... table and... will soon be demolished by the bulldozers" (82). As such, the addict's cleaning can be seen to embody typically Kantian aesthetic properties such as 'disinterested satisfaction' and 'purposiveness without purpose' (see Chapter 2, VI).

The next crucial step in Rancière's interpretation is then to posit a "complicity" between the addict's aesthetic sensibility and that of Costa, which he describes in terms of the unrelenting "exploit[ation of] all the 'beauty' available in the shantytown" (2009a:82). The artist's poetic renderings of the life of Vanda in the form of "a beautiful still-life" (idem), as Rancière puts it, can be seen as exemplary instance of such aesthetic approach. Finally, this aesthetic complicity between the artist and his 'subject' is then said to constitute the art work's "specifically political dimension: the confrontation between the power and the impotence of a body,... between a life and its possibilities" (idem).

This dense reading can be understood so that Costa, by zooming in on the addict's aesthetic capacities, stages a contrast with her powerlessness in the face of the destruction of her living environment. As such, it renders Vanda as more than a prisoner of her precarious place in society with her life entirely taken over by immediate satisfaction of basic needs such as food, shelter or drugs. On the contrary, the obsessive, principled almost, cleaning of the table is taken as proof of the addict's 'autonomy', being done 'for its own sake', regardless of 'heteronomous' circumstances.[135] In light of Rancière's political aesthetics, Vanda's exercise of her aesthetic sensibility has to be understood further as demonstration of her *equality*, not only to the artist but also to humanity as such. In other words, it functions as confirmation of her equal human potential to grasp, resist and transform her life circumstances.

We can further tease out further specificities of Rancière's position by considering likely responses from the different strands of critical art dealt with in the previous sections. To them, it must surely come across as a provocation, scandalous even, to identify the properly political dimension of art with the respective exercise by the artist and marginalized of their aesthetic sense and

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[135] In this sense, Vanda in Costa's art video can be seen as counterpart to Gauny in *The Nights of Labour* (see Chapter 2, III).

the community supposedly formed by it. In this regard, his usage of the term 'complicity' might seem quite appropriate, as it suggests some kind of wrongdoing. Costa, for his part, might be criticized for aestheticizing and romanticizing the unenviable life circumstances of the marginalized, thereby depoliticizing their situation. Or still, he might be accused of satisfying his personal artistic fascinations on the back of a marginalized community, while offering nothing useful in return.[136] One can even predict similar reproaches toward Vanda. Her frenetic cleaning might be dismissed as apolitical, 'autistic' behaviour that contributes nothing constructive to resisting the eviction of herself and her co-inhabitants.

It will then no doubt be suggested that a more appropriate, as well as more political, approach would have been to use art to draw cognitive maps of the dubious mechanisms and tactics to which the marginalized are subjected, as well as the hidden interests and machinations at play. Or still, to document the miserable living conditions and lack of life perspective of 'people like Vanda'. This, so it will be argued, would have helped to sensitize and mobilize the marginalized and community at large to take action and resist ongoing developments. In this regard, artists might even be called upon to take a more direct route and, considering the urgency of the issues, initiate actions by themselves to remedy the situation in the short and long run or set up activist platforms where the marginalized and concerned citizens can organize and defend their interests.[137]

All this, however, would be to miss what can be seen as one of the key targets of Rancière's critique of the suggested alternative strategies. Namely, the way in which they ultimately endorse an unequal, anti-emancipatory division of the sensible in which the marginalized are not assumed to possess the required sensibilities, capacities, time, infrastructure or means to understand, politicize and take action to change their unenviable situation by themselves. Such presumption of impotence - or, at least, of a lesser intelligence or agency - on the part of the oppressed can then be seen to be starkly contrasted with visions of the critical artist as an all-powerful agent uniquely placed and equipped to provide the marginalized with proper insight

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136 Rancière himself mentions "aestheticizing formalism" and "populist deference" as potential criticisms to Costa's work (2009a:80).

137 To be sure, the absence of any such representational and ethical aims in Costa's work is what constitutes its specifically *aesthetic* character. That is, the fact that it is done without any ulterior purpose or agenda, whether it is facilitating understanding of unjust processes, provoking indignation or satisfying urgent needs. Instead, it seems to be driven by a rather traditional fascination with beauty for its own sake, whether that of urban wastelands or the precarious lives of the marginalized.

into their deplorable circumstances or even with ready-made solutions to alleviate them.

The mentioned critical strategies hereby uncritically presuppose and reproduce dominant perceptions of the marginalized as helpless victims - which, sadly enough, are also often *self*-perceptions. This then serves as the basis for an interaction between critical artists and their 'subjects' that is unilateral, unequal, hierarchical, paternalistic and patronizing. One could thus say that what Rancière's alternative politics of art wants to avoid at all cost, is a situation in which engaged artists tell their subjects what to think or do, or even do it for them, acting on their behalf, and thereby underestimate and undermine the marginalized's powers of self-understanding and self-determination.

Costa's approach to the marginalized - at least, as Rancière conceives it - can then be understood as the exact counterpoint to that of traditional critical art. It serves as model of a truly emancipatory interaction between artist and her 'subjects' in which the latter are treated as the former's equals, as possessing and exercising the same aesthetic capacities. As already noted, such 'aesthetic equality' then further serves as index of a more general, *human* equality of intelligence and agency. The radical political aspect of such a position - and, in general, 'the political' in art - can then be understood in typically Rancièrean fashion in terms of a disruption of the dominant socio-sensible order through the presupposition of equality (see Chapter 1). In Costa's case, this consists of assisting the marginalized in contesting their "assigned place... in a given state of things" (2010:143).

VI. THE ART OF UNLOCKING CAPACITIES OF ACTION

I shall now draw out some of the implications of Rancière's reading of Costa's video with regards to art's specific role within a radical politics of equality and emancipation, as well as the way in which this role is to be fulfilled more concretely.

First, based on the above, we can understand why, in Rancière's view, Costa's work achieves that which he deems to be crucially lacking in traditional critical art practices: the nurturing of the oppressed's confidence in its powers to transform their circumstances (see Section II). Costa's focus on the "efforts [of the marginalized]... to recover a voice and a capacity to tell their own stories" (2010:151), as Rancière puts it, would do precisely this. In relation to another film by Costa, Rancière also speaks of an art that "us[es]... the sensory riches - the power of speech or vision - that can be extracted from the life and settings of these precarious existences and return[s]... them to their

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owners, making them available, like a song they enjoy, like a love letter whose words and sentences they can borrow for their own love lives" (2009a:81).[138]

One could thus characterize the artist's role in Rancière's alternative model of political art as essentially a facilitating one. She has to remind the excluded of their equal human capabilities of intelligence and creation or still, their "inherent powers of resistance" (2007a:260). A further function of emancipatory art is then to boost the self-confidence of the marginalized so they exercise these powers. The first operation, which one might characterize in terms of raising awareness - is clearly expressed by some of the verbs used by Rancière in relation to such capacities, such as to "mak[e] available", "return... to their owners" (2009a:81), "witness", "render visible" (*AD*55/78) and "pay... homage to" (2009a:82). A second set of verbs used to describe the artist's relation toward the inherent capabilities of the marginalized indicates the second, more active stance towards the latter. Think of verbs such as to "realize" (81), "set... in motion", "redefine" (2007a:259).

One way to summarize the key role and aim of Rancière's alternative politico-aesthetic practice would be to say that it is fundamentally geared toward *empowerment*. This with the proviso, however, that it is not a case of the artist offering something - say, powers of understanding or agency - to the marginalized that they lack. At most, his formulations seem to concede that the oppressed are not always sufficiently aware of, or have sufficient access to their equal capabilities. Hence the necessity for external intervention by the artist. Nevertheless, he does seem to hold such capacities to be always there and active, however minimally. It is up to the artist to get the oppressed to assert their human powers of intelligence and agency more consciously and confidently, to unlock these powers and act as a stimulus and amplifier. A fundamental criterion of truly emancipatory critical art for Rancière is thus "the type of capacity it sets in motion, [as well as]... the extent to which its nature is shareable or universalizable" (258).

Stated in this way, Rancière's model of emancipatory art could still be regarded as a variation on the traditional critical art paradigm instead of a resolute break with it. Only now, it is not a deeper understanding of unjust social processes that is considered to be the default gateway to unleashing the oppositional agency of the marginalized, but awareness of the fact that they *always already possess and practice such agency*. However, Rancière might argue that everything stands or falls by *the way in which* empowerment is attempted through art or rather, as we shall see, *not* attempted. To understand this, we have to further specify his claims to the fundamentally *aesthetic* nature of a truly liberating art. Because again, as I said in the case of Costa's work, it is the

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138 The work in question is entitled *Colossal Youth* (2006).

artist's aesthetic approach that is thought to be most capable of effecting genuine empowerment.

First, it is important to interpret Rancière's notion of aesthetic complicity in line with his concepts of aesthetic distance, separation and indifference covered earlier (Chapter 2, VIII). Even though the artist and his 'subject' are said to form an aesthetic community, they do so only by each individually practicing their respective aesthetic senses. In this sense, we can understand Rancière's general formula for Costa's approach, mentioned earlier, in terms of an exploration of "the potential of community entailed in separation itself". The community of artist and the marginalized is thus a paradoxical one, premised on its opposite: separation. It does not constitute a 'real' community with the artist, for example, joining the ranks of the marginalized and infusing the latter's struggles with her trademark creativity or, inversely, with the marginalized actively participating in the art work in a process of co-creation. Rather than such substantive communion of artistic and social actors, Rancière's aesthetic community is an abstract one, based on recognition and affirmation of the shared capacities that artists and their 'subjects' each exercise within their own domain. As Rancière puts it somewhere: it is about "the kinship between inventive acts of art and the multiplicity of inventions of the arts of doing and living that make up a shared world" (*AD*55) but, again, without this 'kinship' leading to a fusion of the two.

This 'community in separation' at the heart of Rancière's different politics of art will no doubt be interpreted by traditional critical artists as proof of its disengagement from society. For Rancière himself, on the contrary, it provides support for his claim that the type of art Costa represents, is "an art in which the form is not split off from the construction of a social relation" (2009a:81). No matter how formal, aesthetic or even aestheticist Costa's approach in *Vanda's Room* might be in the face of the dire circumstances of excluded communities, the work is said to relate to the latter precisely because of it. Because it allows for an interaction between artist and the marginalized based on that which matters most when it comes to emancipation: endorsement of human equality in terms of the power to comprehend and actively shape one's life.

As such, Rancière's different politics of art attempts emancipation in a rather indirect way, with art remaining art and doing what it traditionally does: extracting 'beauty' and pursuing aesthetic fascinations. This is a quite remarkable feature since, as we already saw (Chapter 2,VII), he simultaneously holds that by its inherent quality to "shake up the distribution of places and competences", art "blurs" or "displaces" its own borders (2010:149). He even goes as far as to identify modern artistic practice *with* the blurring of its borders. However, in light of his interpretation of Costa's work, as well as his critique of

ethical strands in political art, this is not to be taken as an injunction toward engaged artists to foray too far outside of the realm of traditional art practice. Rather the inverse holds, as Rancière for instance endorses "artistic practices that infiltrate the world of market and social relations and then *remain content* to be mere images on cibachrome, screens and monitors" (idem, emphasis mine).[139] Or when he states that "a film remains a film and a spectator remains a spectator" (151).

This conservative orientation of Rancière's conception of emancipatory art - still very much geared toward aesthetic beauty rather than liberation in any direct, literal sense - is expressed negatively in his claim that "art is emancipated and emancipating..., when... it *stops wanting to emancipate us*" (2007a:258, emphasis mine). He says something similar when, in reference to determinations of the political functions of art in terms of commenting on social injustices or representing excluded groups, he states that art "is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to those functions" (*AD*23/36). From such statements we can deduce that Rancière holds art's claims to achieving emancipation or being political to be conditional on desisting or abstaining from any such claims. As we already saw, this also constituted the specific, paradoxical efficacy of aesthetic art (see Chapter 2, VIII).

But while the ultimate aim of Rancière's different politics of art is to achieve emancipation - even if it goes about it in a paradoxical, roundabout way, one could say that it wants it by not wanting it - it shuns any claims to its efficacy in achieving it. This is another key determination of which we already encountered the general principle (in Chapter 2,VIII), namely, aesthetic art's refusal to anticipate its effects and the acceptance of its insufficiency in this regard (2010:149). In relation to Costa's work, for instance, Rancière emphasizes how he "makes a film in the awareness that it is only a film, one that will be scarcely be shown and whose effects in the theatres and outside are fairly unpredictable" (2009a:82). Apart from external matters of reception, however, he also attributes the uncertain social efficaciousness of art works to the latter's "inner division" (idem). As he puts it: "Cinema cannot be the equivalent of the love letter or music of the poor. It must split itself off; it must agree to be the surface on which an artist tries to cipher in new figures the experience of people relegated to the margins of economic circulation and social trajectories" (idem).

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139 Cibachrome is the more commonly used name for ilfochrome. It refers to a process frequently used in contemporary art to reproduce film transparencies on photographic paper.

Summarizing, we can thus say that when it comes to achieving emancipation and empowerment, Rancière's aesthetic form of critical art does so in an indirect way, definitely not as an explicit goal and without any claims to the probability of success.

VII. THE DISCREET CRITICALITY OF AESTHETIC ART

I want to end this overview of Rancière's propositions concerning an alternative, truly emancipatory politics of art by looking into one further recurrent theme that is worth noting. This is somewhat in line with his general dismissal of explicitly or literally political art practices mentioned earlier (Chapter 2, I). It concerns his recommendation toward today's political artists to stay clear of what he calls "more spectacular but hackneyed" (2010:150), "shopworn affect[s]" (2007a:259), as well as "the dominant imagery" (259). Instead, artists are asked to "explor[e]... the political resources of... more discreet affects" (261), to "produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations" (263).

As an example of such more discreet emotions, he mentions curiosity which he opposes to indignation as one that is more stereotypically provoked by critical art practices. Rancière's preference for the discreet can also be seen to apply to the content of art works. He for instance lauds art works dealing with heated socio-political issues for avoiding the usual emphasis on human drama or socio-economic and geopolitical contradictions, inversely focusing on its aesthetic, material dimension.[140]

This emphasis on the radical political potential of the discreet can be understood as a manifestation of Rancière's unrelenting, principled even, resistance against the status-quo in any form. The latter includes conventional leftist political art practices that, in their quest for attention and relevance, mostly resort to evoking all too ready affects (e.g. disgust, anger, etc.) and impose seemingly incontestable truths on their publics. From Rancière's perspective, such tactics must come across as unacceptable, as a crude form of manipulation in which the public's intelligence is insulted and which prevents the people from thinking and feeling for themselves. In this regard, political art practices that use such strategies are thought to be no better than standard forms of communication in the advertising and media industries or conventional politics, based as they are on the "authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the

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140 Key examples here are a documentary film by Chantal Ackerman (*De l'autre côté*, 2001) on the border between Mexico and the United States and a series of photographs by Sophie Ristelhueber (*WB*, 2005) on blocked roads and road blockades in Palestine's West Bank.

world" (258). Even if it is supposedly done in the name of emancipation of the people, it wholly defeats this purpose as it plays them for a fool.

