Rancière’s Democratic Realism
By: Davide Panagia
Associate Professor, Political Science
UCLA

[Draft version. Please do not cite or circulate without author’s consent.]

Rancière’s Democratic Realism by Davide Panagia is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

1 I thank Duane Rousselle for his editorial and critical remarks on a previous version of the essay, as well as to Cody Trojan and Anna Scheidt for inviting me to spend more time than originally planned with Rancière’s discussion of the Belvedere Torso in Aisthesis.
In this essay I cast Jacques Rancière’s oeuvre within the tradition of sentimental literature and modern theories of the moral sentiments in order to get at his unique articulation of the relation between aesthetic realism and democratic participation. The matter is this: Rancière’s theory of political action is no theory at all but a recounting of, and an attending to, singular historical and aesthetic instances when qualifications for participation in a specific activity are rendered indistinct and indifferent to the prescribed terms and conditions for an activity. This indistinction and indifference to pre-assigned qualifications is the basis for Rancière’s project of emancipation that stands in sympathy with those moral sensibility authors of the eighteenth century who did much to disabuse readers and audiences of the existence of innate relations.

Rancière’s account of emancipated participation imagines an unauthorized partaking of indistinct and interchangeable parts by anyone or anything whatsoever. Another way of stating this is that for Rancière, political action has no specific medium. This is his realism. It is a realism that takes for actual the fact that political action has no innate content, shape, gait, or orbit, that anything can come mingle with anything else, and that there are no relational forces assigned to specific qualities of peoples, of rank, and of things. Hence dissensus as a force of dissidence that dissents from the hierarchies of decorum’s dispositional arrangements. Such dissent is what Rancière understands by the terms “emancipation” and “equality” which are neither concepts nor prescriptions, nor are they terms of critical denunciation; rather these are political relations that involve an improper – or unauthorized – partaking in/of something that the common measure of a social order denies. An example that immediately comes to mind is those 19th Century workers recounted in *Proletarian Nights* who took the time of night as a time of leisure for writing rather than sleeping and recovering from the day’s labors. In those pages, Rancière shows how workers reconfigured

---

2 My previous efforts include the following: Panagia, “The Improper Event: On Jacques Rancière’s Mannerism”; Panagia, “Rancière’s Style.”

3 I elaborate this relation in the Introduction of the book of which this essay is a chapter. Specifically, in those pages I show how Rancière’s poetics stands in contrast to and in critique of an Aristotelian poetics of emplotment and, ceteris paribus, of innate relations. In this Rancière shares with 18th Century moral sentimentalists who sought to do away with the idea of innate ideas and in doing so, articulated a sentimental theory of spectatorship. To make this case, I rely on the work of James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy* and Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment*.

4 Here I paraphrase Frances Ferguson’s account of Rancière’s project in Ferguson, “Now It’s Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading,” 263.
the time of night from one of purposive restoration to one of unpurposive reverie. Though admittedly modest, such everyday moments of unauthorized partaking are legion and “aim to create and recreate bonds between individuals, to give rise to new modes of confrontation and participation.”

At stake in what Rancière otherwise describes as reality’s “mixed character” or the “measurelessness of the mélange” is nothing less than the reunion of emancipation and dreaming that twentieth century critical theory, especially in its denunciatory, high modernist, and/or scientific Marxist mode did much to impugn. Relearning to dream – that is, relearning to partake in what Rancière refers to, citing Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse, as the “farniente of reverie” – is the task of his democratic realism. Elucidating the sinews of these operations of equality, emancipation, realism, and dreaming is the matter at hand.

In what follows, I adopt a sentimental readerly mood to Jacques Rancière’s writings. Such a mood of reading is at once scholarly and politically relevant. Allow me to explain: One of the things that comes out strongest in sentimental literature (both philosophical writing and prose) is the role of one’s own dispositional attitudes in reading and writing and how these are deemed as active in the composition of one’s ideas as one’s analytic acumen or moral cognition. Thus one speaks of an author’s sensibilities, for instance, in choosing the examples she choses, or in the mis-en-scènes she devises. The compositional arrangement of a work, its shape, structure, and content, all speak to a sensual aura of the work that goes beyond the explicit informational and/or propositional content of the work.

The dispositional or sentimental mood, as James Chandler has recently noted, “is not just about new kinds and levels of feeling but also about new ways of ordering works and organizing the worlds represented in them.” The sentimental as a mood of reading, in other words, attends to the dispositional arrangements of peoples, places, and events within the works themselves, but also beyond the works too. Thus, such matters as a media

---

5 Ranciere, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 21
6 Ranciere, *Film Fables*, 149.
9 Panagia, “A Theory of Aspects.”
10 Anderson, “Pragmatism and Character.”
archeology of the work’s production, the conceptual schemas that a work adopts or intervenes upon, and the atmospheres of play and reception that involve the work are all complicit and relevant to a sentimental mood of reading. Indeed, one dimension of the sentimental mood is to question the nature and authoritative standing of relevance for the purposes of engaging works. Moreover, for the sentimental reader there is a general suspicion of the presumption that the analytic impulse to explain and justify statements somehow abstains from possessing dispositional attitudes and intimacies. A sentimental readerly mood, then, doesn't accept such abstentions as given but rather, begins from the idea that the ensemble of elements that generate a work relate in ways beyond those prescribed by an analytic algorithm. Thus, what becomes crucial for the sentimental reader is to elaborate the network of internal and external relations that assemble a work.12

From a scholarly perspective a sentimental readerly mood allows the reader to be attentive to the poiesis of a work, not just to the meaning of words or the causal thread of an argument. When dealing with someone committed to distancing himself from analytic arguments as much as possible, as in the case of Jacques Rancière, this is especially relevant given that for him, the epistemic attitude and its expectations of an analytic poetics tethered to the right disposition of words, sights, and sounds is consistently troubled. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that one of the things at stake in Rancière’s democratic realism is a resistance, to the point of disregard or even rejection, of the sacrosanct epistemic/political relation. One of the unstated commitments in Rancière’s work, then, is to emancipate political thinking from the sensus communis of the epistemic as the form of political thinking in order to return to emancipatory politics the possibility of reverie. Another way of stating this is that for Rancière, the epistemic line of argument stands as the common sense of the police.13 To counteract this prescribed communion, Rancière turns to two important resources that, though distinct, are intimately related in their ways of blurring the police line: 1. the literarity of style indirect libre as a form of political writing and, 2. aesthetic realism. As I’ve treated the first extensively elsewhere,14 in this essay I focus on the latter.

13 This is why, in Mesentente, Rancière distinguishes between disagreement and misunderstanding, and privileges ‘misunderstanding’ as a mode of political partaking against the exigencies of philosophical common sense. (see Panagia, “Rancière’s Style.”).
14 Ibid.
The very possibility of supposing a world where words, phrases, vistas, and sounds do not belong together drives Rancière’s democratic realism; a world, that is, where words, phrases, vistas, and sounds do no-thing – they don’t even make sense. This “do no-thing” is, quite literally, the farniente of reverie\(^\text{15}\) which stands within Rancière’s lexicology as the unpurposive mode of partaking of that curious political ensemble he refers to as “the part of those who have no-part.”\(^\text{16}\) Keeping all of this in mind, my approach to reading Rancière is less concerned with the meaning of Rancière’s words, or in outlining the intelligibility of his arguments, than in making available the thwarted relations he proposes. I do this by looking at the things he looks at, in selecting the passages that he selects, and in raising up to view the vistas he regards. In short, I am interested in showing how Rancière’s sensibility to the farniente of reverie throughout his oeuvre, but especially in Aisthesis, is entangled and complicit with his democratic realism.

Some preliminary remarks on this term “realism” then. For Rancière, realism is not representational, nor is it prescriptive. That is, Rancière’s realism is not concerned with “the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances,” as Raymond Geuss would have it.\(^\text{17}\) Crudely put, Rancière’s democratic realism does not correspond to an existing actuality. Rather, it is a site of contest regarding the nature of the actual. Rancière’s democratic realism attends to the relational forces in an ensemble, as well as to the untethering of the given arrangements of words and signification, of workers and sleep, of films and fables, and so forth. Such relations are perpetually thwarted, according to Rancière, by the reality of an excess that unhinges an inheritance of associations. Here is Michel de Certeau explaining this point in a different, though related, context: “Rather than representing a return to the real, ‘realism’ expresses the release of a population of words that until now had been attached to well-defined facts and that, from this point on, become

\(^{15}\) “Farniente” is the Italian word for “do no thing” and is typically used to deride someone who is lazy and does not work, or whose existence is pointless because whatever it is they may do, that doing is useless. The best English translation of the word “farniente” might be “pastime.” That said, within the history of political thought, the farniente of leisure extends back to Aristotle’s account of the place of leisure in political rule in The Politics (see especially Book VIII).


\(^{17}\) Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics, 9.
useful for the production of legends or fictions.” Such emancipations from assigned relations and allotments motivate Rancière’s democratic realism.

Much of what I find challenging in Rancière’s work seems to be nestled around the sets of issues I raise above. The problem is this: Rancière’s aesthetics of politics is committed to two fundamental and related facts: 1. To develop a project of political criticism not invested in the intelligibility of things; and 2. To develop a project of political thinking that takes the aesthetic claim of the unpurposiveness of aesthetic objects as indicative of a domain of existence that is not interpellative, didactic, prescriptive, or purposive. To consider Rancière’s aesthetics of politics is thus to think the possibility of an unpurposive politics of unintelligibility where the critical task is, as counterintuitive as this may seem, to not understand. This is what he refers to as “a scandal in thinking proper to the exercise of politics.” Scandalous political thinking comes with the realization that the communion of understanding is not political and that there is a pluri-potential domain of political action and experience – the unintelligible domain of the farniente of reverie – where peoples and things do nothing. This is why, as I have noted elsewhere, Rancière’s book La mésentente: politique et philosophie does not translate well as “disagreement” but is better read as a treatise on misunderstanding or “missed understandings.” This, because the French entente signifies both understanding and harmony, and a mésentente refers to the disharmony that comes with misunderstanding. This is also why politics and aesthetics are so inextricably linked for Rancière: For a native French speaker, the achievement of understanding is bound up with a neoclassical aesthetics of harmony. The task and challenge, then, is to appreciate these dimensions of Rancière’s thought in order to think the possibility of a nonpurposive politics, and a political science of misunderstanding, that does not take the intelligibility of things as its telos. For the scandal of Rancière’s thinking amounts to this: to emancipate political theory from its assignment to a project of intelligibility.

No doubt this is an impossible task, especially since our rhetorical analytics cannot help but attribute purposiveness to speech acts, written or spoken. Be that as it may, on my part I will attempt to keep in play the dissonance between Rancière’s ambitions and the

---

18 Certeau, The Writing of History, 42.
19 Rancière, Disagreement, xii.
20 As a sympathetic corollary see Jacob Levy’s discussion of “impure political theory” in Levy, Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom, 58.
21 Panagia, “Rancière’s Style.”
manner with which he looks and analyzes things in themselves. And the way in which I’ve
decided to negotiate this challenge is to deploy a paratactic style of writing that emphasizes
breaks and cuts of thinking at the cost of argumentative coherence and continuity. Parataxis
is the style of writing that, I believe, best accompanies a sentimental readerly mood given the
spontaneous and additive nature of both.  

