

Aesthetics, Politics, and the Embodied Political Subject¹

Darlene O. Demandante

Abstract: This paper draws out an aspect of the subject of politics in the later works of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, particularly his writings on aesthetics and politics. One of the reasons why Rancière is an exemplary thinker is the relationship between aesthetics and politics that informs his theory of politics and political subjectivity. For Rancière, politics is aesthetics in as much as the contestation of the right to speech involves the assertion of a visible body that demands to be included in the count. I will proceed with the discussion by first explicating the general idea of aesthetics and how it is related to politics in Rancière's oeuvre. Then I will specifically address the question of political subjectivity in Rancière's work in relation to aesthetics and politics by discussing the anonymous subject in aesthetic modernity. In doing this, I aim to present an alternative view of politics as focused on embodied political subjects and find the use of bodies for political contestations in both its active and passive form. Using the work of Rancière, I emphasise that political activity can be based on the body's experiences of suffering and emotions. These experiences in turn provide us with a rich material for reflection about what politics can mean today.

Keywords: Rancière, aesthetics, politics, embodied political subject

Introduction

This paper draws out an aspect of the subject of politics in the later works of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, particularly his writings on aesthetics and politics. One of the reasons why Rancière is an

¹ This article is part of a larger project on an alternative reading of Rancière which proposes that underneath the famous model presented in *Disagreement*, which is premised on a formal theory of the subject and the principle of the equality of intelligence, there lies a thick layer of subjective experiences. In my project, I focus on passages in Rancière's writings that point towards a theory of political action, which emphasises embodied experiences, feelings, and dreams as the beginning of politics.

exemplary thinker is the relationship between aesthetics and politics that informs his theory of politics and political subjectivity. For Rancière, politics is aesthetics in as much as the contestation of the right to speech involves the assertion of a visible body that demands to be included in the count. I will proceed with the discussion by first explicating the general idea of aesthetics and how it is related to politics in Rancière's œuvre. Then I will specifically address the question of political subjectivity in Rancière's work in relation to aesthetics and politics by discussing the anonymous subject in aesthetic modernity. In doing this, I aim to present an alternative view of politics as focused on embodied political subjects and find the use of bodies for political contestations in both its active and passive form. Using the work of Rancière, I emphasise that political activity can be based on the body's experiences of suffering and emotions. These experiences in turn provide us with a rich material for reflection about what politics can mean today.

The Link between Aesthetics and Politics

By "aesthetics," Rancière means "the 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."² This pertains to two senses of aesthetics: one is aesthetics as perception and the other is aesthetics as a social practice.

Aesthetics is the sense perception of social realities—ways of perceiving, doing, and making of the various actors involved in the social and political realm, the part of those who have no part, the worthy and the unworthy subjects, those who are counted and those who are excluded—in other words, what Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible.' In relation to the distribution of the sensible, Rancière defines aesthetics as:

... a system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to the sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.³

On the other hand, aesthetics also pertains to aesthetic practices or the ways through which subjects express, entrench, and challenge the distribution of the sensible. For instance, in *Proletarian Nights*, as the workers appropriated the words of bourgeois poets to express their experiences and thoughts in

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

their own narratives, as they turned their nights into time for writing and other activities, which were not expected from them as laborers, they demonstrated that their expressions are concrete manifestations of aesthetics as a practice. Aesthetics in this sense is political because it disrupts the social. But it is a political action that is still within the social as it questions what is perceived and suggests new ways of perceiving and doing.

Here the link between aesthetics and politics is obvious as Rancière demonstrates that the assertion of equality is a political move of challenging the existing configuration of structures and entities (both real and perceived) in a community. Aesthetics is politics in as much as it has to do with the move to be perceived and recognised as subjects who were not originally counted as parts of the community and thus it challenges structures of exclusion. Politics is also aesthetics in the sense that it is about speaking and demanding to be recognised as part of the whole. This assertion in turn brings up an awareness of the distribution of the sensible which pertains to existing ways of doing, making, and seeing in the community.