Playing on the more discreet can then be seen as Rancière's alternative to such authoritarian and patronising interaction. It can be said to stimulate the recipients' self-activity and creativity, to "maintain... spaces of play" (263). Or, as he also expresses it, it creates a "lightening", "alleviation" and "some breathing room,... [by] loosen[ing] the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility, bodies within an estimation of their capacity, and possibility within the machine that makes the 'state of things' seem evident, unquestionable" (261).

Rancière's resistance to any type of imposition in political art (whether on the level of emotions or messages) can further be understood as in sync with one of the central ideas of his emancipatory pedagogy (1987/91). It concerns the fact that the 'master' emancipates "without giving lessons, without giving contents to [mettre de contenu à] this emancipation", as Michaud puts it succinctly (1997:430, own translation). In similar vein, one could say that Rancière's truly emancipatory art involves an *emancipation without content*; one geared, instead, to liberating sensibilities and capacities. In this sense, we can then also understand his emphasis on aesthetic *form*.

VIII. MODERATING RANCIÈRE'S ANTI-REPRESENTATIONALISM

We can begin our critical assessment of Rancière's reflections on contemporary political art by noting that its general tenet is somewhat out of character for a thinker of hybridity. We already saw (Chapter 3, I) that he identifies confusion as a central characteristic of art in the aesthetic regime. It is remarkable then that his core objections to both the traditional critical art model and its two main mutations centre on their mixing of different politico-aesthetic logics. All three formations are accused of playing a double game, of pretending to abide to one model of art's social efficacy while secretly relying on another. They are reproached for thus being hypocritical, dishonest and even for cheating. This dismissal of confusion further manifests itself in the puristic way in which he devises his alternative politics of art in exclusively aesthetic terms.

Both these general features of Rancière's thinking on contemporary political art can be understood as a result of his unambiguous normative commitment to the aesthetic regime of art. My general argument in this section and the next consists of two claims. First, I hold that a hygienic contrast between conventional and post-conventional forms of critical art and Rancière's alternative aesthetic politics is untenable. Second, I argue that it is

also not desirable to try and do so. At least, not if one wants to offer a versatile, robust and relevant conception of contemporary art's radical political power.

For starters, we already noted that Rancière's alternative practice of critical art is in fact not so distinct from its traditional versions as he considers it to be and is thus all but pure. This was most obvious in the case of Sala's work. But Costa's video as well - or, at least, Rancière's interpretation of it - can be understood according to critical art's core project of mobilization through awareness-raising. To be sure, both that which Rancière's emancipatory art raises awareness of and the way it goes about in doing it, is different from traditional critical art. As we saw, the key aim is to make the oppressed aware of their equal powers of intelligence and agency. And it does so paradoxically by not wanting to do this, adopting a more detached, aesthetic approach instead.

Still, even if hopes of self-empowerment through art are downplayed and dismissed for being incalculable, they need to be presupposed as being present nevertheless. Why else, one could wonder, does an artist like Costa choose run-down urban neighbourhoods and marginalized communities as 'subject matter' in the first place? Surely, such a choice is not made primarily based on their unique aesthetic qualities. There must also be a deep concern - perhaps even 'love', think of Rancière's reading of Costa's art videos as love letters addressed to the excluded - for their life situation, as well as related hopes of somehow aiding them in their struggles. This is not fundamentally changed by the fact that Rancière's different politics of art essentially promotes self-help and holds the only way for artists to contribute to this process to be dependent on giving up all hopes, ambitions and pretensions to making a useful contribution and pursue their aesthetic fascinations instead.

This somewhat relativizes a clear distinction and opposition between Rancière's alternative aesthetic politics and representational-critical models of awareness-raising in particular. Still, when it comes to attempting emancipation through art, the differences between the two can still be seen as quite fundamental, as I noted earlier. For one, it might be said that in Rancière's politics of art, the aesthetic is not suppressed as is the case in traditional critical art forms, where it is used in a subservient, merely instrumental way. Classificatory issues aside, Rancière's specific hybrid of representative and aesthetic political art models might thus still be found to be more emancipatory than traditional and post-traditional critical art configurations.

More fundamentally, however, Rancière can be criticized for his downplaying of the transformational political value of representational art strategies *per se*. In this regard, his theory might be vulnerable to similar critiques levelled at some of his contemporary radical philosophers'

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conceptualizations of art's political potential. John Roberts, reflecting on what he labels as the "new communist thinking", which includes thinkers such as Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, Felix Guattari and Jean-Luc Nancy, identifies a strong aversion to representation as a main, shared tenet of their views on art and politics (2009:365). He here also speaks of a "high-modernist commitment to non-representation or anti-representation" (idem). With this, he refers to the dismissal of forms of "representational objectification" in art, as well as "notions of the artistic subject... speaking to, and speaking on behalf of, the 'other'" (idem). According to Roberts, the said thinkers "take it as axiomatic that representational forms of petitioning, explication [and]... appellation, narrow or even destroy art as a space of resistance and democratic co-articulation and cooperation" (idem). This then leads to pleas for the "necessary dissolution" of representation in art and, inversely, prioritization of "the fluidity of reciprocal exchange", the "free flow of exchange of subjectivities" or still, "the production, release and exchange of singularity", holding the latter to be in itself "socially transformative" (366).

Roberts considers such a critical stance toward representation in art to be justified in certain respects.[141] What he finds problematic, however, is the "rejection of the idea that political practice lies in the production of a counter-symbolic archive that stands in contest with the capitalist sensorium" (idem). According to him, this leads to a "loss of knowledge derived from... [the] *corrective distance*... that results from those forms of knowledge that are produced from a theoretical encounter with the subject's objective place in the social totality" (365-6). In order to safeguard this knowledge, he emphasizes the "need to re-symbolize and re-historicize" (366).

More space would be required to fully articulate the specificities of Roberts' reading of the aesthetic theories of the radical philosophers in question. Still, it is not difficult to see how Rancière's political aesthetics, although notably absent from Roberts' account, is driven by similar anti-representationalist stances. Think, for instance, of his allergy toward art practices that speak, think, strategize or act in the Other's place in his critical overview of contemporary political art. We saw that this dismissal of representation and mediation is firmly rooted in his more general theory of equality and emancipation.

Further, one can understand Rancière's reading of Costa's video in terms of what Roberts theorizes as the new communist philosophers' central belief in the transformative effects of the exchange between subjective singularities. Indeed, the video's emancipatory value is situated in the way in which two

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141 Roberts finds it problematic, for instance, that "many representational practices claim a political identity for themselves that in reality does not exist" and emphasizes the need to "acknowledge 'who speaks' and to 'whom'" (2009:365).

singular processes are subtly drawn together. On the one hand, there is Costa's aesthetic rendering of the rare beauty contained in a situation of general decay and despair. On the other hand, the exceptional and unique way in which Vanda voids herself from immediate threats to self-preservation through an aesthetic preoccupation.[142] As we saw, there is no transfer of knowledge here from artist to the marginalized, nor are any attempts made by the former to prop up the latter's agency. There is only an evocation of the way in which each party, in his or her isolated, idiosyncratic activity, is kin to the other because of practicing shared human powers of self-determination.

How then should we evaluate the strong anti-representationalism of Rancière's radical aesthetics in light of Roberts' critiques? First, it forces us to reexamine one of the basic assumptions of his reflections on emancipatory art. As we saw, he adamantly holds that the main task of such art is not that of providing knowledge of systems of oppression because the oppressed themselves are already sufficiently knowledgeable. For sure, he is careful to nuance this claim somewhat by saying that "nobody is unaware of" (2009a: 76) it, that "it is very difficult to find anybody who is actually ignorant of such things" (2010:144) or still, that an explanation of it is "rarely" required by the oppressed (*AD*45/65). Still, he considers its absence to be so exceptional that providing knowledge of unjust social processes can be dismissed offhand as a legitimate task of political art.

One could say that for Rancière the political artist finds the marginalized in excellent shape. The latter are more or less completely enlightened about the mechanisms that structurally disadvantage them and they already possess the necessary capacities for resistance. All that is then required of the artist, is to 'remind' the marginalized that all this is the case - but again, only indirectly so. This is thought to be sufficient to unlock their capacities without, however, offering any guarantees of success.

On factual grounds, such an estimation might turn out to be far too optimistic. It can be seen as another manifestation of what Michaud calls Rancière's 'angelic' view of the marginalized (Chapter 1, IX). It might also be understood as a case of Rancière sticking to his key theoretical claim that presupposing equality is not only the surest way to bring it about, but also the truly emancipatory one. In this instance, it concerns the assumption of equal possession of the intelligence necessary to acquire insight into the conditions of one's subjection. In this regard, he might argue that even in exceptional cases in which knowledge is lacking, artists should still not take it upon themselves to help out. For Rancière, doing so inevitably introduces a hierarchical

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142 Earlier (Chapter 3, IV) we saw that it is a general feature of Rancière's work as a whole to focus on exceptional moments and figures, taking them to be exemplary.

pedagogical division between the artist and marginalized, engendering all kinds of anti-emancipatory effects. However, based on a more realistic estimation of the oppressed's insight into the mechanisms that keep them in their place, Rancière's position might be found to be too voluntaristic. It seems to be based on an inflated belief that by acting as if the oppressed have sufficient powers of self-understanding, one can 'will these into being'. The political productivity and feasibility of such an idealist stance is highly questionable.

Rancière's strategic overestimation of the people's capacities of understanding can thus be regarded as one of the bases for his critique of representation in political art. Another one might be his underestimation of the systematic efforts of the existing order to sabotage such self-understanding, which is my second point of critique. Such sabotage can be done through disinformation, distraction or forcing large sections of the population into permanent survival mode. Those living in the margins of society might well have equal powers of intelligence, but they are often systematically deprived of the means to actualize them. Consequently, it might be a gargantuan task for the marginalized to cut through all the layers of obfuscation, mystification and technocratic jargon created by the powers that be. To be sure, they mostly have a strong gut feeling about fundamental injustices at the heart of the existing order and also possess organic knowledge of its immediate manifestations. It is an entirely different thing, however, to obtain a systematic overview of the precise forces and mechanisms at play beyond one's first-hand experiences, as well as the interconnections with injustices suffered by other groups in society.

Thirdly, despite the reservations previously expressed, it may be granted that providing insight into the insidious workings of power or capital can have overwhelming and debilitating effects on the oppressed's belief in their powers to force radical change. As we saw, this is another key claim of Rancière's critique of knowledge provision as a proper task of critical art. But what about other representational tasks typically performed by traditional critical art? Rancière briefly lists such tasks, talking about critical art works that represent "conflicts and identities" of groups in society (*AD*23/36). He dismisses them, however, equally briefly as roles proper to the politics of aesthetics.

The tasks that are rejected perhaps comes closest to what Roberts refers to as the building of a "counter-symbolic archive" (2009:365) or "corpus of anti-capitalist imagery" (366). One can for instance think of interdisciplinary art projects focused on documenting radical struggles of the past in an attempt to counter either their total absence in official historical accounts or their ideological distortion.

By summarily rejecting such activities, I would argue that Rancière underappreciates the important ways in which past, present or even future

histories and images of anti-systemic resistance can act as a source of support, recognition and enjoyment for the oppressed in their daily struggles against injustices. To be sure, Rancière might detect in such counter-archival representations the beginnings of a new subjection. He might here see the danger of a 'protofascist' idolization of struggle heroes and movements as exceptional, supernatural entities that cause people to feel ill-equipped (in comparison) to fight their own battles. Still, such fears would not only be exaggerated, but also inconsistent with Rancière's overly positive view of the oppressed. As we saw, his thinking is based on an almost unconditional confidence in their powers of intelligence. It would then seem condescending for him to suppose that today's oppressed would uncritically consume such counter-histories and representations, taken them as gospel. Instead, it seems more in line with his own thinking to assume that the oppressed will use them in a pragmatic way as resources of inspiration and practical-historical knowledge for devising practices of resistance in current circumstances.

IX. NO PATHETIC IDENTIFICATIONS PLEASE!

A final, fourth point of criticism with regard to the anti-representationalist strand of Rancière's radical aesthetics concerns the link between knowledge and political action. It links up to Peter Hallward's criticism of what he perceives as Rancière's "downplaying" (2006:127) of "issues... bound up with... forms of knowledge, skill or mastery" (126). He considers this to be self-contradictory and self-undermining because such qualities are all the more required for the type of improvised, virtuosic, 'spontaneous' political action and artistic innovation advocated in both Rancière's accounts of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics (126-7). Yet, it is precisely such transfer of knowledge and skills that is prohibited by Rancière on the grounds that it again introduces unequal sensible divisions between artists and their 'subjects'. For instance, with the affirmation of the artist's position of mastery, thereby defeating the purposes of equality and emancipation. Against this, I would argue that foreclosing the need for, and legitimacy of such knowledge and skills transfers produces some profound asymmetries between artists and the marginalized of its own in Rancière's work.

As we saw, Rancière interprets Vanda's cleaning of the table in Costa's video as manifestation of her autonomy, as proof of her human equality, as well as the commonality between her and Costa as an artist. Still, it seems somewhat incredible to uphold the way in which Costa draws attention to all this in the form of an aesthetic homage as most effective in further activating Vanda's capacities for action. And neither does it prevent any hierarchies to creep into the relation between the two.

First, it seems more accurate to say that although Vanda's cleaning activity points to her possession and minimal application of the same creative human powers as Costa, these potentials are in rather different stages of actualization. It is quite a stretch to simply equate the two, as well as trust Costa's artistic 'love letter' to Vanda's aesthetic sensibilities to be sufficient for her to unlock them more consciously and fully, all by herself and without further mediation or aid from the artist.

This might be seen as an exemplary instance of what Hallward calls the inherently *individualist* nature of Rancière's notion of emancipation, as an "isolated process of intellectual self-emancipation" (2006:125-126). This then explains his anti-representationalism, with any form of social mediation being dismissed for being "irredeemably contaminated by mastery and the social 'weight' of domination" (126). In Vanda's case, this means that after all is said and done, she is basically left to fend for herself and liberate herself against all the odds and the vast machinery of exclusion and dispossession that confronts her on a daily basis. In this, she is 'supported' only by 'emancipatory' artists' rather non-committal declarations of love and aesthetic homages to her sensory equality.

Such minimal engagement might be judged to be both deeply unfair, as well as unconvincing with regard to its outcomes. Above all, it seems to be driven by an exaggerated fear of allowing relations of mastery and domination to disrupt the fragile appearance of equality between artists and their 'subjects'. However, as I would argue, this equality is in the end rather formal and flimsy, brushing over more substantive asymmetries between both parties in terms of really existing - i.e. not potential - knowledge, experience and skills.

In this sense, Costa's artistic declaration that 'we are all Vanda', so to speak, might be an instance of what Slavoj Žižek calls a false or "pathetic identification with the symptom" (1999:228). In this regard, the declaration of equivalence between a documentary art film made by a skilled, experienced and acclaimed artist on the one hand, and the cleaning obsession of a disempowered, isolated individual on the other, might be found to be disingenuous. It allows artists to maximally and unapologetically apply their own artistic powers and pursue their aesthetic fascinations in the reassurance that not only are the marginalized free to do so to the same degree within their specific life circumstances, but also that they help them in this regard. The somewhat outrageous suggestion here is that it would only take a conscious decision of Vanda to come up with inventive ways to emancipate herself from her deplorable life conditions and situation of systemic exclusion.

To try and tackle such differentials of power between artist and the marginalized and aid the latter to fully develop their equal powers, would necessitate an engagement of artists that is intensive, substantive and sustained

or 'durational' as it is called in contemporary art theory (O'Neill & Doherty 2011). At least, more so than allowed by Rancière's model of emancipatory art.

Based on the above, I think there is a strong case to be made for retaining representation and knowledge provision as key tasks for political art. Deep knowledge of the existing order among the oppressed cannot be self-evidently assumed and neither can the enabling circumstances to acquire it themselves. Also, the representation of histories and images of radical politics play a constructive role in devising contemporary oppositional strategies. Finally, it is essential for redressing knowledge and skills asymmetries between artists and the underprivileged that hamper full actualization of the latter's capacities of action.

All this, however, does not necessarily lead to a lesser appreciation of Rancière's key insights. On the contrary, it makes all the more valuable his dissections of the complex and often invisible ways in which traditional critical art practices reinforce anti-emancipatory sensory divisions. The question, rather, is whether the latter warrant a complete dismissal of representation as a legitimate task for contemporary radical political art practices. I, for my part, think that a more nuanced approach toward representation in political art practice is necessary. Its crucial role for achieving radical transformation must be acknowledged while, at the same time, remaining constantly vigilant to its possible anti-emancipatory forms and effects. This can, for instance, take the form of constant self-critique and experimentation with alternative models of co-learning and skills development. Rancière's own pedagogical models as set out in *The Ignorant School-Master* (1987/91) could here serve as key inspiration.

X. RANCIÈRE AS A CONSERVATIVE ART CRITIC

Rancière's rejection of representational politico-artistic strategies might thus in the end prove to be too harsh, unproductive and impoverishing in view of offering a radical political conception of art. I further want to argue that the same holds for his dismissal of ethical forms of contemporary political art, which one could also describe as highly heteronomous. My main, general criticisms here are that he maintains an unduly conservative stance toward the political value of such art practices and that in doing so, he goes against some of his own key claims concerning the nature of radical politics.

With regard to the latter, one can for instance think of his theorization and critique of the tendency of contemporary activist art practices to anticipate, mimic and even parody their efficacy in their desire to achieve change in real life. This, however, can be seen as an application of what his political theory presents as the 'properly political' strategy of 'acting as if' (see Chapter 1,VII).

Artists here embody and enact the change they want to see happen over and against the status-quo, being unfazed by the unlikelihood of having any actual success - or, at least, pretending to be so. The latter corresponds to the quality of impossibility that Rancière regards as a necessary property of properly political gestures to possess as they go against everything that is presented as feasible and self-evident by the dominant order. It is odd, then, that he reproaches ethical political art practices for making such very same impossible gestures or, inversely, for not being able to deliver on their claims to real-life efficacy and for finding ways to make these claims stick nonetheless by resorting to representational politico-aesthetic strategies.

However, the problem with Rancière's rejection of the radical political status of such anticipatory art practices - or, at best, his ambiguous stance in this regard - is not merely one of theoretical inconsistency. Also problematic is the way in which he dismisses as completely futile, attempts by contemporary artists to set up enclaves in society where experimentation can take place with different political, social or economic models, however marginally, precariously and even fictitiously.

To be sure, Rancière might agree with the above conceptualizaton of ethical art practices in terms of his theory of radical politics. He might, however, conclude from this that they are therefore to be classified as instances of the aesthetics of politics rather than the politics of aesthetics.[143] At issue here is something that has been noted at several places in this study (in this chapter, for instance, in Section VI). It concerns Rancière's determination of modern art's radical politicity in terms of a disruption of existing sensible and capacitive divisions. I have argued that this is never taken so far as to lead to the endorsement of artistic practices that radically challenge established views of the place and function of art and foray deep into non-artistic territories, whether it is that of transformational politics, social activism or the media, as many contemporary political art practices do. On the contrary even, although at times indecisive about the latter's radical status, when the push comes to the shove, he seems to be dismissive of it.

This can be seen as a manifestation of a more general feature of Rancière's radical aesthetics. Despite emphasis on the fluid and immanent intersections between art and politics in the modern era, he ultimately upholds a rather clean and clear border between art, no matter how political, and politics, no matter how 'aesthetic'. His reflections on contemporary political

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143 As such, the issue at hand could be downplayed as a merely classificatory one that is ultimately irrelevant to judging the radical political value of contemporary ethical art practices. Still, is one of Rancière's key general claims not that issues concerning classifications are to be taken as properly political ones - even defining radical politics' essence - and are thus to be taken as deadly serious?

art practices only seem to confirm this. We saw (in Section VI) that, all in all, he regards art and politics to be rather distinct practices that need to remain so if they want to stay true to, and maximize their inherent political potential. In this regard, we can say that Rancière's political aesthetics is a typical case of 'two steps forward, one step back'. Having deterritorialized art with his notion of the aesthetic regime, he reterritorializes it in subsequent articulations.

At times, as in the case of his critique of contemporary ethical practices, this places Rancière in an unlikely, policing role, calling these practices to order for disregarding the specific nature and limitations of the politics of aesthetics. In doing so, he can be seen to join the chorus of conservative critics of contemporary art who love to bemoan the fact that today's socially engaged artists, like lost sheep, are fundamentally confused about their proper role and place in society. This surely makes for strange bedfellows. [144]

The stereotypical complaints of such critics are usually two-fold. On the one hand, ethical-heteronomous art practices are blamed for having nothing to do with art anymore because they lack any aesthetic qualities. And indeed, which lover of the arts hasn't ever felt somewhat at a loss when entering a contemporary art institution, having thought to have mistakenly walked into a political rally, scientific conference, networking event or experimental agricultural project and having wondered where, if any, the art is in all this? The first standard reproach is thus that heteronomous art practices are in fact no longer art or are 'bad art', at the very most.

A second standard criticism then goes further and argues that such 'art' practices are also 'bad' politics, science, activism or whatever field they have claimed for themselves, offering little innovation and merely replicating outdated models. In the case of art taking on explicitly political functions, for instance, it is alleged that they mostly uncritically rehash leftist or even communist political ideas and practices that have been discredited decades ago.

Such critical diagnoses are mostly followed by calls for introspection on the 'true' role and surplus-value of art for society. Conservative critics then usually hark back to romantic conceptions of the artist as an eccentric individual who uninhibitedly lives out her idiosyncratic aesthetic fascinations in disregard for dominant opinions, topical political issues or economic value. It is held that only by doing this, artists can make a true contribution to society, namely, to enable and inspire society to look at itself and the world in new and

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144 In the following, I loosely base my account of conservative criticisms of contemporary ethical-heteronomous art practices on a recent opinion piece by Dutch art critic Hans den Hartog Jager entitled "Socially engaged artists: the world isn't listening" (2014, my translation) that caused quite a furore in the art world in the Netherlands. See also Pauwels 2015.

fresh ways. Art is thus told to abstain from meddling in political processes, scientific debates or economic processes because it has no business there and hereby reneges on its proper social function.

In similar vein, the bottom-line of Rancière's radical aesthetics is that artists should intervene on the level that is most proper to them: that of the forms of sensible experience. It is claimed they can make a type of difference there that they can never achieve within the domain of conventional politics, for instance. Consequently, artists are discouraged from intervening on this level.

XI. A CONFUSED CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ART PRACTICE? BRING IT ON!

One of the main problems with the above critiques is that they uncritically endorse the de facto division of labour between art and other life activities as it has increasingly been consolidated from the beginning of the modern era onward (see Chapter 2, III and Chapter 5, II). They present as a universal ideal what has been - and still is - in fact a raw historical deal for modern art, namely, the way its poetic freedoms came at the unacceptably heavy price of structural social irrelevance. Locked up in an iron cage of unlimited artistic experimentation, artists were only allowed to look on while other societal actors shaped the 'real' engines of modern societies - politics, the economy, science - often with disastrous and impoverishing results.

Moreover, by propagating art's enforced marginality as its proper, invariant function, critics buy into the technocratic logic behind this mostly unspoken pact. This concerns the belief that society is best off when it is carved up in different domains, each representing a specific set of human needs, with corresponding experts whose sole role is to find optimal ways to satisfy these needs. Within such a fragmented view of life, artists that 'forsake' their 'proper' expertise and 'arrogate' to themselves other fields must indeed appear as hopelessly confused. They will also be held to be doomed to redundancy by rendering second-rate 'services' in already saturated 'markets'.

However, if one rightly recognizes the wholesale alienation and impoverishment of human life caused by such a compartmentalized view on life, the anomalous status of ethical-heteronomous art practices will be appreciated positively. It can be seen to offer much needed resistance to the deeply alienating effects of such a societal model. In this regard, they follow a long, historical line of artists and art movements that have resisted their enforced specialization and marginalization, as well as the partitioning of modern life in general - even if it mostly concerned a minority. However arrogant, misplaced, amateur or naive the excursions of contemporary

engaged artists in oppositional politics or humanitarian activism might seem to their critics, - but again: within which alienated model of society? - their radical political value has to be situated in their defiance to being constrained to, and fitted with a specific expertise - and a marginal, superfluous one for that - in the modern division of capacities. So again, the output or direct use value of ethical-heteronomous art practices for society might indeed be low to non-existent - but again: who decided these criteria to be all-important in the first place? Their liberating power, rather, lies in serving as living proof that one doesn't have to abide by party politics, amass economic power or obey positivistic scientific protocols to contribute meaningfully to addressing the many urgent challenges of contemporary, global societies.

Art is here no longer satisfied to be a mere supplement to modern, alienated life, burdened with the impossible and ungrateful task of making this life somewhat bearable and meaningful. On the contrary, artists fashion themselves as active agents who tackle urgent societal issues in unconventional, refreshing and fearless fashion, averse to the usual motivations of electoral success, profit maximization or media coverage.

To be sure, contemporary artists' transgressions of their traditional roles and adoption of functions typically performed by other social actors is not to be taken as *in itself* radical politically. They may hereby merely exchange one constrained identity - that of the artist - with another - that of the politician, ideologue, humanitarian, journalist, etc. - and thus offer more of the same. The crucial factor is the degree in which they radically question and redefine accepted notions of politics, economics or science, as well as tear down the solidified borders between these spheres, instead of conforming to them.

In Rancière's critical account of contemporary political art, the radical political possibilities and qualities of such art practices go mostly unnoticed and unappreciated. A useful contrast to this, is Grant Kester's theoretical and historical account of a specific, contemporary type of ethical-heteronomous art, which he labels as "conversational" and "dialogic" art (2004). This refers to art practices aimed at facilitating discussion of social and cultural issues through process-based art works, mostly outside the immediate realm of art institutions. A key example mentioned by Kester is a project by artists that attempts to break the deadlock surrounding drug-addicted, homeless women in a city and come up with fresh approaches and solutions. One of the most important initiatives was the organisation of boat trips with different stakeholders on an adjacent lake, during which discussions took place on key aspects of the problems. Another exemplary art project established a platform

for people of colour to address their specific problems and the stereotypes to which they are commonly subjected, as well as to craft their own identities.[145]

Kester still identifies modern aesthetics - and its central belief in "the ways in which aesthetic experience can challenge conventional perceptions... and systems of knowledge" (3) - as the "relevant legacy" of such art works. According to him, however, this tradition can be practiced in ways other than through conventional, object-oriented art practices, especially by ones that organize "collaborative encounters and conversations" (1) as the mentioned art works do. One of his basic claims is that conversational art processes, although seemingly lacking any artistic or aesthetic qualities, have to be conceived as "itself a creative act... in which... traditional art materials [are]... replaced by 'sociopolitical relationships'" (3). As he also puts it, it concerns "works that define *dialogue itself* as fundamentally aesthetic" (13, emphasis mine).

Again, it is important to stress how it here not merely concerns art practices that give up their status as art by adopting existing political, cultural or humanitarian procedures. Decisive for their radical political value is the degree in which they are able to invent new models of political or cross-cultural interaction, for instance. Their continued allegiance to notions of the aesthetic should be understood in the same way, i.e. in its broad conception as offering a specific experience in which established ways of seeing and doing are radically questioned. As Kester says of the conversations set up by artists: "It is reframed as an active generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict" (8). As such, despite his affirmation of the strongly heteronomous tendencies of conversational art practices, Kester still regards these to constitute "a specific form of art practice with its own characteristics and effects" (11).

On the one hand, Kester thus holds on to the aesthetic avant-garde's mission to disrupt habitual ways of perceiving the world. This can also be seen as central to Rancière's radical aesthetics. Think for instance of his general definition of the politics of aesthetics in the modern era in terms of the suspension and disruption of dominant modes of sensibility (see Chapter 2, III). On the other hand, however, Kester does so without endorsing the dominant way in which this mission has been given shape in sensory objects or experiences throughout the history of modern art. Instead, he allows for

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145 The works concerned are (respectively) *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*, by Wochenklausur (an Austrian arts collective) in Zürich, Switzerland (1994-5) and *The Roof is on Fire*, a performance with 220 teenagers, by Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson, in Oakland, California, United States (1994).

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heteronomous art practices to achieve not only the same radical effects, but even more effectively so.

Considering Rancière's critique of contemporary ethical art practices, this will surely be a bridge too far for him. Out of what seems to be an outdated allegiance to an aestheticist notion of art's politicity, he seems to restrict art's power to disrupt sensible divisions to the sensory realm. In this regard, I agree with Gail Day's verdict on Rancière's key theorems concerning art's politics. She considers them to be "utterly out of kilter with those currents in recent art that would seek to exceed their accepted place of fiddling with sensoria while the world burns" (2009:402-3). To this, we might add that his criticisms of ethical-heteronomous art practices are also 'out of kilter' with some of the core themes of his own political theory, as I argued earlier. Rancière thus *both* refuses to regard contemporary ethical-heteronomous art practices as instances of the politics of aesthetics *and* overlooks them as applications of his own notion of radical politics.

In view of Kester's account, however, one can ask why such practices should be classified as instances of *either* the aesthetics of politics *or* politics of aesthetics, as Rancière seems to insist. Why can't they be *both and neither*, to use a typical Rancièrean logical figure? Why can't they be a hybrid between the two? That is, a confused, borderline formation with its own logic of political radicalness and social efficacy.[146] Rancière's doctrinaire stance in this regard is all the more unfortunate because both his theorizations of the aesthetics of politics - for instance, with its sensitivity to who speaks, how, where, etc. (see Chapter 1, VI) - and politics of aesthetics can actually contribute much to further articulating the political value of contemporary ethical art practices, as well as to developing more advanced models.

In conclusion, one can thus say that, ultimately, there is something too prim and proper about Rancière's theorization of the radical political dimension of art. Although somewhat odd for a thinker that is often regarded as an anti-philosopher, this seems to stem from a too respectful and orthodox interpretation of the holy cows of philosophical aesthetics. This comes at the price of a theory of art and politics that is too inflexible, one-dimensional and reductive to appropriately appreciate and conceptualize the radical transformational power of contemporary socially engaged art practices.

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146 With regard to similar contemporary art practices, Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga have argued that "they demand complex forms of judgment (both aesthetic and ethical, political and practical) and schemes of evaluation that go beyond the disciplinary framework that even a sophisticated elaboration such as Ranciere's still preserves" (2009:28).

**Conclusion:** Did somebody want to reaffirm the alliance between art and radical politics?

In conclusion, I shall mainly summarize the study's most important points of critique with regards to what I identified as the three central components of Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics. After this, I shall offer some final remarks as to how his project of radical aesthetics is to be assessed, especially with regards to its ambition to offer a more productive conceptual framework for radical political art practice in today's conditions.

I devoted the first three chapters of this study to the explication and critical assessment of what is no doubt Rancière's most fundamental theoretical move of both his political and aesthetic theory. This concerns the central role awarded to Kantian and Schillerian notions of aesthetics in both his conceptions of an aesthetics proper to politics and a politics inherent to aesthetics.

(i) In case of his political thinking, I showed how Rancière conceptualizes the foundational ordering mechanisms of societies, as well as radical political practices of contestation in strongly aesthetic, Kantian terms. With regards to the first, I pointed out how his key concept of the division of the sensible implies a specific metapolitical theory of societies and how this is odd considering his criticisms of such theories, its Marxian versions in particular. I also questioned the way in which this concept holds the sensible register to be the primary locus of societal division.

This led to a mixed evaluation of Rancière's theory of the aesthetics of politics. On the one hand, Rancière's notion of sensible division offers a valuable contribution to understanding social inequality and political oppression by identifying the ways in which they establish and maintain

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themselves at a sensory level. On the other hand, however, to posit the sensible as most fundamental dimension of social injustice and inequality might lead to aesthetic reductionism. I held this to be the result of Rancière's attempts at conceptualizing politics in post-Marxian terms, i.e. beyond political-economic approaches that have often been equally reductionist. Against such monolithic, single-cause explanations of society's fundamental structuring mechanisms, I proposed to treat political-aesthetic and political-economic processes of division as intricately entangled, each determined by and determining the other.

I also took issue with one of the consequences of Rancière's predominantly aesthetic theorization of the root mechanisms of social inequality and oppression: his conceptualization of radical politics as primarily a struggle for sensory equality. I reproached him for hereby holding rather idealistic views on radical social transformation, neglecting the importance of addressing socio-economic inequalities. On the positive side, I held Rancière's aestheticized notion of radical political contestation to point to an important, oft neglected frontline of struggles for equality, i.e. that of sensory divisions. I argued, however, that it is overreaching to present it as the primary frontline and, further, that it cannot be disconnected from struggles against other sources of division, such as those produced by modes of production. Instead, I pleaded for the integration of struggles for sensory equality in a multi-pronged offensive against multiple operators of oppression.

(ii) I presented my critical assessment of Rancière's theory of the politics of aesthetics in Chapter Three, after my exposition of it in Chapter Two. I first pointed to a methodological weakness of Rancière's theorization of the notion of the aesthetic. This concerned its one-dimensionally redemptive approach, intent mainly on identifying and affirming the radical political dimension of aesthetic experience in the work of Kant and Schiller. I suggested that this specific approach might be explained by Rancière's desire to counteract so-called 'vulgar', ideology-critical or anti-aesthetic readings of philosophical aesthetics aimed at unmasking its class underpinnings. We saw that Bourdieu's sociology of art is singled out by Rancière as main protagonist of such an approach.

I argued that although such theories have been quite widespread among the Left, its dominance should not be overestimated. I showed that within the tradition of cultural materialism, there has been an equally strong tradition of highly dialectical accounts of aesthetics that combine both ideology-critical and affirmative-redemptive strategies. I mainly referred to the work of Eagleton and Jameson. I reproached Rancière for neglecting to engage with such more complex Marxian approaches to art and aesthetics. I argued that this made his unreservedly positive reading of Idealist notions of aesthetics

unconvincing as it fails to account for the latter's contradictory political aspects and functions. For the same reason, I argued that Rancière's account risks becoming ideological, eulogistic even.

I also specified some of the substantive dangers resulting from the limitations of Rancière's approach. I did so by looking at one of the most powerful critical accounts - that of Beech and Roberts - of recent philosophical projects that have attempted to reclaim traditional philosophical aesthetics for progressive political purposes, as Rancière also does. I thereby corrected his self-positioning in terms of a lone voice in a predominantly anti-aesthetic contemporary theoretical wilderness. I found Rancière's political aesthetics to be vulnerable to key contentions levelled at similar, neo-aestheticist Leftist theories. It mainly concerned a neglect of the way in which philosophical aesthetics constitutively and inherently introduces hierarchical divisions on the level of sensory experience that fulfil an instrumental role in the struggle for hegemony by the ruling classes. I found this to seriously undermine Rancière's euphemistic conceptualization of aesthetics as the model of a radical suspension of sensory systems of division and inequality.

Finally, this problematization of the inherent politics of aesthetics allowed me to level another criticism at Rancière's theory of the aesthetics of politics. I did so in relation to his key historical instance of such aesthetic politics: i.e. working class appropriations of bourgeois aesthetics in the 19th Century. While Rancière holds the latter to function as demonstrations by workers of their equality to their bourgeois 'masters', I argued that, in doing so, workers concede too much to their class enemies. They allow the latter to dictate the terms of equality - e.g. that of disinterested aesthetic experience and production - terms, moreover, that serve ruling class interests and are inherently biased against working class experience.

I took the account by Beech and Roberts of Dadaism to point to artistic strategies that are more aggressive in challenging the dominant rules of the aesthetic 'game' and in sabotaging the underlying power differentials. Although it concerned mainly strategies of subtraction and negation, they do prepare the ground for a fundamental change of core aesthetic principles and thus for a 'game changing' politics of aesthetics. I also pointed to aspects of Rancière's thinking where he himself seems to level a similar criticism as mine to aesthetico-political strategies of appropriation without, however, letting go of his unduly affirmative reading of Idealist accounts of aesthetics.

(iii) Chapter Four and Five examined a second key component of Rancière's theory of aesthetics and politics: his theorization of autonomous and heteronomous strands of aesthetic politics. This included his specific reading of the latter's historical manifestations and developments in the modern era.

I first demonstrated that Rancière's proposed model of autonomous and heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics follows a similar conceptual logic as that of 'third way' formations in contemporary politics. I contended that it is to be criticized on this basis because it results in a conception of art's politics with several problematic, restrictive features. These included a strong bias against radicalism, an unwarranted and somewhat outdated allegiance to art's autonomy and - inversely - an overly cautious assessment of the transformational potential of heteronomous art forms. I also argued that Rancière takes on board some of the tragic conclusions regarding the radical political possibilities of autonomous and heteronomous art forms of his key predecessors (mainly Adorno and Bürger).

Against this, I held that by capping radicalism in art - and, with it, revolutionary enthusiasm and passion - one might eliminate its political potential altogether. I also argued in favour of the higher pertinence of heteronomous political-artistic strategies in light of the mass engagement of contemporary artists in new radical social movements. Based on the latter, I also pointed to the limitations of the predominantly tragic, late-twentieth century conceptual frameworks of art's transformative potential for an assessment of the potential of contemporary politicized art practices to contribute to radical societal change within our present-day context.

All this led me to be rather sceptical of Rancière's self-declared attempts at countering what he calls the contemporary post-utopian consensus on aesthetics, with its severing of the link between radical art and politics. Ultimately, his theory seemed to offer yet another variation of it, although one that is perhaps slightly more operational. As a counterpoint, I referred to a conceptualization of autonomous and heteronomous components of political art practice where they not so much act as each other's safety-valves, each protecting the other from radically asserting itself. Instead, autonomous and heteronomous artistic tendencies are engaged in an agonistic competition that enables artists to strongly impact on experiments with new organisational forms within contemporary radical social movements.

Apart from these criticisms of the conceptual model used by Rancière to think the relation between art's autonomy and heteronomy, I also problematized some of his main historical claims regarding the main strands of aesthetic politics in the modern era. My critique also concerned what I called Rancière's regime theory of art.

I objected mainly to the way in which Rancière presents his own historical account as superior to what he considers to be the predominantly historicist and teleological accounts of artistic modernism and postmodernism. His key claim is that his account of art in terms of three major regimes is less restrictive with regards to thinking the historical

possibilities of novel aesthetico-political formations. I argued that there is nonetheless a strong sense in which such possibilities are predetermined from the beginning in the aesthetic regime of art, being presented as mere historical actualizations and variations of an unchanging set of original determinations. I, for instance, showed that Rancière's interpretations of recent, allegedly novel forms of aesthetic politics mostly end up affirming the same fundamental settings of the aesthetic regime and hereby enact a certain historical closure for radically different politics of art.

I also argued that despite Rancière's tolerance for 'anachronistic' manifestations of the regimes of art, there is a strong normative commitment to the aesthetic regime which is regarded as counterpart of modern egalitarian politics. I thus held his historical account of art's politics to be based on a certain notion of historical progress which runs counter to his opposition to linear, teleological accounts of modern art. Finally, I argued that for the above reasons, Rancière can be seen to defend the status-quo with regard to the limitations of art's political potential by holding its determination in the aesthetic regime to be the highest achievable.

Against this, I proposed to disregard Rancière's idealization of the aesthetic regime as quasi-horizon of art's radical politics and, instead, to treat it as merely one, contingent and all but ultimate framework for conceiving of art's radical political potential - which is actually more in line with Rancière's own radically historical approach. This should then allow for more free experimentation with art's transformational powers.

(iv) A third important component of Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics critically examined in this study (in Chapter Six) concerns his critical analyses of dominant political art formations in the recent period (from the Sixties onward) which he also refers to as 'critical art'. This also includes his own suggestions of an alternative, truly liberating contemporary art practice.

I first noted that Rancière's application of the three different fundamental politico-aesthetic logics - i.e. ethical, representational and aesthetic - both in his critique of recent critical art practices and his presentation of an alternative practice is driven by a strong drive toward purity and, inversely, a rejection of hybrid formations. The major contemporary strands of critical art are all dismissed because of their mixing of aesthetic, representational and ethical dispositives, hereby suggesting that they should be disaggregated. Inversely, Rancière's different politics of art is devised as a solely aesthetic configuration.

I argued that even in the case of his alternative aesthetic politics of art, such purity cannot be maintained because it also contains representational elements. More fundamentally, I argued that such aesthetic purity should also not be upheld as a regulative ideal if one is to come up with a robust and versatile conception of radical art. My critique here consisted mainly of a

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defence of the transformational function of representational and ethical approaches in contemporary political art, against their outright rejection by Rancière.

In case of representation-oriented political art forms, I argued that one of critical art's key traditional aims of providing deep insight into the workings of the existing order to the oppressed is more crucial than Rancière holds it to be. Such knowledge cannot be self-evidently assumed and neither can the enabling circumstances for the people to acquire it easily themselves. Also, representations of past emancipatory struggles by art through the construction of counter-archives can play a constructive role in people's confidence and abilities to devise oppositional strategies in their own, current circumstances. Finally, representational strategies are essential for redressing knowledge and skills asymmetries between artists and the underprivileged and allow the latter to fully actualize their capacities of action.

I also defended the radical political potential of ethical art practices which can also be described as highly heteronomous forms of aesthetic politics - to use the terms of the second key component of Rancière's work. I first argued that Rancière strangely criticizes the latter for practicing a similar type of performative politics that he considers to be properly political in his political thinking.

I also noted a further inconsistency in Rancière's conceptualization of art's politics. On the one hand, he considers it to be a key characteristic of art in the aesthetic regime to disrupt all strict, hierarchical divisions between ways of feeling, speaking and doing, including those inherent to the field of art itself. On the other hand, he never takes this disruption to go so far as to radically challenge established views of the place and role of art and support art practices that foray deep into extra-artistic territories such as the spheres of activism, humanitarianism and the media, to name but a few. In this regard, I identified a conservative reflex in Rancière's conceptions of art's inherent politics, with him ultimately favouring art practices that in a modest, 'realist' way are content to be 'nothing more' than art, despite their political pretensions.

In contrast, I located the radical potential of today's highly heteronomous art practices precisely in their rejection of the marginal and harmless place awarded to art in the modern era, as well as of the general, compartmentalized and expertocratic views on social organisation that are the cause of much alienation. Importantly, however, I argued that for artists to play such a role in their heteronomous pursuits, they must radically question and redefine established notions of transformational politics, activism or journalism, instead of merely conforming to their existing, ossified forms. I

took the work of Kester on conversational art practices as an exemplary instance of such radically heteronomous conception of art practice.

Based on the above, I can now offer a general assessment of Rancière's radical aesthetics, especially with regards to its aim to open up new avenues for art's politicization in the current era. Everything considered, this aim seems to be hampered by a too generous, positive reading of core concepts of some of the founding fathers of modern aesthetics, especially that of the autonomy characteristic of aesthetic experience. To be sure, Rancière takes aesthetic autonomy not simply to be that of art in the strict sense but more broadly as that of a specific, liberating mode of experience and form of life. Still, I have demonstrated at different places in my study that at crucial moments in his work, he does interpret aesthetic autonomy in rather narrow, even conservative terms.

Rancière's radical aesthetics pays a high price for this. It makes it inadequate to conceptualize the transformational political potential of today's radicalized art practices that interpret and apply aesthetics in the broadest possible, heteronomous terms, if it not rejects it downright. That his work is nevertheless popular among contemporary politicized artists and theorists should then perhaps be attributed more to his persistent defence of notions of radical politics since the 1960s, as well as the radical tone or style of his thinking. That is, more so than to his specific theoretical propositions concerning the link between art and radical politics.[147]

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147 In this regard, Stewart Martin contends that apart from a certain "moral resoluteness", Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics offers little of value to artists involved in contemporary political struggles (2005:44).

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