In the following I concentrate my sights on some writing in Rancière’s recent oeuvre:
specifically, the Prelude to Aisthesis, and scene fourteen of that same book, “The Cruel
Radiance of What Is.” Before I do so, however, I spend some time characterizing the
operation of emancipation via indistinction and indifference that I claim is at the heart of
Rancière’s democratic realism. Such aesthetic practices help in coming to terms with
Rancière’s emancipatory ambition of blurring the dividing lines that structure any social
order. In short, indistinction and/or indifference is the operation of blurring that makes
Rancière’s realism possible. I then show the connection between realist and reverie at work
in Rancière’s oeuvre and how reverie refers to an unpurposive doing, a pragmatics without
purpose, that is central to Rancière’s sense of democratic action as an illegitimate partaking.
The sensibility that runs throughout is the following: the realism of indistinction emancipates
action from purposiveness by insisting (contra and Aristotelian poetics of muthos, or
emplotment) that action cannot be scripted. Thus it is not a matter of learning what action is
but of relearning an active sensorium in the everyday world of the farniente, which is not a
utopia (or no-place), but a time and place that belongs to no-one-whom-so-ever. Part III of
this essay departs from the lexicological mode of the previous sections and turns to an
exemplary moment in Rancière’s recent work, Aisthesis, to put on display the everyday

22 Parataxis is a style of writing that finds origins in Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Michel de Montaigne
is its exemplary author who, throughout his essays, announces this writing style as complicit
with the project of essay-writing itself as when, in his essay “Of Friendship”, he asks “what
are these things I scribble, other than grotesque and monstrous bodies, made up of various
parts, without any certain figure or any other than accidental order, coherence, or
proportion.” (Montaigne, The Complete Essays of Montaigne, 135; also see my discussion of this
in Panagia, The Poetics of Political Thinking, 98-101; as well as Flathman, Reflections of a Would-Be
Anarchist, 49-77). The classical rhetorician, Morris Croll, explains that parataxis is a style best
suited to “those who have aimed at the expression of individual experience” and thus “have
tended to break up the long musical periods of public discourse into short, incisive
members, connected with each other by only the slightest of ligatures, each one carrying a
stronger emphasis, conveying a sharper meaning than it would have if it were strictly
subordinated to the general effect of a whole period.” (Morris Croll, “Attic Prose in the
Seventeenth Century” in Croll, Patrick, and Evans, Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm, 87).
realism of the farniente of reverie. I conclude the essay by showing how Rancière’s democratic realism is a dissident realism insistent upon dissolving the ties that bind a social order from authority. The possibility of doing so returns reverie to emancipation.

Part I: Blurring the (Police) Line; or, the measurelessness of the mélange

The police line is a dispositional arrangement that assumes an innate relation of cause and effect implicit in all actions and relations. It thus refers to two operations at the same time: the privileging of causality as a mode of relating and the representation of all relations as causal (as if no other mode of relating can count or measure up to the strength and purpose of causality). This is what Rancière means when, in his Ten Theses on Politics he affirms that “The police is a ‘partition of the sensible’ [le partage du sensible] whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement.” The police line, in short, is the rigid designator conducing forces, energies, senses, and sensibilities towards and end, and without a break. The police is not a visible figure of state authority but an invisible line of succession (i.e., the succession of power, the inheritance of capital, the flow of meaning, the continuation of plot, etc.) that obliges space and time to continue to function as they have. The police line is an ontology of totality and continuity.

A crucial element of the police line, then, is its intended ability to restrict participation. If the only relations that count are causal, then no other form of participation can take place other than a purposive one. Or, better put, any other supplementary form of partaking is illegitimate. And so already we begin to see the extent to which for Rancière, the police line is a sensibility of both order and arrangement, as well as time and movement. The police line disposes (both in the French sense of “arranges” but also in the French sense of dispositif, or technical object) the totality of relations and inclusions. It assigns movement and trajectory, as well as orbit and influence. It is, in every sense of the word, a disposition intended to restrict forms of participation.

“This dividing line,” Rancière affirms, “has been the object of my constant study.”

For the dividing line to be the object of constant study means wanting to show how distinctions dissipate and disperse – blur – at the moment when the reality of excess is

24 Rancière and Parker, The Philosopher and His Poor, 225.
brought to the fore. Consider, in this light, the recurring exemplarity of Flaubert’s prose as a political thematic throughout Rancière’s oeuvre. Flaubert is a thwarted author, Rancière tells us. His biography is the epitome of neoclassical aestheticism – and yet, his works are immediately perceived as democratic. “His very refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever was considered to be evidence of democratic equality. His adversaries claimed that he was democratic due to his decision to depict and portray instead of to instruct. This equality of indifference is the result of a poetic bias: the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content.”

Equality arises when necessity is rendered indistinct; that is, when the dividing line that distinguishes is rendered indifferent to all other divisions. Hence democracy as that form of association without qualification. The assumption here is a sentimental one: the demos is not constituted on the basis of a necessary relation. On the contrary, the feature that enables the auto-articulation of a demos is a disinterest to the necessity of any formal arrangement. Without interest or qualification, then, there can be no prescriptive force for the constitution of a collectivity. This because indifference “destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers as a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by the random circulation of the written word.”

Once we acknowledge the fact that relations are not innate or natural, then the only thing left is to admit that anything can comingle with anything else, that no relation is illegitimate because legitimacy is not a condition of relationality. And this admission is the work of an aesthetic experience that “frees the sensory events from the links of identity and usefulness.” In short, indistinction blurs the police line.

Let us pause for an example that Rancière offers up. It is an aesthetic example from the world of cinema; and more specifically, it is Rancière’s articulation of Godard’s practice of montage which is rooted in this assertion: “Godard clearly makes his point by dissociating

---

25 Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics.*, 14. Consider a similar sentiment, recently articulated by Jacob T. Levy, in his account of the dissolution of hereditary rule: “But the thought that a commoner and a king, men and women, *bourgeois* and nobles, or compatriots and foreigners could be equal in status has seemed absurd to other states who sought to impose isomorphism.” Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 70.


things that are indissociable.”28 And the first thing that Godard dissociates is the cinematic common sense relation between image and plot. Godard’s montage techniques (in contrast to Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical montage that is directed towards a “synchronization of the senses”29) dissolves the hold that the narrative plot has on filmic images to the point of dissociating images from their narrative arrangement.30 Consider in this regard Anna Karina’s character, Odile, in Godard’s caper classic Bande à part who, when told it is time to go and plan the caper, turns to the camera (and audience) to ask: “Un plan? Pourquoi?”

Jean-Luc Godard. Bande à part. 1964 (Criterion Collection 1:36:27)

“A Plan? What for?” This, as if to affirm that the film itself has no plan but is simply a series of recorded movements and gestures assembled in a plan-like way. [Plan is the French word for the cinematic shot that, as Ronald Bogue notes, “has its origin in the early silent cinema, when filmmakers spoke of establishing continuity between planes of action in succeeding scenes.”31] Such moments of dissociative acknowledgment arrest because they render indistinct the elements of the film, elements that possess no inherent logic of arrangement in and of themselves. There is no reason why this image of a glass of milk (in

28 Ranciere, Film Fables, 172.
30 This is what Daniel Morgan refers to as “reference without ontology” in Godard’s late work. See Morgan, Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema, 156-165.
31 Rancière and Parker, The Philosopher and His Poor, 44.
Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* – an example Rancière extracts from Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* \(^{32}\) necessarily belongs to that narrative sequence – *just as* – there is no reason why that color of skin belongs to this drinking fountain. There is no absolute reason for belonging, and thus no absolute reason for exclusion either. The fact of association is not bound to a necessary logic or justification; participation is *unreasonable*, if you will. Hence the force of Godard’s montage that “decomposes the assembly of gestures and images and returns them to their basic elements. The universality of his art is that it establishes the most basic elements, and assemblies thereof, that make a discourse and a practice intelligible by making them comparable to other discourses and practices, by, for instance, making a political discourse and union comparable to a declaration of love and a love affair.”\(^{33}\)

Once we will turn to *Aisthesis* (below) we will see other micro-situations Rancière elicits to emphasize his practice of emancipation as the partaking of aesthetic indistinction or blurring. In reality, for him emancipation means blurring: “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body.”\(^{34}\) And this is why politics is always aesthetic for him. Simply put, aesthetics regards an operation of reconfiguration of the sensible (as he often writes) that takes as its starting point the fact that there is no relationship of necessity between form and content. Thus instead of answering the question of what is beautiful, or what is art, or what is useful in art for politics (all questions that Rancière is uninterested in answering), he turns to microsituations of aesthetic disinterest to underscore how aesthetic experience blurs the given relations within any existing configuration. And this occurs because aesthetic experience renders things indistinct, or indifferent, or impersonal from one another in the manner in which Godard will render indistinct, or indifferent, or impersonal the relation of image and plot.

These three terms – indistinct, indifferent, and impersonal – are used interchangeably in Rancière’s oeuvre to designate the reality of non-necessity; the reality, that is, that no relation is necessary and/or proper to politics and that all relations amount to what some might otherwise call decorum, or even habit. We can begin to sense how Rancière’s realism is a kind of thwarted realism because it is not invested in a fidelity of correspondence to an

\(^{32}\) Ranciere, *Film Fables*.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{34}\) Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 19.
actual world, but to the felt experience of a break or betrayal of that correspondence. The name given to that betrayal of correspondence is emancipation. It’s with this in mind that Rancière asserts the following: “From the democratic insurrection against the hierarchical distribution of forms of life, modern fiction wants to extract the impersonal, anonymous power of life, freed from all the threads linking it with the rules of social identification and poetic legislation. It wants to capture this ‘pure’ power and oppose it to the tyranny of plot. This is its own idea of democracy.”35

The relation between democracy and modern fiction – a relation that Rancière often invokes – may at first glance seem curious, at least. But for Rancière it’s crucial as a formal operation of prose deployed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “scandal in thinking” of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, for instance, regards the everydayness of its subject matter such that if anything whatsoever can count as a subject of literature, then the poetic legislation that determines the right types of actions and the specific kinds of individuals entitled to representation loses its authority to judge who or what is entitled to representation. Modern fiction blurs the line of appropriateness in representation downgrading the decorous ambitions of a *belles-lettres* literacy to a modest ambiguity of mere letters. Here is Rancière again: “Modern fiction affirmed itself by turning upside down the old hierarchical logic that opposed the rational connection of action to the empirical succession of life. This means that its development was linked with the upsetting of the old opposition between active men and passive women. It was linked with the emergence of a social and literary character: the child of the plebeian who is now able to live all those forms of experience that were previously reserved for men of action or leisure: ideal love stories or forms of refined sensuous excitement, social and political intrigues or the pleasures of poetry, aesthetic contemplation, or reverie.”36 *This* above all else, is the operation of dissensus at the heart of Rancière’s radical egalitarianism: it is the emancipation of any authority whatsoever through an erasure of the forms of relations – the analogies, sympathies, knowledges, and judgments – that institute distinctions. Anyone can experience anything: experience is unentitled. The result is a state of reverie whereby reality’s constant

---

36 Ibid., 207.
mixing is exposed and made palpable. This reverie of indistinction is the practice of
democratic partaking that blurs the police line.\textsuperscript{37} And this is Rancière’s democratic realism.

Part II: Reverie; Or, In Praise of Unpurposive Action

Reverie is the experiential state of the measureless mélange: it is at once impersonal
and improper to the extent that within this mixed state the certainties of property and
propriety do not hold. The idea of reverie is crucial to Rancière’s elaboration of democratic
politics not because reverie promises an emancipatory imaginary or a politics of the
imagination. On the contrary, the state of reverie is the actual state of democracy – it is
democracy’s real, if you will – that is persistently being threatened by multiple forms of its
denunciation. The denunciation of reverie comes in those authoritative judgments that
affirm the continuity of partition. If we were to be curt, we would say that the denunciation
of reverie is the activity of the police that wants the inherited allotment of property (of
lands, of factories, of industry, of capital, of work, of time, and of space) to continue in
perpetuity. But the operation of blurring we rehearsed in the previous section generates a
state of reverie – a state, that is, of suspension where things simply stop operating as they
had. Reverie will thus be the name Rancière gives to the unauthorized partaking in leisurely
activities that generate an unpuprosive doing.

Rancière’s focused attention to reverie began early in his career through the archival
work that went into the writing of \textit{Proletarian Nights}. Crucial to that enterprise, and to the
stories of locksmiths, tailors, and cobblers therein, was the discovery of unofficial ways of
doing certain activities, like the writing of poetry. The “worker’s dream” that forms the
subtitle of \textit{Proletarian Nights} is less a sleep-induced state of abstraction, or an imaginary utopia
of a promised political futures, but the real conditions of time and space subverted by
workers so they could take time for reverie. Rancière discovers such practices of temporal
partaking in the archives of the nineteenth century French proletarians he reads. But in order
to be able to attend to this newly articulated sensitive fabric, Rancière has to make place for
reverie as a site of social scientific research. To do so, it becomes urgent to reconfigure a

\textsuperscript{37} I explain this operation more fully in my chapter in Panagia, \textit{The Political Life of Sensation}
entitled “From Nomos to Nomad: Kant, Deleuze, and Rancière on Sensation.” (21-44).
reliance on the epistemic break. In short, in order for reverie to see the light of day a subversion of “the science that claimed to explain subjection and guide revolt” had to occur because that science “was complicit in the dominant order.”

The discovery of the *farniente* of reverie requires Rancière to abandon the expectations of both explanation and prediction as viable modes of social science research. “To account for the subversive power of their work,” Rancière affirms, “I was forced to break with the habits of social science, for which these personal accounts, fictions, or discourses are no more than the confused products of a process that social science alone is in a position to understand. These words had to be removed from their status as evidence or symptoms of a social reality to show them as writing and thinking at work on the construction of a different social world.” The science of the social as the science of the purposive statement has no time for the unpurposive. And yet here is an entire *an*-archive, a “heap of broken images” as Miriam Bratu Hansen calls it, of political and aesthetic material that registers the unpurposive real of an assembly of participants whose activities are politically subversive not because of their outcomes but in and of themselves, as activities that undermine the divisions of time and space allotted to them, and they do so not as a result of a political program, or on the basis of institutional requirements, but simply because they are practiced. In lieu of restorative, work-oriented sleeping, these artisans and laborers engaged in leisurely practices by taking the night time as their time of leisure.

There is thus no doubt that such non-events occurred. The archival evidence is overwhelming. The facts are there, if you will, as is the data. But how can you account for the lost-time of reverie within a science of politics that articulates purposeful action as timeless deeds? What of those acts that are not deeds but that nonetheless mark a doing that is happening, even if that doing is no-thing? The task at hand for Rancière becomes one of abandoning a purposive social science and the actuarial ambitions of evidentiary accountability so as to give space and time to the *farniente* of reverie.

The status of irrelevance attributed to unpurposive acts is a sustained site in Rancière’s writings that allows him to affirm the realism of reverie for democratic politics.

---

38 Althusser, *For Marx*.
40 Ibid., xi.
41 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 36.
Such reverie, as I’ve suggested, is not the reverie of an imagination with a purpose, but refers to activities without necessary or planned effects; it refers to a mode of action that is unusable and hence unprescribable. In contrast to the auctor of the epistemic break who taught where knowledge began and stopped, what is relevant and irrelevant revolutionary action, Rancière turns his political, aesthetic, and scholarly attentions to everyday practices that are fundamentally ambiguous to the criteria of purposiveness. In doing so, he puts pressure on the anxiety to specify the relevance of any one activity. In short, what Rancière’s turn to the farniente of reverie points to is a refusal of those modes of critical denunciation that easily assign qualifications of relevance to actions so as to determine the nature of right action for democratic politics. Like the aesthetic object that, on its own, is neither relevant nor irrelevant because its value is undeterminable, the actions of the farniente trouble, to the point of dissolving, the expectations of purpose for political action. The result is an indistinction of action from purpose – an impersonal action – that renders any action or activity whatsoever as potentially political. The farniente of reverie thus restores the actuality of an accursed share of democratic politics. But to accept this – that is, to accept reverie’s farniente as political action, and specifically as a transformative mode of democratic action – requires a troubling (for some) corollary: the unpurposiveness of reverie puts pressure on our inherited dogmatism about the centrality of judgment as a political faculty. For what the forces of measurelessness, unpurposiveness, indistinction, and reverie all point to is the refusal to privilege judgment as necessary to democratic politics. Rancière’s democratic realism involves a disregard for judgment since crucial to judgments are criteria, and criteria are unavailable in the measureless mélange of reverie’s farniente.

Part III: Rancière’s Scenography

order to discard the model of judgment that Rancière identifies as the dogmatic drive of critique which emphasizes the right knowledge for politics and identifies a hierarchy of purposeful acts, he will have to introduce a series of literary and aesthetic substitutions that take the place (in the sense of a part-taking) of the established epistemophilia. In *Aisthesis* Rancière will thus explore fourteen scenes of sensorial transformation [properly put, these are instances of a plebeian modernism] that exemplify the availability of an emancipated movement that “does not succeed in reintegrating the strategic patterns of causes and effects, ends and means.”

Crucial to this sense of democratic action as emancipated movement, and to what I am calling Rancière’s democratic realism, is a disregard for specialization as necessary to the delimitation of veritable political acts. Indeed, and as he affirms in the Prelude to *Aisthesis*, specialization is what kills the demos’s dreams: “The scientific Marxist revolution certainly wanted to put an end to the workers’ reveries, along with utopian programmes. But by opposing them to the effects of real social development, it kept subordinating the end and means of action to the movement of life, at the risk of discovering that this movement does not want anything and does not allow any strategy to lay claim on it.”

At the outset of *Aisthesis*, then, Rancière elaborates two contested accounts of realism. At one level, there is an epistemic realism, the realism of “real social development”, which is less an actuality than a prescription of what action ought to look and feel like; this is the realism of epistemophilia that determines criteria for actual political. Epistemic realism is not so much a category of knowledge which accurately designates the real in the world. It is, rather, the qualification of the category of the epistemic as lexically prior to any other qualification for the determination of right political action. Epistemic realism is a mood or disposition that instructs workers on what is to be done, when, and how. On the other hand, we have reverie’s realism that is at once resistant and immune to the project of strategic thinking and purposeful action found in epistemic realism; reverie’s realism is the realism of unpurposiveness. In short, what the scenographies in *Aisthesis* play out is a tension between the moment of aesthetic experience and that of critical judgment. “The aesthetic revolution,” Rancière affirms, “developed as an unending break with the hierarchical model of the body,

---

44 Ibid., xvi.
the story, and action.” Such a break also implies a break with hierarchies of judgment and, relatedly, the modern convention of conjoining judgment with critique. The modern aesthetic revolution introduces a dissensus in the conventions of both propriety and property, structured as they were on decorum’s hierarchies. By showing how this aesthetic operation of interruption works, Rancière will show two things of political import: 1. All hierarchies are not natural but tethered to a specific world of decorum; and 2. In the modern period, politics is not a matter of authoritative judgments but of dismantling the power of authority via practices that reconfigure the validity and legitimacy of judgment’s stature amongst the political faculties.

In this way we can understand how the emergence of that quintessentially modern aesthetic object, the novel, is as much a democratic achievement as it is an aesthetic one: The novel, Rancière tells us, “dethroned drama as the exemplary art of speech, bearing witness to the capacity of men and women without quality to feel all kinds of ideal aspirations and sensual frenzies.” To dethrone drama as the exemplary art of speech isn’t merely a statement of a modern sociology of literary culture; it is also an assertion about the dismantling of those poetic categories that represent the right disposition of words, sounds, and meanings. That the novel can count as a work of aesthetic value means, precisely, that those common peoples who read novels, and those common sentiments represented in novels, are countable. As Frances Ferguson rightly describes the point, “Literature thus provides a redistribution of the sensible in creating new lines of equivalences.” The project of *Aisthesis* will thus be to show how the aesthetic revolution of the modern period is also a political revolution (and vice versa) by setting up the scenes whereby anyone whomsoever can have aspirations and frenzies; that is, by creating a scenography of moments that show how there are no qualifications for partaking in the *farniente* of reverie.

There are fourteen scenes in *Aisthesis*. Each is autonomous in relation to the others. And though they are organized chronologically, that chronology does not imply any kind of lexical priority or necessary rank. Each of the paratactic scenes, then, presents a passage in a work as a singular autonomous thing, an object with its own support. So that the passage itself, and the object of scrutiny, both bear the weight of the thing in itself. But this is no

---

45 Ibid., xvi.
46 Ibid., xiv-xv.
47 Ferguson, “Now It’s Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading,” 530.
mere willful autonomy; there is no voluntarism or individuality implied in the intentional structure of the objects presented or, indeed, in the structure of the presentation itself. This because aesthetics for Rancière’s does not assume autonomy as synonymous with authority. Quite the contrary: the autonomy of the aesthetic object wrenches it from having the stature of authority precisely because its autonomy isolates it from any link to a structure of qualification. In this way the presentation of these objects and scenes as autonomous stands as a marker of aesthetic indistinction. They are indistinct to one another and thus are relatable to one another, though their manner of relating remains unassigned. And to call the objects of Rancière’s mises-en-scènes autonomous means to affirm their non-necessity to any authoritative structure of interest or intent or purpose. This is what I mean when I say that they are objects without a support: they don’t have to lean on – or be borne by – anything like a value scheme in order to count as objects of ponder.

The formal layout of Aisthesis is paratactic. It creates the opportunity of an emancipated movement throughout by insisting on the absence of a beginning, middle, or end. The book has a project, no doubt, but it doesn’t have a plan (recall Odile: “Un plan? Pourquoi?”), and the reader is free to start at any point in the book, and move about freely. Aisthesis is a book of aesthetic and political theory that in composition and layout comes perilously close to transcribing the aesthetic features of filmic montage. It is a book with no depth, a glass surface. It is a work that at once announces the insufficiency of an hermeneutics of suspicion for political criticism, denies the strategic effectiveness of a symptomatic reading, and performs the emancipated movement it seeks to put on display. Given its subject matter, it is a book curiously devoid of judgments or explications; this, despite the fact that it begins and ends with one great castigation: the denunciation of expert judgment via its denunciation of innate relations as embodied in the Marxist avant-garde ambition of “rigor” when analyzing capitalism and art, politics and aesthetics, avant-garde and kitsch. But that denunciation is the starting point that allows the book to queer the relationship between rigorous analysis and relevant evidence by introducing the idea that when all is said and done, anyone whomsoever has the capacity to do no-thing. And Aisthesis will show us fourteen scenes of such good-for-no-thing-ness.

48 Consider, in this regard, Rancière’s treatment of paratactic syntax as synonymous with montage in Ranciere, The Future of the Image, 43-51.
49 Ranciere, Aisthesis, 48.
As there is no lexical priority, rhyme or reason built into the exposition and elaboration of *Aisthesis*’s scenes, I will focus on the one that my current reading strikes me most vividly: scene fourteen, entitled “The Cruel Radiance of What Is.” The chapter begins, as they all do, with a textual scene; it cites a passage from James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Like all the other scenes in the book, Rancière does not explain the intelligibility of the work, of the words, or the vistas. Rather, he charts the transformations of the sensible fabric therein and how such transformations betray a police line of innate relations.

In chapter one/scene one of the book Rancière shows this starkly and directly by announcing the break that Johann Winckelmann’s description of the *Belvedere Torso* made with the representational regime of art, that regime of art that (like its corollary in modern theories of political representation) says that for a representation to count as beautiful (or legitimate, in the political case) it must correspond to something real in the world. But with the *Belvedere Torso* we have a statue of Hercules – the colossus of deeds and actions – without arms or legs, “a seated body deprived of every limb capable of performing any action requiring force or skill.” And so, at the get-go, even in the first pages of the first scene of *Aisthesis*, Rancière is not shy about projecting how his objects of attention will be found objects (quite literally, in this case, as the *Belvedere Torso* was, for Winckelmann, a relatively recent archeological find). “A mutilated statue,” he will go on to say, “is not only a statue lacking parts.” [empirically speaking, The *Belvedere Torso* is a part that has no parts.] “It is a representation of a body that cannot be appreciated any longer according to two main criteria used by the representative order: firstly, the harmony of proportions – that is to say, the congruence between parts and the whole; secondly, the expressivity – that is, the relation between visible form and character – an identity, a feeling, a thought – that this visible form makes recognizable in unequivocal traits.” By isolating a mutilated statue as an object of art in his monumental *The History of Ancient Art*, Winckelmann (perhaps unwittingly) ushers in the modern period of a plebeian avant-garde that has as a possible-world manifestation the Agee/Walker collaboration.

The Agee/Walker collaboration bespeaks a reconfiguration of the sensible at two levels: the first is the rearrangement of the image/text relation in the book and the second is

50 Ibid., 2.  
51 Ibid., 4.
the reconfiguration of the propriety of tone by, as Rancière says, seeming “to transpose Balzacian descriptions of bourgeois interiors to the setting of poor life.” Their project began as an established genre with a missive: Fortune magazine at the time specializing in long-form photojournalism sent Agee to Alabama to document the lives of sharecroppers during the height of the dust bowl. When asked to do so, Agee enlisted Walker Evans’s help. “But,” Rancière notes, “the two friends soon took a decision that lent their cooperation unique allure: each one of them would work alone. Text and photographs would be independent. No photograph, indeed, would show the reader the cracks in the bureau or the family of china dogs. Photos would bear no captions. And no reporter’s text would explain the circumstances in which the photographer gathered certain members of one of the three families.” Herein lies the crux of the farniente scene, its reconfiguration of the sensible: it is a collaboration without union or unity wherein each person and each object (word and photo) stands as autonomous and indistinct to the another. Like Winckelmann’s Belvedere Torso, what we have here is a singular break with the representative regime through Agee’s and Evans’s practice of having no-part with one another. The effect is the creation of a scene where words have no-part with images, and images no-part with words. Words and images will thus operate as found objects in this scene of broken relations and reconfigured conventions. [The implication in Aisthesis will be that democracy is, itself, a practice of mediation that reconfigures the orientation of those broken pieces or found objects he calls “the part of those who have no-part.”] By deciding to work alone together, Agee and Evans disfigure the line of relation between journalism, photography, and realism thereby making each of these elements broken parts that may be reconfigured. It is true that the representational regime in photojournalism would ask its practitioners to supplement words with images, and images with words, so as to present an accurate account. And no doubt, this is what the Fortune editor who gave Agee the assignment expected of him: an accurate and unembellished narrative. After all, Agee was known for having written those kinds of stories before. All the while, no one could have expected him to decide with Evans to break with the expectations that art mean something, an expectation defined “by the champions of

52 Ibid., 246/7.
53 Ibid., 247.
54 Gilles Deleuze calls this a “non-totalizable relation” (Deleuze, Cinema, 256) or an “irrational cut” (Ibid., 278). On the political theory of the irrational cut, see William Connolly, Neuropolitics, 114-139.
a certain modernism,” that “opposes the carefully chosen elements of art to the vulgar inventories of ‘universal reportage.’”

And so we have a reconfiguration of (at least) two different sensorial plateaus: the transformation of the relation between word and image, which transforms (or dismisses) the necessity of each to have to provide explanations of what there is to be seen and known; and the transformation of the expectations of representation itself that, like the Belvedere Torso, requires a reconfiguration of the hierarchies of criteria that assign the qualities of stature and decorum to objects. “The champions of a certain modernism,” as Rancière identifies those judges without naming them, refers to that category of decorous criticism which presumes that the sensibility of taste possesses innate qualities. It is those same judges and critics who identify the coincidence of taste with rank, and judgment with capacity. But the punctum, or interruption, or blurring, or dissensus – in short, the *brouillage* – that Agee/Evans collaboration enacts breaks the common measure that assures the equivalences which a certain modernism whishes to uphold. And the result? An indistinction of things, place, and order that stultifies qualification by instituting an excess of triviality dispersed throughout the pages of the work so ubiquitously, that the “trivial” stops being a negative qualification and is transformed into the actuality “that there is no reason to choose one over another.” This is, ultimately, the power of a democratic realism that admits of the measurelessness of the mélange and thus, of the insufficiency of sound judgment as a marker of social and political privilege. Here is Rancière on Agee/Evans one final time:

the ‘frivolous’ or ‘pathological’ count of singlets, clothespin, rusted nails, espadrille eyelets, broken buttons, and lone socks or gloves in the Gudger house is a way of making these objects useless for any account of the situation of poor farmers given to the – traditional, reformist or revolutionary – doctors of society. This is precisely, says Agee, the only *serious* attitude, the attitude of the gaze and speech that are not grounded on any authority and do not ground any; the entire state of consciousness that refuses specialization for itself and must also refuse every right to select what suits its point of view in the surroundings of the destitute sharecroppers, to concentrate instead on the essential fact that each one of these things is part of an existence that is entirely actual, inevitable, and unrepeatable. The ‘frivolous’

---

56 Ibid., 249.
inventory of the drawers only fully renders a minute portion of the elements that are
gathered in the infinite and unrepeatable intertwining relations between human
beings, an environment, events, and things that ends up in the actuality of these few
lives.57

To account for these lives means having to embrace triviality and frivolousness, those
markers of do-no-thing-ness that specialization refuses. And this occurs in Let Us Now Praise
Famous Men not simply at the level of presentation, but also at the point when Agee’s and
Evans’s collaboration is enacted in the mode of isolation (“each one would work alone”) enabling the photos to bear no caption and the words to bear no illustration. The result is a
complete reconfiguration of the genre of journalism and with it, a reconfiguration of how
words and images can and may relate – that is, as indistinct to one another.

Only by appreciating the actuality of indistinction can we appreciate the force of
Rancière’s democratic realism. Through his scenographic practice of staging elements as
indistinct from one another Rancière is able to make explicit in the scenes he selects how the
worlds depicted are lyrical inventories that bear the weight of the actual. The risk is to
romanticize the poor, the downtrodden, the sharecroppers whose lives bespeak a “cruel
radiance;” and the consequence of this risk is to disregard them. Romanticization singles
them out as a distinct lot whose places and times have been apportioned. But Rancière will
deny that risk, foreshorten and dismiss its consequences. For “the cruel radiance of what is”
doesn’t come from a celebration of the sharecropper’s condition, as if the task is to single
out the true hero of life’s randomness. It is rather, quite the opposite: the task of the
scenography is to isolate the weight of an art of living that arises when the representational
order of words and images can no longer bear the weight of common measure: There is no-
thing common about the sharecroppers. What Rancière wants to do with this scene is not
point to the genius of two artists who accurately depict the suffering of others. On the
contrary, he wants to show the aesthetic arrangements curated by the sharecroppers on their
own terms, and show how Agee’s and Evans’s attention to these does not come from an
indexical act of representation that wants to pinpoint a true reality. Rather, by denying
journalism’s genre convention of using images to supplement text and text to explain
pictures Agee and Walker allow the fact of living to emerge from the subversion of a “right

57 Ibid., 251.
disposition of things.”58 This work is ultimately the result of Agee’s inventories throughout his text that we can only glimpse at in Evans’s photographs; it is the work of a “poetics committed to unfolding the truth of one hour of the world imprisoned in the triviality of a utensil or a fabric.”59 It is, in short, the truth of the ready-made, found object (like the Belvedere Torso) that stands on its own and has no innate relation to any specific purpose because it is a no-part. Agee and Evans distort the common conceit that the purpose of words and images is to explain reality.

In discussing Dziga Vertov, another of Aisthesis’s scenes, Rancière says this: “A film is not a matter of putting a story into images meant to move the hearts or to satisfy the artistic sense. It is primarily a thing, and a thing made with materials that are worthwhile on their own. This is the principle Vertov adopts… Only cinema of the fact.”60 This cinema of the fact is not a realist documentary. It is, rather, the realism of a doing no-thing, of rearranging things that are already there. “Vertov does not simply want to film facts. He wants to organize them into a film-thing that itself contributes to constructing the fact of the new life.”61 Something similar can be said (and will be said) of Agee and Evans as well as of Chaplin and Winckelmann and all the other scenographers in Aisthesis. Why scenes and why this scenographic mélange? Simply put, what Aisthesis does is put on display, in both content and form, Rancière’s democratic realism that centers on the fact of mediation of political life. Politics is the constant struggle to have one’s activities count as real or actual in the face of those acts of judgment (i.e., the police line) that affirm the uselessness (or illegitimacy) of the unpurposive. ‘How useless it is for sharecroppers to have decorations! Rather than dedicating their time and effort to ornament, they should spend their time working harder so the can lift themselves from their misery.’ And yet, Rancière wants to say, it is precisely in those micro-moments of do-no-thing-ness that we uncover novel forms of participation and acts of organization and arrangements dissident from established modes of commonality decorum. Such acts of disorganization construct the fact of new lives. The realism of democratic reverie is a dissent from an epistemic realism that imagines the work of political thinking as the procedure of justification for the right disposition of things.

58 See Michel Foucault’s “Governmentality” in Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, The Foucault Effect, 251.
59 Ranciere, Aisthesis, 255.
60 Ibid., 228.
61 Ibid., 228.
Part IV: Conclusion

In the Fall of 2014, a classic water-cooler event occurred in North America: a podcast named *Serial* went viral amongst the U.S. digital literati. The podcast followed the format of journalism reporting with a classic ‘who-done-it?’ plot sequence. It recounted the events and peoples involved in the murder of a teenage girl in Baltimore in the 1990s. And each episode left audiences asking for more, so to speak, because though one person – a seventeen-year old named of Adnan Syed – was arrested, tried, and prosecuted for the murder, the fact of his being guilty remains up for grabs. The doubt of guilt results from a simple fact of the story, the story’s true central character: the twenty or so minutes of unaccounted – and unaccountable – time of Syed’s otherwise ordinary day. That unaccountable time is, on Syed’s retelling, a period of one’s day like any other period of any other day, where he just can’t recount of his whereabouts, what he was doing, or with whom. He may have been in the library, perhaps he was driving somewhere, or maybe he was murdering his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee: simply put, it is a time when nothing, and everything, could have happened. Because of that unaccountable time, Syed was prosecuted and sentenced to serve a life sentence for the murder of his ex-girlfriend. The journalistic plot leaves the question open as to whether Syed is or is not guilty; and for the purpose of the podcast, it really doesn’t matter. Because *Serial* (the show) couldn’t be “serial” the time sequence, if there were an answer to the ‘who-done-it?’ Indeed, one of the things the podcast makes clear is how many everyday moments of everyone’s lives are moments when nothing is done and when time is fundamentally unaccountable – quite literally, a *farniente*.

One of the things that Rancière’s explorations of the *farniente* of reverie throughout his career of writing and research on the aesthetics of politics make clear is that the expectation of the accountability of time is a constant site of political inequality. As we have seen throughout these pages the *farniente* of reverie is a time of leisure, a luxurious moment of the frivolous passing of time when minutes, if not hours, happen without scope or aim. Any person whomever is not entitled to time’s passing. Such leisurely luxuries are reserved for industrious peoples of any age whose heroic acts of bravery save the economy, or make history. These *auctors* are the ones entitled to do nothing because their lives are otherwise occupied with purposeful, authoritative acts. Rancière’s democratic realism disrupts this
sensible fabric of temporal causes and effects, of means and ends, of acting as doing, in order to set the stage for a radically egalitarian democratic partaking. What the *farniente* of reverie does, in other words, is discharge action with the burden of having to matter, of having to achieve, so that any act whatsoever may have a radiance of what is.

The realism of democratic politics is the do-nothing of everyday acts of reconfiguration that show novel ways of arrangement and participation in forms of organization heretofore unavailable. This do-nothing affirms the fact that qualifications for action and participation are not innate properties of action. Such a mode of democratic realism emerges from the sensorial transformations that enable transformations of political organization other than that of representation. We saw a version of this in our detailed recounting of the Agee/Evans scene. Here journalism, reportage, the illustration, passivity, leisure, decorum, time, and the relation of words and images were reconfigured to the point of creating an entirely disparate and incongruous sensible fabric; disparate, that is, to the conventions of journalistic reportage then (and now); incongruous, that is, to the expectations of a representational realism. When the hierarchies of representational realism are rendered indistinct from all other qualifications of relevance to a work, then what is left is to create the configurations of the sensible that render a work, or event, or action actual. Such sensible configurations suggest the possibility of a radical democratic realism that takes as its starting point the frivolous fact that the purposiveness of action is not an innate quality of democratic life. Therein lies the unbearable weight of the *farniente* of reverie.

Bibliography:


