

Article

Action versus Movement: A Rebuttal of J. M. Bernstein on Rancière

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External Editor: Krzysztof Ziarek

Received: 3 September 2014; in revised form: 3 November 2014 / Accepted: 7 November 2014 /
Published: 19 November 2014

Abstract: Rebutting J. M. Bernstein’s interpretation of Jacques Rancière’s aesthetics in an essay where Bernstein uses Rancière to praise classic Hollywood cinema, the present article turns to a series of recent essays and a lecture by Rancière to argue that, *pace* Bernstein, for Rancière the conditions that demanded 19th-century modernism’s critique of the intertwined concepts of narrative and action still prevail today, in the era of entertainment cinema. The egalitarian social condition foreshadowed by the aesthetic for Rancière demands suspension of the very conditions of domination of nature and passive spectacle endemic to contemporary life. In other words, my essay argues that Rancière must and does remain committed to a version of aesthetic modernism, albeit one founded in an undoubted realism and a concomitant ideal of social equality.

Keywords: aesthetics; Jacques Rancière; modernism; J. M. Bernstein; cinema; narrative; image; realism

1. Introduction

If, as Jacques Rancière argues, the titanic battles of the last thirty years over the “end” of modernism and the emergence of an apparent “postmodern” have in fact only obscured what is really going on; if, furthermore, *what is* being thus hidden is a broad project of social/aesthetic emancipation aimed against a socially produced “natural” hierarchy, then the vital question to pose to Rancière is, when did or will this project end?

Now, one might respond to this initial query by challenging its assumptions, assumptions contained in that word, “project” that I’ve just used: after all, Rancière chooses the very language of “regimes of the sensible” for his aesthetic history precisely in rejecting the dialectical and progressive historicity implied in debates about modernism and postmodernism. The history that interests Rancière takes place at the level of “sense”—both of the “senses” and of “making sense”—and thus does not in the first instance engage any ends or goals, complicating any effort to conceive it as project.

In the end, my essay will agree with much in these objections, arguing that Rancière himself remains too beholden to a linear and progressive view of aesthetic phenomena. However, both Rancière’s embrace of a history privileging the struggle against socially produced inequality and the accounts of regimes of the sensible by which he incorporates the historicity of that struggle into an account of how inequality has changed over time still allows us to ask some of the questions that haunt Jurgen Habermas about the “unfinished” nature of modernity’s tasks. When (meaning, “under what conditions”) *will* the tasks emerging in the aesthetic regime be completed? Or, if the aesthetic regime (as opposed to modernity) is in principle endless, *why* is that the case?

In attempting to raise precisely those questions, I’ll confess an odd ally, Jay Bernstein, who in the course of an exemplary, though, in the final analysis I think, wrong interpretation of Rancière on cinema, lays precisely this challenge at Rancière’s feet [1]. Specifically, Bernstein argues that aesthetic modernity—what Rancière calls “the aesthetic regime of the sensible”—has now definitively established itself, thus antiquating any aesthetic practice aimed at puncturing representational hierarchy *per se*. Thus, for Bernstein, at least *that* aspect of modernity defining itself as a process of overturning the inherent inequality *contained in traditional* social visions has already come to an end. Or, to be more precise, we no longer live in such a traditional “world”, where the very *forms* of social interaction constantly, invisibly and ceaselessly reinstitute inequality. For Bernstein, what Rancière calls the representative order—which Bernstein takes to be a mere “previous artistic regime”—is definitively past. And that means that the tasks of contemporary art necessarily shift away from those of a “classical” modernism aimed against the hierarchical form of language itself inherent in “representation” ([1], p. 29).

It’s worth underscoring the general correctness of Bernstein’s interpretation here: Rancière *does* emphasize the way that the aesthetic regime of the sensible *responds* to the formal hierarchy implied by the regimes preceding it and particularly the “representative regime” [2–5]. Furthermore, it makes some sense, and Rancière himself acknowledges, that at least *some* elements of this critical response have fallen by the wayside in the contemporary world. We are no longer living in a time when we have to establish, for example, the legitimacy of the machine or of mass society ([4], pp. v–vi). Criticism of some particular supports of social inequality seems outdated and no longer necessary.

