

AESTHETIC REGIME'S OCCUPATION OF REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT *This article explores the relationship between aesthetics and representation in Jacques Rancière's theory. According to the author, representation is simultaneously present and prohibited in modern aesthetics. It appears as a parasite or an intruder in artistic production. Rancière asks: under what conditions is representation prohibited and what happens when art does not represent? The central axis in the analysis explores the consequences of this configuration, with emphasis on politics. According to Rancière, the concept of distribution of the sensible invariably implies a regime of life and, therefore, some sort of politics. Hence, aesthetics is not limited to arts, reaching life as a whole. The relationship between aesthetics and representation necessarily implies a mode of life where representation becomes impossible in all senses.*

Keywords *Aesthetics, Representation, Politics.*

RESUMO *Esse artigo trata da relação entre a estética e a representação na teoria de Jacques Rancière. Segundo o autor, a representação é simultaneamente presente e proibida na estética moderna. Ela aparece como um parasita ou um intruso na produção artística. Rancière pergunta: sob quais condições a representação se torna proibida e o que significa a arte não representar? O eixo central da análise explora quais as consequências dessa configuração, com destaque para a política. Segundo Rancière, o conceito de partilha do sensível implica invariavelmente um regime de vida e, portanto, alguma forma de política. Sendo assim, a estética não se limita à arte, mas atinge a vida em seu sentido*

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pleno. A relação entre estética e representação implica necessariamente um modo de vida no qual a representação se torna impossível em todos os sentidos.

Palavras-chave *Estética, Representação, Política.*

Introduction

This article explores Rancière's analysis of what he calls Aesthetic regime and its conquering/occupation of representation. Firstly, it should be clear that this question might be misleading: a possible (and reasonable) understanding of the question reads it as a historical description of a transition from one aesthetic regime to the second. This is not what is on debate here. Even though I will elaborate upon an occupation of one regime on the latter, this is not in the sense that one comes to replace the other. It is not as if one historical configuration imposes itself in detriment of the other as two separate entities that come into conflict and one overcomes the second.

The Aesthetic regime means a new configuration of life and arts. The paradoxical promise of making humans truly *humans* while/by making art genuinely *art*. The fulfilment of the promise would eliminate the subject/object (active/passive) relationship into an emancipated aesthetic form of life in which art and life are equivalent. The conjunction of the two is the heart of the problem. Art and life must both be autonomous and authentic while simultaneously intersect: they must be independent and co-dependent, as the object of their fulfilment. Aesthetic regime holds the contradictory knot of autonomy within heteronomy. Art's autonomy relies on its realization as a mode of experience, i.e., an aesthetic form of life, but such experience is one of heterogeneity since the object of the experience is aesthetic (artistic) only insofar as it must not be itself (art) because it must be turned into another (life).

In other terms, aesthetics is the problematic promise of making art as always something beyond art: it must always be aestheticized into a form of life. That is, art is art only insofar as it is not an object of art but an artistic experience of any object, or in other words, as it becomes life. The same logic applies to life: life is always an aesthetic project rather than sheer existence. Art and life must be autonomous while being intersected or transformed into one another. The Aesthetic project is directed at solving the impasse inherent in this relationship: finding a mode of art or life that realizes the aesthetic promise

The distinction between aesthetic and representation is vital for Rancière because his philosophy focuses on the gridlocks on contemporary world

formation: "This leads me to a methodological remark: disagreement is not only an object of my theorization. It is also its method" (Rancière, 2011b, p. 2). Disagreement for him:

[...] is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice. And this is also what 'class war' means: not the conflict between groups which have opposite economic interests, but the conflict about what an 'interest' is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life (Rancière, 2011b, p. 2).

Thus, for Rancière, the relationship between aesthetic and representation is not one marked by dispute over domination of the artistic territory, as in a conflict over the appropriate form of artistic expression. Rather, it is a dispute over the nature of sensibility itself. The configuration formed by aesthetic and representation, in his view, reveal the impasse of our current worldview: the question of what can art (or anything else) represent implies inspecting the conditions of appearance, i.e., presence in the world via its taking place somehow, and therefore, the conditions of reality (Rancière, 2010, p. 141).

For Rancière, the two regimes are not two separate knowledge structures or cultures: the Aesthetic regime engulfs the representative regime, i.e., the modern world's aesthetic is not an evolution or escalation of the past's representation but, in fact, engenders the past's representative structure. The representative regime exists only from within the Aesthetic regime:

[...] To make a distinction between regimes, then, is not to say that from such and such a moment onwards it became impossible to create art in the same way; that in 1788 art was part of the representative regime and, in 1815, part of the aesthetic regime. The distinction defines not two epochs but two types of functioning; not an opposition between two constituent principles but one between two logics, two laws of composition, two modes of perception and of intelligibility; not between two principles of exclusion but between two principles of co-existence (Rancière, 2010, p. 210).

Still they are not the consequence of one another: it is not the case that exclusively within the Aesthetic regime is representative regime possible, as in the argument that only within a certain perspective, an alternative is possible. For example, one could argue that only within a three-dimensional perspective of artistic operations, it becomes possible to consider perspective as an element in arts. It is possible to argue that until a certain period in time, perspective was not an issue in arts but at a certain point, depth was "discovered" and from this point onwards something essential about visibility became known. This new regime determines/orders our sensibility in way that there is no return

from it: once perspective is a given there is no forgetting it. A hypothetical exercise of imagining a structure of the sensible that does not include it would be futile since the alternative organization of visibility exists only within the new structure: flatness, as the negation of such element, always presupposes depth and, this way, is conditioned on its existence. Such attempt would be a parasite of the new perspective.

Rancière's Aesthetic regime does not operate this way. It never fully integrates representation. Within the Aesthetic regime, representation becomes a vital issue because only its distribution of the sensible is concerned with a specific relationship between life and world as an issue of representation: it is concerned with the way reality appears in art and vice versa. As I will later illustrate, representation is an issue only when art can no longer represent anything: the Aesthetic regime's demand, that art and life become autonomous, creates a situation in which representation is impossible since art cannot stand for anything exterior to it. So, a representative regime appears only as a prohibition within the Aesthetic regime. Representation in the aesthetic regime is the other side of the aesthetic regime; representation is a relationship of dependency between life and arts, and therefore, a break with the aesthetic promise of autonomy.

Regime, as the intuitive understanding of the word already implies, is a form of organization. It is a determination of a policy that rules/coordinates action. In its regulatory force, it already connotes to a relation of authority over an internal strange/opposite force. The aesthetic regime is the regime of the sensible and therefore it stretches its policies to dividing the sensorial: to organizing it. It is a series of axioms that determine the meaning/sense assigned to the artistic operation's sensible product.

It is a distribution¹ of a specific policy of the sensible, a division of space and time. It is the articulation between visibility, doing/making and the conceptualization of both and the relationship between them. It is an organization of the faculties, an ordering or disordering of the relation between knowledge and sensibility (Rancière, 2009b, p. 2). This means that it is not a specific school or ideology but the space in which these structures of knowledge happen. It concerns the possibility or impossibility of making something visible or invisible within a specific context of conceptualization of this process. It concerns the *a priori* rationality of interpretation.

1 Distribution here refers to the author's use of *partage*, which is both a division and a demarcation. Distribution means that aesthetics governs sensibility by putting in place the limits that simultaneously separate and integrate forming an overall configuration of the sensible.

A regime is the consolidation of a *distribution of the sensible* in detriment of others. The distribution of the sensible is the self-evident law governing the sensible by first tracing the spaces and forms of its appearance. This distribution creates the common world in which things are inscribed and therefore imposes a regime of the sensible. It determines the participation into what is common: it determines the participation in this world. The basic meaning of the word already points in that direction. Distribution is both the sharing and the division of something. It is precisely the joining in separation, as in a contract that establishes the common space through the demarcation of its internal spheres. This means that it traces implicit facts about what is visible or audible. It is the form of inclusion or exclusion of the sensible. Sensible is the *aistheton* (Rancière, 2010, p. 215) or what is capable of being perceived, the *a priori* forms of determining what presents itself to sense experience: the distribution of the sensible is what determines this *a priori* of sensibility.

Aesthetics then is clearly not just the study/interpretation of arts. It does not concern art and its effects on sensibility. It does not have arts as its object. It is, in fact, thinking arts as a distribution of the sensible, one that imposes/assumes art itself:

[...] This is not a matter of the "reception" of works of art. Rather, it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced... These conditions make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythms to be felt and thought as art. (Rancière, 2013, p. X).

Within the aesthetic regime, arts became life itself, it exists purely as an entity/object. Art is the expression/coming-to-presence of existence/life, not its representation. Through a change in language the represented becomes a state of matter with a new category of presence: it is autonomous presence and not a presence that represents an object exterior to itself.

Returning to my initial topic, perhaps the most misleading aspect of aesthetics' occupation of representation is that there is no actual conquering, that is, there are no separate entities that dispute over a territory; there is only a conflictual co-incidence of two structures of sensibility. There is no transition into the Aesthetic regime since representation was not there before. It is already/always part of aesthetics, despite barely being it. There is still an irremediable difference between them, an intrusion even: there is still an occupation of one by the other, the prohibition of one inside the other.

Representation is always present as the difference and even a prohibition in aesthetics. It is what must be constantly displaced within sensibility: something is invariably perceived/manifested, but the object must not stand for something

else while it must always be something beyond its sheer manifestation. In this sense, aesthetics does not reveal anything essential about visibility: it is not an absolute structure of the sensible. Other regimes remain present as an excess of the aesthetic occupation: the Aesthetic regime is, hence, what Rancière calls a dissensual distribution of the sensible – despite creating the conditions of distribution, it does not provide an ultimate organization since it contains within itself a disagreement. Representation is an intruder within aesthetics – it is both invariably present and never equivalent to it. The intrusive nature implies that something is simultaneously within and without, since the intrusive object must be in the configuration without being an integral part of it, i.e., neither absorbed nor expelled.

Rancière points to the fact that within the aesthetic regime, there is no separation between art and life, so anything is an appropriate object of art. That is, any object can appear as art, so it is possible to represent/portray anything. Still, those objects no longer serve a function as artistic objects: they have no purpose or aim, they simply stand as artistic manifestations. In other words, art no longer represents anything, it is an autonomous manifestation (Rancière, 2010, p. 130). Rancière argues that the impasse comes precisely from the fact that, once art represents everything, it no longer represents anything: the prohibition of representation comes from its overwhelming presence. The contemporary disagreement concerning sensibility comes from the dispute over the sense of presence: what does it mean to appear?

The aesthetic and its discontents

Aesthetic regime is a series of attempts to solve this heterogeneity of the relation between arts and life while avoiding collapsing one into the other. That is, art becoming life or life becoming art. According to Rancière, the engineer and the poet are both part of the same project (Rancière, 2009e, p. 97): both attempt at building the common surface for life and art.

The example of *Juno Ludovisi* is emblematic here. Rancière uses Schiller's analysis of it to illustrate the principle behind the Aesthetic regime. The statue supposedly stands for itself (self-contained). It has no purpose or will. It is not a work of art, it is a free appearance. In this sense it cancels the relation of passivity/activity and brings a free play with the spectator. It becomes a form of life. Its aesthetic condition, in this sense, is that it will not be a work of art: it brings the promise of a self-contained collective life that does not separate life from art, a life without spheres of activity (distribution of the sensible): a total life. Aesthetics aims at eliminating the passive/active dichotomy of representation,

and substitute it for an art of collective celebration. Like a Greek festival that includes all the people in a cathartic multitude (Rancière, 2013, p. 16). The Juno is autonomous while it stands for a promise beyond itself: autonomy is only inasmuch as heteronomy.

There is a certain undecidability in aesthetics. On the one hand, the aesthetic sense is dissensual: it is the conflict of sense with sense, i.e., a shock between any manifestation of sense and the possibility of it being an absolute ultimate sense. It is marked by the constant impossibility of a final aesthetic sense turning into a governing regime of sensibility. On the other, it is an attempt to produce consensus out of a dispute over the sense of sense (i.e., the meaning of meaning) constantly meeting its limitations. In this way, in its attempt to produce the ultimate absolute aesthetic life it invariably finds that it is incapable of providing a common sense for life and art:

[...] art refuting the hierarchical division of the perceptible and framing a common sensorium; or art replacing politics as configuration of the sensible world; or art becoming a kind of social hermeneutics; or even art becoming, in its very isolation, the guardian of the promise of emancipation. [...] Aesthetic art² promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity (Rancière, 2010, p. 133).

This conflict is what Rancière terms by *dissensus*. Dissensus is the conflict between a sensory perception and the understanding of it: a conflict between the regime and the manifested reality (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). It is the friction between several regimes/bodies of sense. So, there is always life in arts and arts in life: there is always a life project within art and an artistic project within politics. Both politics and aesthetics are concerned with the division of space and time: with dividing social spaces and groups into appropriate/determined spheres. The notion of dissensus adds the element of dispute (disagreement in the sense presented earlier) to the division. It shows how the division is not a clear-cut partition but rather an always conflictual and forceful relationship between spaces: a co-existence of distributions of the sensible and forceful relation between them. Dissensus means that the division is not a common sense, but rather an authoritarian sense that must prohibit other senses as an attempt to eliminate the intrinsic conflict between sense and sense: dissensus points at the invariable conflict within any consensus.

2 Earlier in the text Rancière defines aesthetic art as: "In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something else than art. It is always 'aestheticized', meaning that it is always posited as a 'form of life'. The key formula of the aesthetic regime of art is that art is an autonomous form of life. This formula, however, can be read in two different ways: autonomy can be valorized over life, or life over autonomy - and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect" (2010, p. 118).

The aesthetic regime is characterized by the suspension of the relationship between the object of art and any social purpose. Art must not have a function. The Juno no longer serves a ritual. It is just an object of resistance. It has no purpose other than standing. It stands both as a figure of time, it remains in the most literal sense of the word, and it also resists any categorization. It resists all form of power over it. It remains itself against all forms of corruption. It is just a formula of neither Y nor X. At this point the contradiction is clear.

Art does not oppose the world, it does not prescribe a different life, it does not attempt at overturning the order. At the same time, it adopts the posture of opposition to the order of things: it opposes the commercial, advertising, commodification. The word “resistant” points, at the same time, at something that refuses to change (persisting in its being), and at something that refuses to remain in its situation. Once again, it is the problematic promise of art’s power of autonomy (self-maintaining) simultaneity with its power of departure (self-transformation).³

In this sense, art in the aesthetic regime is a monument. It is a witness of a sublime life: an archeological object that stands for itself while it carries a whole epoch with it. The basic configuration of the aesthetic regime is found in the bases of realistic literature - Flaubert’s crude and dry description of the world. Every object is equally significant as the other. Everything possesses history. It is thought and action within the passive mass. Objects never stop speaking. There are no useless details. At the same time, in order for this banality to be aesthetic it must not reveal the secret. It must be mythological, phantasmagoric; it must be only a trace of its own history. It must be mute. It must stand to be deciphered. It is simply a code to be decoded. It expresses much more in its silence than any speech could. Art becomes the presentation of the irrelevant, the stupid, and the anodyne that is incapable of transferring meaning while it is the carrier of the secret. Thus, the words stand both for themselves and for nothing. They are forbidden to represent anything. Within in the aesthetic regime of arts, everything is possible since everything must not be itself. Art is in everything and everything is in arts. There is no limit. Still, the law against representation creates the impossibility of sense: once everything can be art, nothing can and art, therefore, can no longer represent anything. It appears in a constant convulsion of disagreeing with itself – it must not be what it is. In other words, as a result of everything being representable, nothing is so anymore.

3 Art is taken to be self-maintaining because it is autonomous but it is also responsible for creating effects as an operation in the world and therefore to self-transform into an aesthetic mode of life and not remain a pure object of contemplation.

Since everything can appear as art, in order to preserve the secret of art, the work/object must not stand for an exterior element. It must not be decipherable. It must preserve in silence while constantly speaking.

The Image

The central issue here is the question of the image: what does art produce? What visibility comes out of it? If art is the ruling of visibility, then the central issue can only concern the meaning the notion of image has. The issue here is not pinpointing the relationship between image and reality. Rather, Rancière is interested in exploring the configuration under which this relationship becomes possible and its effects. Images are operation between the sayable and the visible. An image is essentially two things: on the one hand, likeness to an original, not necessarily a reproduction or a faithful copy, but an object that stands for an original, and, on the other hand, the artistic interplay functioning on the relationship between the two. This alteration of resemblance is an alteration that makes the image different from itself.

The notion of image connects to the notion of regime because it is the presentation of a relationship between the sayable and the visible, the gesture of sharing space and time, a relationship that plays on that analogy *and*⁴ dissemblance between them. Imageness does not refer to qualities proper to the objects, but ways of coupling or uncoupling the power of showing and signifying them. It concerns the ways of sealing (or refusing) the relationship between life and art. In this sense, art is made up of images. Art operates on visible forms, to yield a meaning or subtract it. Figurative or not, art produces operations of discrepancy: words express what the eye might never see in order to create configurations of visibility around this coupling of clarifying/obscuring.

Within the aesthetic regime, images do not stand for an element transcending its configuration – images are self-contained. The aesthetic image has no *other* since it does not represent. Still, this image is never a flat portrayal of reality – it is the mute word, the silent speech mentioned earlier. The aesthetic image opposes the false image, the simulacrum of reality, in the name of a true autonomous image. This means that the prohibition of representation does not

4 This “and” is especially relevant here. It appears in italics in several texts by Rancière. It is the “and” of the Aesthetic promise I mentioned earlier. The interjection between autonomy and heteronomy. The attempt at bridging between the heterogeneity of life *and* arts: “The entire question of the “politics of aesthetics” – in other words, of the aesthetic regime of arts – turns on this shorts conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of “changing life.” (2013, p. 116).

mean abdicating the visible, instead, this paradox creates a disquiet situation, the situation where representation is prohibited in the name of revealing an original and true aesthetic image.⁵

The Aesthetic regime is turned towards the dissolution of the notions of image into its truthiness. Aesthetic art calls upon itself to organize life either by being purely art or purely politics – art has always been not just art: it aims at eliminating the representative image and therefore becoming a manifestation of reality itself. It aims at eliminating the operations of decoding and suspension and replacing them with a form of authentic appearance. This would be the reduction of any act and form of manifestation into one emancipated aesthetic life/art.

The image is left to itself as the pure exaggerated bare image that never accomplishes the aesthetic promise of emancipation. Rancière points that this principle of no common measurement between life and arts underlining the prohibition of representation is problematic. The heterogeneity implicit in the exclusion of representation, assumes that even between arts there is no common measurement, that every operation is infinite in itself. Arts become impossible at the same time that they are the only possible operation since every production is invariably aesthetic. It forces art to integrate and given its impossibility, to create the heterogeneity and dwell in it. Art becomes just a montage. A parataxis of images put together in their chaos, in their difference. It is a collage of dis-measure, of the nothing common, either complete schizophrenia or complete consensus over difference, either the relation between art and world sinks into absolute chaos or into a fully accepted juxtaposition transformed into commodity: transformed into an item of absolute community.

There are two possible postures towards this problematic structure of image: the mourning of the infinite “there was” of life in art or the reopening art toward an absolute other of life – the transformation of mourning into an everlasting posture or the constant negation of the other’s presence in art since it cannot be represented:

5 Rancière calls this situation the hyper-resemblance. The hyper-resemblance marks the thing itself rather than a commercial replica because it frees resemblance from representation. The artistic hyper-resemblance is located in the gap between the pure singular artistic operation and the techniques of mass reproduction, often appearing as the maximization of these two logics in an image that is massively reproduced into society at the same time that is hieroglyphically singular. The image speaks when it transmits no message. This is what allows photography to be an art. It is not the simple collection of resemblances, it possess imageness. It marks the reality of the elsewhere (Rancière, 2009e, p. 9). In other words, it marks its presence in its disappearance. The image and the pure body becomes one in this infinite operation of disappearance that never disappears.

[...] The complaint is then no longer that images conceal secrets which are no longer such to anyone, but, on the contrary, that they no longer hide anything. While some start up a prolonged lamentation for the lost image, others reopen their albums to rediscover the pure enchantment of images - that is, the mythical identity between the identity of the *that* and the alterity of the *was*, between the pleasure of pure presence and the bite of the absolute Other (2009e, p. 32).

Within this situation, Rancière points at a possible common ground between life and art. This term of common measurement, this tie around the relation, is the *sentence-image*. It is what allows the montage. This is not the translation of a sentence into an image or vice versa, as, for example, in theater you have the script and the performance. It is precisely the opposite. Only in a representative regime the sentence creates a visible image by creating a conceptual link between actions and the image, and, so, provides it with presence. The image in the representative scenario is the substance to the word – its flesh, to some extent. The Aesthetic sentence-image reverses this logic. It is an agreement, or in Rancière's terms, a common sense, over what art means and its task or, in better words, the suspended lack of both.

The image is the leap - the interruption of this passive substance. It does this by unifying two sensory orders: image is always double in its imageness, both representation and its ultimate opposition. The sentence-image is the unity of continuity with the power of disruption. It is the solid ground of continued aesthetic production that repels schizophrenia and numbness without providing any alternative. It is the suspended middle term of agreeing to disagree that reins absolute since it does not permit any resolution of the conflict, but is not itself an disagreement in the sense described previously by the author. It is a montage that attempts at forming a common ground: a consensus over the dissensus.

The aesthetic sentence-image allows artistic operations based on montages, on a specific organization of objects in order to create an image that is consensual. Its montages purposely avoid the prohibited area. The heterogeneous unbridgeable relation between life and art is transformed into a common measure. According to Rancière, these montages can be dialectical or symbolic. The dialectical creates clashes out of chaos while the symbolic attempts at unity. Dialectical is a montage of shock, of disruption of community in order to form a new structure. It involves presenting strangeness as familiarity to expose the violence behind common sense. The power of the sentence-image in this case is revealing the power of the anodyne to reveal its secrets. The symbolic on the other hand works by analogy. It groups the heterogeneous in order to show the common ground between them. It focuses on the shared world of objects. In both cases, the aim is at an integrating bond. Either by creating a clash that is reconstructed into a new integration or by showing the already existent mysterious common ground.

The breaks are slowly transformed into a common history, events joined by a common ground:

[...] The visible does not succeed in phrasing itself continuously, in providing the measure of the “without common measurement”, the measure of mystery...It must be added that these two forms themselves never stop intermingling their logics. They work on the same elements, in accordance with procedures that verge on the indiscernible...The space of these clashes and that of the continuum can even bear the same name: History. History can indeed be contradictory things: the discontinuous line of revealing clashes or the continuum of co-presence. The linkage of heterogeneous elements constructs and, at the same time, reflects a meaning of history that is displaced between these two poles (2009e, p. 60⁶).

Both these logics refer to the same principle of autonomy in heterogeneity. The image is the application of the aesthetic regime of art. It is the organization of visibility through the axioms determined by the aesthetic distribution of the sensible. In the concepts of imageness and montage, the dissensual configuration gains stage via aesthetics' impossibility of fulfilling its promise making the suspension of the relationship between art and life evident. This whole scenario brings back the original theme of the relation between aesthetics and representation since the prohibition of representation together with its constant presence creates the problematic aesthetic structure: it is evident that the representative knot is always on the shadow of this configuration. Still, it is omitted in the aesthetic sentence-image.

Aesthetic occupation of representation

The suspended situation is created by the aesthetic regime's occupation of representation. It occupies it by invading its territory and forbidding it simultaneously. Still, the representative regime of art is always present. It is not integral with aesthetics but is always a one-more in aesthetic attempt at being whole. It is present within the aesthetic regime as a resistance, as a monument of its impossibility to become an absolute regime. The representative regime of arts brings the dissensus into the consensus of aesthetics. It shows the impossibility of its distribution of the sensible.

The essential question Rancière asks is not if certain things are representable or not. This question makes no sense because nothing exists outside a specific configuration of the world. Therefore, the question would be under what

6 This theme also appears in Rancière (2013, p. 14).

conditions something can/would be representable or not: “under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented? Under what conditions can an unrepresentable phenomenon of this kind be given a specific conceptual shape?” (Rancière, 2009e, p. 109). This difference is essential: under what circumstances is aesthetic regime’s prohibition relevant? Under what conditions and configuration, it is possible?

It is only possible under a configuration of the unthinkable. To argue that certain objects are not representable is to show the problematic nature of art. It is to challenge artistic power in its own domain. It is to say that it lacks the means to perform as it should. It is to argue that certain objects cannot be brought before perception. Their essence is secret in an undecipherable way. Any material presentation is inadequate. Art is overly present: it has a surplus of presence in comparison to the sublimity of the event, it betrays the event by its materiality, it removes the object of art of its existence, hence, becoming an unreal token of it. This interplay of surplus and lack opens the space for effects of play and pleasure that are incompatible with the gravity of the experience. Art turns representation into simulacrum.

This posture is self-contradictory since it assumes at the same time the impossibility of representation and the correspondence between the object and the event. It assumes the sublime at the same time that it expects arts to copy it and accuses it of its failures. The posture transforms its proscription into impossibility, that even thought is disclaimed, further become a consequence of the properties of the object. In that sense the aesthetic regime of arts contains in itself two contradictory distributions the sensible: the aesthetic and the representative – the two are in constant internal conflict.

In the aesthetic regime, there are no appropriate subjects for art: everything is as good as anything else. No object enjoys an artistic privilege. There are no rules to art. All correctness and appropriateness are abandoned. This is the essential axiom of the mute word discussed in the previous sections. At the same time, the objects may not be altered. They are founding myths, sacred objects of archeology to be interpreted. In simple words, there is an identity of opposites: at the same time that art breaks the hierarchies and allows for a democratic participation, it forbids actions. Every object is aesthetically equal while these objects are not to be tampered with: they are to be passively observed, to be deciphered. Objects are stupid and holy simultaneously.⁷ In other words, the first

7 They are human and inhuman, sublime and present... this was explored in the question of the image. What appears in art is both common and extraordinary. It is both the average anodyne and therefore accessible and out of order and in this way operating on it.

identity joins democratic participation with passiveness and the second joins the common with the holy. So, it becomes evident that the aesthetic regime is not a regime of non-representation, it a regime of anti-representation.

The aesthetic regime of arts proposes the emancipation of resemblance from representation. Aesthetics is not emancipation from resemblance. The break with representation does not forbid resemblance, it forbids representation. Everything is equally representable – everything resembles everything so there is no representative regime. The overwhelming aesthetic presence of the object demands that we do not make anything out of it. Hence, it does not make anything visible since it brings presence, but this presence is beyond the power of art to make visible, so artistic production is stuck in passivity, the inertia of the overwhelming visibility that paralyzes action and absorbs any possible meaning. Rather than activity, there is only passivity.

The issue is that the aesthetic suspensive dichotomy between art and life assumes a correlation between object and thought, an infinite correspondence that never meets. Only within this logic is the anti-representation possible. In reality, there are no such events that are excluded from representation. There is no such thing as an inappropriate description of something. There is no submission to adjustment with reality. There is an absolute difference between the intelligible and the perceptible. This is also the difference between the will to know and the capacity to know, the Oedipal⁸ issues of knowing too much or too little. The impossibility of the sensible to achieve the real, to touch the object, is the fault of the spirit. The limit of humanity towards the world means that humanity must submit itself to the sublime, to its debt to it:

[...] On the contrary, now it is spirit which is faulted, summoned to pursue the impossible task of approaching matter, of seizing the sensible singularity. But the singularity of the sensible in fact gets reduced to the indefinitely reiterated experience of one and the same debt (Rancière, 2009a, p. 128).

This means that life and art meet everywhere and nowhere: life is found in every artistic operation and vice versa, but, they are never equivalent, or in better words, they are ‘equivalent’ only inasmuch they are distinct. Hence, it is only possible to represent the inhuman: that which beyond any humanity or rationality. Both art and life are always hostage of an absolute other, an absolute exteriority. This sublime is only present as a negative presentation, a testimony to something else that haunts thought. It is the thought of that which does not

8 Oedipus is perhaps aesthetics’ emblematic myth. I will not explore the connection between psychoanalysis and aesthetics but the connection between the two is relevant to the argument presented here.

think. It is the presence of pathos in logos, the unthinkable in the thinkable: "This figure presupposed a regime of thinking about art in which art is defined by its being the identity of a conscious procedure and an unconscious production, of a willed action and an involuntary process" (Rancière, 2009b, pp. 28-29).

A spirit that is outside itself as in the example of the Juno expressing the spirit in materiality. The hide and seek game between life and art, between spirit and matter, is the symptom here. This indetermination is precisely the root of the prohibition: representation must only be a trace, a ghost. Art exists only as the inscription of its own impossibility.

The end result is that it is not in the aesthetic regime that things are unrepresentable. Only in the representative regime of arts are things fit or not fit for representation. In the aesthetic regime of art, representation is just a universal law of prohibition. In fact, a contradictory prohibition as the paradoxical promise, it simply expresses the wish of bridging between life and arts and therefore not representing. The issue is precisely the contradiction of rationality. The example of the holocaust is perfect since its perfect rationality is precisely what makes it irrational. Its perfect rationality is not sufficient to explain its reasons (Rancière, 2009a, p. 127). In its ethical commitment to represent such unthinkable, the aesthetic regime over enforces the dialectic of dissensus: it places an absolute law that knows no subject. That annuls any possibility of action and therefore annuls politics and arts. This is the holy terror of the Aesthetic regime. This regime of art just like a military regime is always on the verge of the threat, always on the state of siege against representation. To avoid being unfaithful to the event and its horror, it installs the horror of passivity.

Conclusion

Once this picture is sufficiently formed I find it essential to return to my initial point about what is on the debate here: Rancière is not concerned just with how modernity read arts or interprets its operations. He is not concerned with art's social function and space. It is not sociology of art in the sense of demonstrating the political/social behind art or vice versa. Rancière is occupied with the aesthetic formation of the subject: with the invisible/unpresentable place in the political dispute. The aesthetic project is a project of humanity and not just arts. The notion of consensus is emblematic to describe the suspended situation. The notion of a common world is the notion of a common sensory world: a world where there is no conflict between sense and sense, a world of common sense. Consensus essentially means an absolute distribution of the sensible: an unquestionable sharing of spaces and time, or in other words, an absolute political structure. Aesthetics and politics are knotted in the concept.

I demonstrated that the results from the aesthetic logic is not politics, or arts, but rather a non-posture, a stagnated consensus over the lack of alternative to the suspended situation. The prohibition of representation does not mean the exclusion of representation. Rather, representation co-exists while subjugated: invariably present but inoperative. It must be there, at hand, but not operating.

The aesthetic regime's configuration where everything is visible, a regime of the spectacle where nothing fully appears, depends on the invisible – which cannot appear or be represented. It depends on an original form of life; an inhuman deprived of everything and, therefore, represents the ultimate human condition: the bare sublime human is the invisible object of the aesthetic regime that can never be represented, either the terrorist in its pure aggressiveness or the victim in its fragility. In the same way that this sublime life cannot appear in art, it cannot appear in politics. Both operation (art and politics) act on the sublime life but refuse to take it into consideration as a fully present agent. It is always 'represented' via citizenship or human rights while it refuses the representational logic of politics as state rights. The result in both cases is an enclosed logic of reproduction of the same, a consensus around the impossibility of an alternative.

Politics, as art, is based on this power of fiction: on the power to rearrange the world in a form that does not correspond to reality but that is a pretension. In this way, fiction forms uncertain communities, uncertain distributions of the sensible. They interfere in politics by creating a new subject of politics. A fictional right: a right that makes as if it was real. This entails breaking with the fantasy of purity in politics and arts. Returning to a politically relevant structure of life, demands that we reintroduce the dissensual power into action. A disruptive power of cut into social bonds, always ambiguous and litigious. There is no original trauma or salvation to come, there is only a disagreement over the disagreement itself: over the common sense of the discussion itself.

This should not be a completely new structure; rather, it is a new model of de-structurization: it does not intend to classify but rather to declassify:

[...] I have tried to conceive heterogenesis through a type of thinking and activity that produces shocks between worlds, but shocks between worlds in the same world: re-distributions, re-compositions, and re-configurations of elements (Rancière, 2010, p. 212).

Art's power is always dissensual, it should never form a total picture. Rancière implies that art should represent something, but this mimetic principle should not be the principle of a representative regime since there is no historical linearity. Rather, the mimetic principle is precisely the return of arts as thinkable creative power, a power that rearranges dwelling spaces (Rancière, 2010, p. 136).

If the question is under what conditions is such and such possible, the approach of disruption attempt precisely to show the condition of difference in this same structure: the heterogeneity in the same, or the dissensus of the homonym. That is, the operation of showing the difference of meaning of the same word, the dispute over the sayability of it. This homonym is best illustrated by the notion of '*aisthesis*'. It is the perception of something given and the apprehension of it (Rancière, 2009b, p. 1). It is this double sense of sense. It is both the faculty of perceiving and the faculty of making sense of it, so it is a double sense.⁹

On this note, I would like to conclude by attempting to show the reason behind Rancière's project and its relevance. In a sense, I want to demonstrate why it is important to pay attention to his arguments. A shallow reading of Rancière might create the impression that he is interested in theorizing the evolution/development of arts or structures of visibility along history. In this scenario, Rancière is mapping the relationship between arts and the world with no greater aim other than pointing at the problematic points and contradictions. Without a doubt, this would be an important project, but it would be a limited version of what Rancière is trying to say.

My argument is that Rancière's project is precisely an attempt at proposing an alternative non-consensual political formation of the subject through a transformation in the division. A new form of sharing or challenging, that allows for the excluded to become a subject of this sharing. This is best illustrated by my description of the problematic relationship between aesthetic and representation. The aesthetic structure aims at an ethical consensus by promising a final solution to dissensus of representation. Rancière argues that given this impossibility, art is reduced to either constantly ironizing itself for its incapacity or becoming a sacred artefact of capitalism (a commodity) since it becomes an extraordinary object. In this way, the aesthetic regime of arts is a neutralization of the political.

Rancière provides a new reading of an absolute knowledge structure governing contemporary society. His reading is not simply concerned with the hysterization of this knowledge, i.e., providing a shock into the system that points at its contradictions without resolving it. Rancière aims at disruption of this knowledge, not in the name of truth, but in the name of new structure of agency. The dissensual meaning of *subject* is evident in the homonym 'subject': always a conflict of its sense with its sense – both the agent and the object,

9 Kant's aesthetic judgment is precisely the suspension of this relation. It is the indifferent sensibility that generates passivity. This passivity supposedly allows for the sublime and with it the transformation of art into life but as I illustrated previously this aesthetic promise is illusory.

both the one that acts but who acts only within certain conditions. Again, not in a search for cure, but in a search for the heterotopy intrinsic in political or artistic activity –this heterotopy that is fiction because it is not true or illusion but a pretend, a reconfiguration of the relation between *aisthesis* and *poesis*.

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