

CLASSICS REVISITED

Jacques Rancière (2009)

Aesthetics and its Discontents

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Latin American politics have a distinctive auditory profile. From the “Gritos de Independencia” (declarations—cries—of independence), to the silent protests of the Mothers of the Plaza Mayo and contemporary “cacerolazos” (pot-banging protests), sound at its extremes gives voice to those lacking political recognition. In Jacques Rancière’s thought, such events are the very matter of politics: these cries shatter political regimes that determine who has a voice—capable of denouncing injustice—and who doesn’t. These *distributions of the sensible* articulate politics and aesthetics, as they operate through similar strategies: making visible or invisible, audible or in-audible.

Latin American artistic practices have also been engaged with politics throughout history—the conceptual art of the 70s and the “Nueva Canción” (protest song) cannot be thought outside of their conjunction. Yet, as we have learned, it is not enough for art to be “about” politics to be politically effective. Often—as the privilege of certain social groups—art ends up contributing to preserve the *status quo* it presumes to

denounce. But class conflict is not the sole problem. Take the Venezuelan musical education initiative *El Sistema*: grounded on the aesthetic autonomy of classical music, it seeks to broaden access to musical education for impoverished youths, yet ends up creating an equally hierarchical “microcosm” of capitalist society (Baker 2014). Explaining these contradictions is the main point of *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.

Despite seldom addressing Latin America, music, or sound (Rancière 2002), Rancière’s thought is key for addressing the problematic conjunction of aesthetics and politics in the subcontinent. In past years Rancière has gained prominence in the art world, especially in Barcelona, where he was often featured in seminars on art and politics. While he is mostly read as defending the political affectivity of art, this book strongly qualifies this claim. In it, Rancière engages with contemporary art and the philosophies of Alain Badiou, for whom preserving art’s autonomy is the only way of keeping its powers of showing what is true, and Jean-François Lyotard,

who exposes our irremediable subjection to the Other in his reading of the modern sublime.

For Rancière, however, autonomy is not art's essence. Art, as sensory experience, depends on specific *regimes of intelligibility* which historically organize what is audible or inaudible through distributions that determine who is counted as part of the community and who is not (cf. Moreno and Steingo (2012) for an exposition of Rancière's regimes in relation to contemporary musical practice). In this way art participates in the political. But what Rancière understands as *politics* is rather the rupture of these distributions, an anarchic event without principle or law: a Haitian slave disappears from the pole he is tied to; a Spanish ornamental vase shatters in Bogotá; a cry for independence makes audible a people in a regime that refused to recognize it. If and when these ruptures occur as art, it is not under the control of the work or its maker. Therefore, there is no such thing as the political content of a song, nor is any sound meaningful or noisy per se. There are only moments of *dissensus*, the calling into question of frameworks of perception in a specific regime. Existing distributions of what counts as meaningful are disrupted by some-thing—a cry or the banging of a pot, which in turn ceases to be art.

Alberto Toscano (2011:228) attacks Rancière for idealizing the rarity of politics, which explains why the art-world is captivated with a philosophy that works as anti-sociology, idealizing the political

event over its rational projection. Toscano calls for counter-cartographies that offer alternative cognitive mappings for the dispossessed. Such, in fact, is the positive role of art for Rancière, as it shows “the ways in which, today, our world is given to perceiving itself and in which the powers that be assert their legitimacy” (15). Aesthetics “is not a domain of thought whose object is ‘sensibility’ [i.e. aisthesis], it is a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium that henceforth made it possible to define the things of art” (11). By conforming to the sensorium it belongs to, art makes intelligible the way in which the visible and the audible are articulated within a specific regime. Conversely, regimes historicize aesthetics: art doesn't exist as such outside them.

The *aesthetic regime*, dominant since the nineteenth century, affirms radical equality. Such equality implies a founding contradiction: “art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art” (36). Autonomous art is only possible in this regime but, paradoxically, radical equality makes autonomy impossible. This regime is a sensorium of consensus, where everything is equivalent to everything else. The integration of noise and speech into music—e.g. Varèse's sirens, or the Afrocaribbean and “popular” elements in the music of Carlos Chávez and Leo Brower—was a promise of emancipation that “engaged” modernism sought to translate into politics, with varying results.

This promise disappears when modernist optimism gives way to contemporary

discontent. One of Rancière's targets is Lyotard, who is shown to invert the Kantian project: where the aesthetic experience of the sublime saved freedom and the autonomy of reason, Lyotard finds art as an expression of the disaster of absolute dependence to the sensory and the radical Other. Instead of a promise of emancipation, aesthetic subjection as ethics is the only chance to escape totalitarianism (105). Yet for Rancière, relational art and the "ethical turn" dissolve both art and politics by erasing the distinction between fact and law. Consensus is the suppression of this division. It reduces all the diverse peoples that make up politics into a single ethical community in which belonging is founded on the exclusion of the Other (116).

I offer two examples: while the sculptures of Doris Salcedo silently testify to the Violence in Colombia, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta* commemorates the 1968 student massacre of Tlatelolco by broadcasting participant's voices into the city as a searchlight "beams" them to the sky. In Salcedo, the holocaust is beyond encounter: we face only its enigmatic remains. In Lozano-Hemmer, testimony dissolves into a multi-media network of aesthetic equivalence: it becomes spectacle. The becoming-light of voice is rather its disappearance within an indistinct multitude.

By examining the polemical interventions of critical art and the mysterious and ludic engagements of relational art, Rancière articulates the paradox of the present in

a lesson relevant for Latin America: what grounds art's political motivation to act today is the uncertainty about its own politics. Consensus gives contemporary art a substitutive political function whose actual political affectivity is unclear (60). Thus, with respect to art, Rancière presents a limit; with politics, he outlines the space of its eventual emergence but offers no organized alternative. The contradiction of the aesthetic regime spells the end of the political project. But in Latin America, hope is not enough. Rancière's recuperation of the aesthetic has given new spaces for dissensus in artistic and academic spaces with an invitation to question its limits in practice and theory. As demonstrated by cases such as the Capriles salsa or Calle 13, these spaces are still of an open disagreement.

Bibliography

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