Bernstein, however, extends Rancière’s acknowledgement of historical change far beyond those boundaries. For him, living in a definitively post-Copernican age, we no longer need worry about the “form” of hierarchy implied by narrative itself. We no longer need worry that socially produced narratives encouraging individuals to accept some given “place” in a natural or supernatural order of things inhere in the very ways that we write, draw or speak¹. This isn’t to say that we no longer

¹ Responding to Rancière’s effort to valorize the image over contemporary narrative, Bernstein argues that “what nonetheless makes this claim historically lopsided is that it presumes that narrative is always mythological, so to speak,

tell ourselves stories that promulgate inequality: we certainly continue to do that. For Bernstein, however, the problem no longer concerns the very *structure* of sense and of discourse; it no longer problematizes narrative itself, only certain forms of it. That means that, for Bernstein, the primary task of the contemporary arts (and of cinema, the particular concern of his essay) is the criticism of “bad” (*i.e.*, inequality-encouraging) stories and the establishment of “good” (equality-aiding) ones ([1], p. 33).

As we will see, Bernstein’s interpretation amounts to a challenge *to* Rancière, an argument that he should cast-off his Euro-centric residual fondness for a modernist “art-cinema” with its interest in challenging narrative-driven movie-entertainments and come to see the true measure for contemporary cinema (and by extension, contemporary art in general) to be its capacity to open societal discussion and debate about new inequality-bearing contemporary narratives. Let’s examine more closely how he gets to the point of this exhortation.

2. Bernstein on Rancière: The Regimes of the Sensible

Bernstein gives an excellent account of Rancière’s realist re-writing of the history of the modernist arts, a re-writing that conceives of the underlying movement as involving a critique of the implicit rules about *who* can engage in the free activity of making or appreciating art. Rancière reads the period from the late 18th through mid-20th centuries as evolving an escalating challenge to the role of *narrative* and the *priority* of literature in the arts. In Rancière’s terms, we get an ever-advancing criticism of the representative regime of the arts, a regime that he clearly means to associate with the role of “representation” in early modern thought but which he actually traces back to Aristotle’s critique of Plato ([2], p. 21). In the representative regime, because it tells the stories of important human actions, poetry (literature) is accorded priority over other arts and, even within the circumscribed boundaries of the “literary”, different practices have different value. In other words, hierarchy determines everything—granting relative social privilege, first of all, to anybody who can “speak freely” but also producing, as multiplying mirrors of this definitive gesture, fine-grained ordering of *different* modes of speech ([2], p. 22). If one adds to this, finally, that the representative regime differentiates these various secondary modes of the artistic precisely according to their “objects”—what they “speak” about—then we have the complete picture of the “artistic” against which the aesthetic regime mounts its rebellion. In other words, in this final step, “epic poetry”, with its stories about the foundations of noble empires, is conceived as superior to lyric (whose subject is less exalted) and all poetry is superior to merely “craftsmanly” painting, which represents both noble and relatively ignoble scenes ([2], p. 22).

This distinction of the arts with regard to their objects explains why Rancière’s most famous accounts of the aesthetic regime’s *challenge* to the representative regime start out from the 19th Century novel and the increasing incursion of the *image* into literary narrative within that genre².

always the narrative of the representative regime, as if, implausibly, narrative itself did not undergo a secularizing movement.” Again, further down on the same page, he specifies that the problem is Rancière’s tendency to “construe the question of the authority of narrative as if all narrative had the same type of hierarchical commitments as the ‘ways of doing’ of the representative regime and argues”, instead, that we should accept a “structural” view, according to which “narrative (i)s simply the movement from one equilibrium to another” ([1], p. 29).

² See, for example, the discussion in *The Future of the Image* ([3], pp. 40–45), or in *Aisthesis* ([4], pp. iv–viii).

While Rancière famously recounts the history of the novel in France in a couple of books and numerous articles, increasingly, with the new millennium, his work makes clear that this new centrality of the *image* is essential to the aesthetic itself and not only to literature. Thus, to quote Bernstein on Rancière, the increased prestige of *painting* in the 19th and 20th centuries derives from an aesthetic regime that dictates “a practice of tearing objects out of their ordinary circumstances, their usual uses and ends, the standard ways they are categorized and conceptualized, their moral significance or insignificance, and considering them in their mere appearing, as things in themselves, all but worldless apart from their imposing claim on the judging subject” ([1], p. 24).

Operative underneath this emphasis on the imaginary (even within the narrative context of the novel!) is the emergence of “sense” itself as a category of experience, a socially equalizing concept precisely opposed to the “modes of action” that traditional societies could rank. Implied for both Bernstein and Rancière is the idea that the objects of sensation, as opposed to the modes of doing things, bring with them a quasi-transcendental equality. In what Rancière calls “the great parataxis”, the presentation of objects in their indifferent accessibility to the senses of *every* human being provides generations of artists within the aesthetic regime a foil to the elitist hierarchy of the earlier arts. Thus, Bernstein writes that “the shift from the representative to the aesthetic regime amounts to a change of orientation from ‘ways of doing’ (the mimesis of action) to ‘ways of sensible being’” ([1], p. 27).

Precisely because they de-emphasize human action, which remains problematically linked to “representative” narrative, painting and later photography and cinema emerge as paradigmatic arts. Indeed, the entire history of modernist cinematic theory embraces variations on a developmental logic favoring those arts where “style” comes closest to a passive registration of the material world—where human action seems to drop out of art entirely: the passivity of the camera (or of montage as a kind of mirror of the mechanical work of the camera’s eye) grants priority to cinema over other art forms and to various “modernist” moments in cinema (including “silent” cinema!) over cinema as popular entertainment. Rancière seems at moments to endorse something of this argument. The result is that, as Bernstein puts it, “Rancière tends to construe the question of the authority of narrative as if all narrative had the same type of hierarchical commitments as the ‘ways of doing’ of the representative regime.” ([1], p. 29).

This brings us to the second step in Bernstein’s argument, where he notes the historically limited circumstances under which the disruptive image can maintain its priority over some kind of interest in human action. The implicit assumption of *this* modernism is that “action” is always the hierarchically framed object of the representative regime, the kind of action limited to a few exemplary “men”, an impossible for most people most of the time. Or, to put this differently, narrating human deeds is always taken to be a way of re-instating an implied social inequality.

However, of course—such is Bernstein’s counter to the dominant assumption in Rancière about the aesthetic regime—the development of modernity produces its own narratives, accounts of “ways of doing” that precisely *do not* reinstate the older, “representative” hierarchies. As evidence that, despite his silence on this matter, Rancière agrees with him about it, Bernstein just builds on Rancière’s explicit project in *Film Fables*, namely, to understand such “narrativization” as a complexification of the otherwise linear history of cinema suggested by multiple modernists. Rancière himself notes that in “literalizing” with the movie camera the ideal of 19th century literature of a purely mechanical “image”—an image devoid of the cultural mediation of the narrative—“gives another turn of the screw

to its secular dialectics” and that this turn results, in part, in “constructing dramaturgies” alternative to the old ones ([6], p. 11). In other words, human stories aren’t necessarily the vehicle for the re-importation of pre-modern attitudes about inequality.

Bernstein’s moment of “strong interpretation”, if you like, comes in extension to Rancière’s suggestions (here and elsewhere in *Film Fables*) that filmic history seems to *include* an exploration of new kinds of narrative to imply that we today have entirely left behind the problem of *narrative per se* as being associated with the representative regime. No longer, thus Bernstein, need we concern ourselves with the cluster of questions concerning the priority of the image over the story or of material reality over human action. Indeed, and this will lead to Bernstein’s elevation of Hollywood cinema over European “art cinema”, according to Bernstein, these “twisted fables” *can be* unproblematic models for, “freedom to act in a manner of making actual what has not existed before”. In other words, for Bernstein, narrative is redeemed in art because *narratives* “are the linguistic expression of the human capacity for making history, making the real accord with some idea of how it should be” ([1], p. 34).

3. Rancière’s Hidden Critique of Action

The fact that Bernstein ends up in a place where, one suspects, Rancière, with his fondness for art cinema, would not follow, should give us pause. Of course, as Bernstein argues in “Movies as the Great Democratic Art Form of the Modern World”, *that* might simply be a problem of European aesthetic prejudice. Such is, indeed, the lever of Bernstein’s “immanent” critique of Rancière, his sympathetic effort to push Rancière’s ideas beyond where Rancière himself has taken them. Or, to put this slightly differently, once, with the increasing democratization of modern societies in the late 20th Century, narrative becomes, like things, a matter of indifferent social concern—such that “any story could be the story of any person”, there is no longer the necessity for the arts to struggle further against the representative regime, for them to eschew a full embrace of story.

However, I would argue that Bernstein has missed something vital in Rancière’s thought—a critique of *action* tying it necessarily to both narrative and hierarchy and disallowing the conclusion that the task of the “aesthetic” critique of representation is finished today. For Rancière, in my interpretation, we simply will *never get to* a point where narratives cease carrying inequality, because they express this anti-egalitarian message *in their very form*. Here, again, the argument needs two steps: in the first, I would show that, as he makes clear both in *Aisthesis* and other recent work, the aesthetic regime doesn’t *just* de-emphasize action, allowing it to re-emerge in a post-critical phase, as Bernstein proposes; it also *transforms it*; and, in the second step, this transformation of human activity into something that resists the very categories, “active/passive”—what Rancière calls “movement”—problematizes any aesthetic practice *simply* embracing uncritiqued “action”, no matter how egalitarian its political intentions might be.

Hollywood cinema might represent all kinds of laudable transformations of human identity or society, but insofar as it is overwhelmingly experienced as a *passive* spectacle—even while it is *also* an active invitation to conversation about the re-formation of social categories—it reinforces social hierarchy and militates against the genuine achievement of equality even if, in its content, it *also* criticizes precisely such social/moral ordering. To put my cards on the table, as I read Rancière’s

recent work, he is arguing that *action* itself is a concept fatally tainted by such hierarchy. We cannot, even today, definitively found any egalitarian vision of society on narratives about human actions. Action's persistence today as a dominant concept of supposedly "democratic" life really indicates the survival of the naturalist "representational" regime today, even in the very midst of post-modern culture. The end result: for Rancière's way of seeing art, while no longer *exclusively* the vital issue, the "formal" concerns of modernism about what the arts address and how they address it remain important.

3.1. In Aesthesis

Bernstein could be forgiven for missing Rancière's development of this critique of action; for it is a fairly recent phenomenon in Rancière's writing, dating mostly from his intensive investigations of performing arts—music, mime, dance and theater. The studies of those areas of cultural production, while certainly prepared by Rancière's earlier work on cinema, are reengaged *with an emphasis upon performance itself* in Rancière's recent book, *Aisthesis* [4]. In thus considering arts where a response to human "doing" cannot simply be subsumed in an interest in "things", these essays force a deepening of the stakes for equality of liberation from the very intentionality of the story.

Whether he's writing about the acrobatics of the Hanlon Lees brothers at the Folies Bergère, the dance of Lois Fuller or even the theatrical direction or acting of Maeterlinck and Lugné-Poe, one finds in Rancière a genuinely popular performance that escapes the traditions of narrative in the performing arts—a performance, as Maeterlinck refers to it, "without action". And Rancière clarifies that that this descriptor indicates, not an interest in psychological inward narrative, but rather an assertion of "silent sensation" that defies narrative altogether ([4], pp. 114–15). In each case, the dancer's or juggler's art involves an implicit reconsideration of the very temporality of performance, one that moves it away not only from the symmetrical verities of Aristotelian poetics but, even more radically, from the chaining of the gestural act to any pre-given intention at all. In the dance of Lois Fuller, for example, the dancer, describes motions that, while superficially said to correspond with various natural figures ("butterfly", "flower", *etc.*) really depend on the freedom of the "serpentine", of a kind of curvature that develops and transforms organically in time ([4], p. 94). In other words, they exhibit freedom from the limits of instrumental action, allowing the actor ceaselessly to reinterpret her/his intention; as Rancière puts it, "the figurality of the serpentine is opposed to the order of geometric proportion by the perpetual variation of the line whose accidents endlessly merge" ([4], p. 95).

Thus, human acts are now deprived of the "rational" symmetry upon which a more classical modern thought would base their opposition with natural determination. Instead, the value of the actor's performance lies in its spontaneous ("serpentine") freedom from any such limited figurality. One way to understand what's going on here might be to reference Rancière's several discussions of the 18th Century French-language debate about reform of the theater. Indeed, Rancière dates the transformation of the performing arts to the 18th century breakdown of the theatrical illusion for both Diderot and Rousseau (See [7]). Though the two 18th century thinkers derive radically different conclusions from this breakdown—Diderot opting for a painterly, imagistic theater and Rousseau arguing for the escape from theater's artificiality in folk festivals and political gatherings—both thinkers perceive that, in modernity, the tightly scripted classical theater has lost its ability to *convince*.

This debate suggests to Rancière, so I would claim, that the origin of a crisis in conviction in the classical, “representational” theater lies in a change in *freedom*. Whereas, the “representational” subject still frees itself *from* natural determination, denying his imbrication in a mechanistic, fatalistic universe, the new subject of the aesthetic regime wins its liberation over and against *social determination*. Its freedom is the freedom from the binding narratives that societies produce to constrain human activity. Such, at least, would seem to be the significance of Rancière’s immediate turn in a couple of recent discussions from the debate between Rousseau and Diderot to Schiller’s interpretation of “aesthetic freedom” (See [4], p. xi; [7]): in both cases the significance of theatrical spontaneity emerges against an unfreedom resulting from the structure of modern societies³.

If, for Rancière, the 19th or 20th century actor’s or mime’s freedom measures itself *against* a society that threatens to crush individual spontaneity, this liberation does its measuring, paradoxically, in accordance with *nature*, but it is, of course, a nature itself re-conceived away from the renaissance or classical images identifying it with imaginary totality. Whereas the case of literature in the 19th Century can give us the impression that art evolves *away* from the symbolic, narrative-driven mode of the representative order toward a silent *imaginary* presence, now we see that the aesthetic order challenges *the imaginary*, too, moving us away from what Rancière himself calls the earlier “organic” aesthetic wherein the image gave to us the picture of the whole. In renaissance art, for example, the circle is vital not only because it corresponds to Aristotle’s vision of “perfect motion” but also because it allows an image of the assumed totality of the cosmos. Whether or not we literalize the organic into such perfect figures, the notion is that the “beautiful” object, in its symmetry, balance and poise gives us an image of the “concinntas” (“concord, harmony”) that we understand to be definitive of nature itself.

Rancière’s discussions of the Belvedere Torso announce that, for him, the emergence of the aesthetic regime corresponds with the loss of *that* function of the image⁴. In its place we have the image as housing a chattering spontaneity *within* or even *as* material nature. But the key here is that, with *both* of them opposed to the iron cage of modern society, *this* nature no longer stands against the sphere of the human subject. What human beings do and what nature does are not in principle opposed.

³ On this point I entirely concur with Bernstein who infers such a position from Rancière’s rather indirect discussions of freedom and modernity: “That aesthetic practice could be a form of radicalism in itself becomes plausible if one assumes, and it is what Schiller argues without end, that the cost of modernity has been a suppression of the sense drive by the form drive; that is, modernity in the form of Newtonian physics, machine technology, the division of labour, the domination of use value by exchange value, universalist morality, and the rights-based, bureaucratically governed liberal state is the triumph of formal reason (what Hegel labelled ‘the understanding’ in opposition to ‘reason’, and what the tradition of Critical Theory theorized under the labels of instrumental reason and identity thinking) whose fundamental characteristic is the extirpation of humankind’s sensuous-material nature as a normatively independent stratum of human living. In this telling, the space of reason (rationality, meaning) and the space of freedom are joined without remainder.” ([1], p. 25).

⁴ “The analysis of the Torso seems to go precisely against the current by setting a counter-revolution of suspended expression against a total revolution in expression. However, these two opposite revolutions share a common principle: the destruction of what lies at the heart of representative logic—namely the organic model of the whole, with its proportions and its symmetries.” ([4], p. 7).

3.2. In Rancière's Recent Interpretation of Vertov

The end of that “mediation” of nature and subjectivity can be seen in Rancière's recent lecture on Dziga Vertov, delivered in London and, in slightly altered form, in Tallinn, Estonia. Entitled, “Modernity Reconsidered”, the lecture uses the device of two original propaganda posters by the Stenberg brothers for Vertov's great film, “Man with a Movie Camera”, posters that play with the continuity of the human body and, not just the material world, but also, specifically, the machine. Rancière's discussion of one of the posters helps us to place this lecture in the context we've just discovered—the context of a “re-invented” image, one that challenges society in conjoining the subject and nature. Rancière references one poster for “Man with a Movie Camera” whose vortex-composition will be endlessly repeated in advertising and art through the rest of the century, most famously in propaganda for Hitchcock's *Vertigo* [7]. In contrast to the posters for *Vertigo*, Rancière notes that the obvious, representational meaning of the Stenbergs' image—that it apparently depicts a woman falling “up” into the sky of the metropolis—makes no sense. The poster itself thus demands that we re-consider it, namely in terms of a breakdown of the representational distinction between figure and the field or space it inhabits. For Rancière, all three elements in the poster (the woman's body, the buildings shaping the space, and the “sky” so framed) lurch into compositional instability, into a kind of single continuum, and it is this destruction of representative oppositions that interests him ([7], minutes in 14:30–16:00; 24:00–25:00).

In other words, the constructivist image here drives home the impossibility of separating off human subjects from natural objects or “naturalized” persons, placing all in a vertiginous phenomenal continuum. Unlike the case of classical action, we no longer have an opposition between a spontaneous actor and the “passive” material (or society) upon which he works ([7], minutes in 21:30–22:30). In a way that will be eminently familiar to students of aesthetic freedom as theorized from Kant and Schiller through Hegel and Marx, freedom now means doing things *in concert* with that material, both shaping it and being shaped by it. It is important to add, when taken in the context of a socially-imposed unfreedom, such a continuum also erases the vision of the heroic actor intervening in history against a backdrop of passivity on the part of the “masses” of persons.

However, it's only the *other* of the original posters for “Man with a Movie Camera” that reveals Rancière's full critique of action. This image depicts an ambiguous machine-dancing-woman, whose human features, using techniques of photo-montage, it melds with those of a tripod and camera (see [7]). In discussing this image, Rancière conceives the merging of the woman's body, totally absorbed in the “life” of its dance, and the photo-apparatus/“machine” as based upon their mutual “indifference to an end” ([7], minutes in 28:00–29:30). In other words, we find an explanation for modernism's fascination with the machine, an explanation alternative to the prevalent critical tradition that plays with the hegemony of modern technology and the paradoxes of embracing subjugation: the intrusion of an “active” object subverts the very continuity of action according to a pre-set intention, at the very least *bending* such intentionality in relationship to what the thing or person “wants to be”. The camera, and more generally for the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, the machine, are simply the image for this liberation from the pre-set ends determined by society; they simply represent this possibility of freedom ([7], minutes in 23:00–29:00). Ironically, of course, because with the machine, others fix upon precisely what seems at first to represent dumb instrumentality run amuck, the machine becomes a

powerful metaphor—placing emphasis, as it does, on the *emergence* of the new as opposed to any new object. That is, the machinic is, in the first instance, a “transformer”, an imaginable (and thus imaginary) form for the mediation of purposes, something that transforms them, introducing the unanticipated into history.

For Rancière, the freedom revealed in the machine is absolutely aligned with subverting the very *distinction* that allows a hierarchy of creators and “others”. As Rancière says,

The fusion of the body and the machine and, more widely, the role of the machine in so-called avant-garde art has nothing to do with a naïve admiration for technical novelty, speed and efficacy. The machine is much more than the power of technics; it embodies the abolition of the opposition between men of ends and men of means. The machine doesn't know of such distinctions: it doesn't know of the opposition between activity and passivity. The (fusion of the machine and the human body)...achieves an overall destruction of the hierarchical distribution of the sensible ([7], minutes in 23:30).

Machines, and machine-humans are *neither* active (the sole autonomous determiners of ends and means) *nor* passive. They are, rather, *in movement*, in a process that begins from and re-directs the purposes of materials, of nature ([7], minutes in 22:10). Or, to put the same lesson differently, they *are* nature, both subject and object of change. It is this lesson that the modernists of the early 20th century learned from the “mechanical” support of an industrial base, but it is a lesson still relevant to us, who live in an age combining mechanical and digital technology. The cause of equality demands an ongoing commitment to seeing persons as both/neither agents and/nor the material recording such agency. And this is the ongoing lesson for which we turn to the arts, where we find meaning both recorded by prior intentions and undergoing transformation at our hands.

The machine here is *not* the symbol of Western civilization's domination over nature but rather the synecdoche for an order of “subjects” whose temporality defies the opposition between the human and the natural. Rancière proposes that fascination with the mechanical is of a piece with the body's freedom in modern dance, theater or mime. The point, in either case, is our liberation from the stupid universe of determined actions set by fixed goals in favor of a “serpentine” movement involving transformation of both ends and means. Movement must replace action.

3.3. The Critique of Action as Criticism of Bernstein

Implicitly, here, Rancière has repeated his question, “what is it about art that has traditionally produced or reinforced inequality?”—a query that he now extends beyond his previous answer, “narrative, and the hierarchy between those who gain voice as the narrators and everybody else”. Now he adds to the set of concerns facing the advocate of equality the social production of a basic divide between the *artistic actor*, the person who can re-shape nature, and “passive” elements—both the natural “material” shaped by the creator and the great mass of people associated, in their incapacity to “act”, with that material. In other words, the fundamental structural element underlying artistic hierarchy (and thus inequality) in the representative regime is the distinction between active and passive, human and natural, a distinction that condemns most people to a lower, quasi-natural status. Thus, Rancière acknowledges in the Vertov lecture that, because “the opposition of action with the

passivity of the spectacle still remains within the old model”, “the becoming-political of art cannot be equated with its becoming active” ([7], minutes in 22:10).

Rancière’s answer to Bernstein must be to claim that, having missed the problem of action, he must also pass over the continued way that the struggle against a regime of representation is ongoing. He must miss the continued relevance, when it comes to equality, of the struggle against the representational. For this reason, Rancière would be justified in resisting Bernstein’s claim that Hollywood’s “golden age” represents Rancière’s own utopian hope in combining aesthetics and the issue of equality.

This is a position that Rancière’s recent book on the Hungarian filmmaker, Béla Tarr, confirms. *Béla Tarr: the Time After* criticizes the emphasis on narrative in most contemporary cinema, suggesting that Tarr’s work, whose subject is life in a Post-Soviet world, contains an alternative—“the time after”. Rancière describes such time as precisely “the time after all stories, the time when one takes direct interest in the sensible stuff in which these stories cleaved their shortcuts between projected and accomplished ends” ([8], p. 79).

4. Worlds of the Sensible: “Regimes of the Sensible” Reinterpreted

Underlying this specific disagreement about the history of cinema, there lies a broader misinterpretation of just what defines the “representative regime of art”. Bernstein has narrowed Rancière’s concept too much, making it into a mere “artistic regime” as opposed to “the principles of sensible order governing bourgeois life itself” ([1], p. 26). But for Rancière the “Representative Regime” *itself* already constitutes precisely that “sensible” basis organizing a social life, including, apparently, bourgeois social life. In other words, it is because he understands the ongoing representational constitution of sense that Rancière affirms the ongoing struggle against it, and against the way that narrative-form re-affirms hierarchy. It is on the basis of this continuation that he is justified at all in speaking of an ongoing project within the aesthetic regime of the sensible.

Rancière’s aesthetic writings clearly indicate a contrary understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic and representative regimes to Bernstein’s, one that traces *both* to transformations in the “distribution of the sensible”. Already, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* [2], Rancière speaks not *just* of regimes of “art” but, as somehow underlying these, of a series of “distributions of the sensible.” Thus, for example, in an interview from that book, he argues that “aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience”, and then he immediately follows-up on this comment by suggesting that “it is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’.” ([2], p. 13).

In other words, for *each* of the understandings of art that Rancière catalogues there is a corresponding “distribution of the sensible”, a corresponding “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”, to quote his definition from the same interview ([2], p. 12). This is, furthermore, a way of understanding the history of art that Rancière seems to have held onto up to the present, writing in *Aisthesis* that different regimes of art “themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected” ([4], p. iv).

All of which is just to suggest that we follow Rancière (and not Bernstein) in seeing artistic practices in general as interventions “in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” ([2], p. 13). They are ways of changing the basic sense of what and whom we see and how we understand the common dimension of our experience, and that is as true of the representative regime as it is of the aesthetic one.

5. Conclusions

If we return now to the question from which my essay began—the inquiry into the duration, which really means the nature, of the aesthetic regime and thus of the relationship between the aesthetic regime of the sensible and the representative one—it would seem that the demands of *answering* Bernstein have led us to an uncomfortable conclusion. The lineaments of Rancière’s argument as I have reconstructed it would suggest to us that this struggle against the representative—as a social rather than formal condition—might be unending; for the need to challenge hierarchy seems to be deeply implanted in modern life—as deeply implanted as the very idea of *action*, of a subjective imposition of human will on a passive “object”.

It would be tempting, indeed, to extend the unresolved tension between aesthetic and representative regimes to a quasi-ontological condition affecting all advanced technological societies to one degree or another, though this is admittedly an extension of Rancière’s thought beyond itself; on the one hand, the ever-expanding universalization of “instrumental” reason, of “means-ends” thinking, in such modern societies produces an inevitable sense of entrapment within an “iron cage” (Weber) of modernization. By stamping out endlessly the form and the fact of action, of an active technology imprinting itself on nature, technological societies both maintain and reinforce the deep-structure of social-life in the representative regime even and even better than in the pre-industrial societies where we *think* of naturalized hierarchy as having its home. On the other hand, and this is the surprise hidden at the core of Rancière’s aesthetic thought, the very possibility of an effective response to social pacification comes precisely in a material temporality central to technological society. The real significance of the “mechanical utopia” of the aesthetic avant-gardes from the early 20th Century (of Vertov and his constructivist comrades among others) lies in seeing the need to *transcend action* rather than in any selection of the machine as *the* image of such aesthetic mediation.

Another way to get at the problematic to which I hope to call attention here is to re-divide the *two* meanings of “sense” that Rancière intentionally binds when he speaks of “regimes of the sensible”. If the basic projects, the fundamental ways of “making sense” foundational to a technological modern world inevitably and efficiently re-instate the representative regime, then, paradoxically, it is only the “sensible” conditions of a modern, aesthetic world that provide an effective, if inconclusive, answer to those conditions. The sensuous alone can respond to the errors of sense (meaning).

I am aware that, in drawing these conclusions from the indirect evidence of Rancière’s essays and lectures on other matters, I may be constructing a kind of argument that Rancière himself would eschew, a bridge too far. I am even more concerned that my conclusions, involving as they do a quasi-transcendental assertion about the constitutive role of action (and thus of the representative regime) in modern societies, wander far from the historical specificity and concreteness that Rancière prefers in his work and especially in his lectures and writings on aesthetics. Above all, I hesitate to

place a kind of structural impediment to equality into the thought of a philosopher whose most important insights have resisted all such structures. At the very least, I must admit that I'm unsure whether and how far Rancière would follow me in constructing this answer to Bernstein's inquiry about the duration of the representative regime. Still, I will have succeeded in *my* intention if this path of thought provokes Rancière to revisit that question of the periodization of the aesthetic, or, to put it one last way, I will be happy if we can raise the question of whether the representative/aesthetic couple *really* names two distinct regimes at all.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

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