Thus, the 'distribution of the sensible' is Rancière's unique way of framing the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. Rancière describes aesthetics not just as a theory of affects and sensibilities or as a theory of artistic practices, but also as being directly linked to politics. Aesthetics for him primarily has to do with what is made visible, perceivable, and speakable by existing symbolic and material divisions, separations, and hierarchies within society. Hence, it is historical, material, and political. What is sensible, what can be perceived by the senses, and what can be the subject of discourse is dependent on the structure that allows it to be seen or conceals it. Artistic practices can reveal what can be seen, said, and done in a given historical period. They can also show how this order can be challenged, notably by showing another way of being, doing, and making. There is always a parallel between the artistic and the social as revealed by the distribution of the sensible. In the following section, I am going to discuss in detail the dynamics of aesthetics and politics in Rancière through his notion of the regimes of the arts, which pertain to his alternative approach to aesthetics which take into consideration the overlapping paradoxes and contradiction in its development.

The Politics of Aesthetics

Rancière's early writings from *Reading Capital* to *Disagreement* have made explicit that the central concern of his oeuvre is the question of politics. However, the links that he establishes between aesthetics and politics have also been present in his work from these early writings. The definition of politics as having to do with challenging hierarchies and changing the

distribution of the sensible through the assertion of equality by individual subjects and communities, as well as Rancière's focus on the writings of the proletarians in his archival work, demonstrate the connection that he proposes between aesthetics and politics.

In his later texts, after the publication of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière deepened his analysis of the link between aesthetics and politics. Still taking equality as the fundamental assumption, Rancière's discussions now focus on what he calls aesthetic modernity or the aesthetic regime of arts as a period where democracy has become a real possibility. The politics of aesthetics highlights the emergence of a new aesthetic experience given the numerous, complicated relation between social and political actions on the one hand and the conditions of perception and expression on the other within the historical development of artistic representation and the new 'distribution of the sensible'. Rancière devotes the discussion to the history of the paradoxical links between the aesthetic paradigm and the political community.⁴

The view of aesthetics as primarily pertaining to what is visible and speakable, hones in on the interplay between perception, representation, aesthetic practices, and the implications of these in a broader configuration of a society. At the core of Rancière's aesthetics is that it is in fact political. In order to show this alternative view of both aesthetics and politics, he uses a descriptive approach or what he calls the regimes of the arts to fully take into account the various elements of the interrelation across hierarchies and paradigms of aesthetic practices. For Rancière: "The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization."⁵ The three regimes of the art is a counternarrative to histories of modern aesthetics that aims to delineate clearly the specific character of art in particular time frames and how the aesthetic configurations affect the politics of the time. Gabriel Rockhill describes that for Rancière, "Rather than there being determined systems that indiscriminately impose themselves on the totality of artistic production within a given time frame, there are competing and overlapping regimes that are racked by internal and external contradictions."⁶ The regimes of the sensible reveal that artistic and social practices overlap and are not strictly chronological as other histories of art describe it. For instance,

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013).

⁵ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.

⁶ Gabriel Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, trans. by James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 16.

there are forms of representation and expression in the modern aesthetic regime which function on the ethical principle.⁷ The regimes of the art show the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that arise out of the interplay between aesthetics and politics in each specific regime. These contradictions are themselves meant to show us opportunities for new ways of doing things both at the social level and at the level of representation and expression.

Rancière wants to offer a counternarrative or counterhistory of aesthetic modernity against influential histories and philosophies of art that champion linear accounts of the history of aesthetic practices. He is critical of the approaches to aesthetics that fail to take into account the overlaps and paradoxes within the development of aesthetic representations and the historical context within which they developed because many of these approaches forgot to take into consideration the relationship between artistic practices and society. The regimes approach is the method to contest common approaches to art in the humanities, which tend to focus on the development of art alone without taking into account the context in which this development took place. In particular, Rancière aims at criticizing formal histories of art that argue that the development of art is towards the perfection of a medium, for example, from classical to abstract painting, or the metaphysical/teleological view about the end of art.⁸

As a counternarrative, Rancière employs a descriptive method that carefully defines the basic features of the historical understanding of art and art forms in each historical configuration which he calls the regimes of the art. The regimes of the art describe specific ways in which a given epoch conceives of the relationships between discourse, reality, especially nature and society, those relationships defining the structural conditions of meaning and expression at each historical time.⁹ The three regimes of the arts are the ethical regime of images, the representative or poetic regime, and the aesthetic regime of modernity. Rancière puts much emphasis on the third regime because it summarizes the modern understanding of aesthetics. Through the aesthetic regime, Rancière identifies specific features of the understanding of art characteristic of modern society, including its contradictions and paradoxes.

Summarising the three regimes will give us a broader perspective of the relationships between the social realm, the frames of social perception, and the aesthetic practices that run parallel to it. Such move will also allow

⁷ Some novels, poetry, theater, and screenplays written in the modern period that are focused on projecting coherent narratives meant to portray the tragic hero as a noble character to be emulated.

⁸ Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Regimes of the Arts," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. by Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010) 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*

us to see what opportunities are opened for subjects in the current historical context. Understanding how Rancière interprets the historicity of our current aesthetic regime is therefore fundamental to understanding his concept of political subjectivity.

The Regimes of Art

Ethical Regime

The ethical regime of the arts is concerned with the origin, truth content, purpose, and uses of images. Rancière describes this regime, thus: "In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities."¹⁰ Images are believed to affect the ways of doing and making in a particular community and therefore the question revolves around its truthfulness. Plato's criticism of art as an imitation twice removed from truth and of the artist who simulates reality in false images and transforms it into poetry, painting, and theatre is the archetype of this regime.

There is no such thing as an isolated work of art as artistic representations take place within ways of doing and making. Images thus have direct implications on social reality as they take place in the division of labor in the society. In this regime, art is not understood as mere art but always in conjunction to how it could possibly shape the individuals within a community and the community as a whole. Artistic images have an instructional value for the citizens. This is the reason why Plato puts the artists who make copies of simple appearances among the lowest citizens of his republic. The ethical regime is not limited to ancient Greece but also applies to the analyses of representations in the present which assess the value of art forms in terms of their influence on the mind of their audiences.

Representative Regime

The second regime of the arts is the representative regime which traces its main influence from Aristotle and flourished in the period of the *belles lettres* during the 17th and 18th centuries.¹¹ This regime identifies the substance of the arts *via* the couple poiesis/mimesis. It is "mimetic" inasmuch as it is in this period that art developed forms of normativity that stipulated the conditions of good imitation and defined art as the practice of good

¹⁰ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 16.

¹¹ Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," 10.

imitation. In this regime, imitations are recognized as exclusively belonging to art and assessed within this framework. This regime is at the same time “poetic” since it identifies art through a classification of ways of doing and making.¹² Most importantly, this regime is called “representative” because it is the notion of representation that organizes the connection between the ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging. The representative regime “establishes the singularity of art but also the identity with the forms of life that it is connected to.”¹³

There are four major principles that structure the representative regime of arts as described by Rancière in *Mute Speech*. The principle of fiction pertains to the emphasis on the representation of action through stories. As Rancière writes in *Mute Speech*, “the essence of the poem is the representation of actions and not the use of a certain language.”¹⁴ Fiction gives the license to portray a narrative that makes sense of the world within a given space and time, thus breaking away from Plato’s concern with the truthfulness of the artistic image. The second principle is the principle of genericity which pertains to the arrangement of actions following a specific genre. The genre provides “the necessary inscriptions of the functional arrangements of action.”¹⁵ It dictates the rules on how actions should be represented in a narrative, how a story should be told, and how characters should be made to act and speak. This connects it to the third principle which is the principle of appropriateness. This principle structures the “hierarchy of represented subjects,”¹⁶ how the actions of the characters should be appropriate to what they are representing, how they should speak, and what language is proper to the character being represented. This institutes a division between high and low, noble and common, superior and inferior. