

*The Politics of Aesthetics*. By JACQUES RANCIÈRE, trans. Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum. 2004. pp. 126 £14.99 (pbk).

IN CERTAIN circles Jacques Rancière is probably still best known for his association with the scientific Marxism of Louis Althusser. Along with Pierre Macherey, Roger Establet, and Étienne Balibar, Rancière contributed to Althusser's 1965 seminar on Marx's late work that resulted in the volume *Lire le capital* (1968). In the wake of the events of May 1968 in Paris, Rancière took his distance from Althusser, busied himself with radical and practical politics, and set about producing a trenchant critique of Althusserian Marxism (*La Leçon d'Althusser*, 1974). He also turned to the archives, temporarily eschewing philosophical abstractions for historical enquiry into the actual practices and desires of workers (resulting in works such as *La Nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier*, 1981, and *Le Maître ignorant: cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*, 1987). In more recent years, however, he has turned his attention to the study of literature, film, and questions of aesthetics. What is this trajectory, then, if not a gradual turning away from an 'ultra-leftism' to finding solace in works of poetry and the contemplation of beauty? But what if this story followed another path; what if the long road to aesthetics was actually a result of a radicalism fashioned in the aftermath of May '68—a radicalism that rejected the relative conservatism of scientific Marxism? This more intriguing path might

be the one to follow if you want to engage in Rancière's aesthetic theory at its most challenging and unorthodox.

This small volume, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, presents Rancière's aesthetic thinking in truncated form. It comprises two interviews with Rancière; an afterword by Slavoj Žižek; a preface and introduction by Gabriel Rockhill; and two appendices—a glossary of technical terms, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. While the interviews are thoroughly engaging, it is the two appendices that hold out most promise. The glossary, which also includes the rudiments of a concordance that allows ideas to be traced throughout various works, is an excellent introduction to the complexity and originality of Rancière's thought, while the bibliography shows just how much of his work is available in English, albeit scattered throughout a variety of often hard-to-find journals. This, then, is not an 'aesthetic theory', a totalizing monument of thought, but a great place to start getting to grips with what Žižek calls (in a reference to two of Rancière's earlier works) 'the lesson of Rancière'. So what is this lesson?

Rancière's conception of aesthetics as a field of enquiry and as a field of phenomena is both elegant and profound. Rather than seeing aesthetics as riding the coat-tails of art objects, a mode of enquiry seeking to understand and explain its host (the art object), Rancière designates aesthetics as the entire 'distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*). 'The sensible' here needs to be understood not as reason or common sense, but as both perception and what is perceived and perceivable. It is the realm of the senses and the realm of the sensed. The question of the autonomy, or relative autonomy, of art is simply a moot point: aesthetics is ontologically social. The 'distribution of the sensible', as the glossary informs us, is the order 'that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing modes of perception within which these are inscribed' (p. 85). Aesthetics, in this definition, is society and culture seen from a formalist point of view.

It understands actions, silences, thoughts, dreams, perceptions, enunciations, and so on, not in terms of a social content that could be judged as relatively good or bad, but rather as the production of formal arrangements and forms of sense distribution that are at heart simultaneously aesthetic and political. Such is the imbrication of these two terms that each holds the key to other: the political is always aesthetic because politics is only efficacious as a formal arrangement of social agents, institutions, and possibilities; aesthetic forms are always political because they are never anything less than the arrangement and distribution of forms of perception that are ultimately social and political. If Rancière prioritizes aesthetics over politics it is only because his understanding of aesthetics is as a determinant that produces the political: aesthetics is 'the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience' (p. 13). In other words, aesthetics is the condition of possibility of politics and society. Not a minor point for the future of aesthetic thought.

The pay-off for treating aesthetics as the 'distribution of the sensible' is, I think, enormous. For one thing it immediately renders obsolete questions of the artist's commitment: for instance, the fact that Flaubert held aristocratic aspirations, and held on to an 'art-for-art's sake' ideology is irrelevant in the face of the democratic distribution of perception that his novels perform. In this way Flaubert is part of an aesthetic revolution that institutes a new regime of art, a revolution that would allow film and photography a place as art because art had already recognized 'an inherent splendour to the insignificant' (something that film and photography were uniquely placed to capitalize on). Here again Rancière brilliantly turns established wisdom on its head: questions of social and cultural determinism versus technological determination, for instance, give way to aesthetic determinism because aesthetics is revealed as the base *below* the social

base. Interestingly such a perspective does not dissolve the specificity of the artwork into mere examples for a sociology of culture. Rather the artwork allows privileged access (an access gained only through close attention to the specificity of the artwork) to the 'distribution of the sensible' and hence to the potential and actuality of the social. In this way artworks are a crucial resource for thinking the social and the political: and because they are uniquely poised to *address* the 'distribution of the sensible' (the aesthetic terrain) they are our most vital meta-aesthetic corpus.

There is no space here to pursue a detailed account of Rancière's contribution to aesthetics, but it is worth noting that potentially it could allow us to rethink the periodization of art movements in relation to wider social and cultural forms; to reconceptualize avant-gardism; and to rekindle a social urgency to questions of aesthetics. Rancière's work has yet to impact fully on Anglophone aesthetic thinking. If it had, I think that the constant noisy drone of the 'death of aesthetics' could be lowered to a whisper.

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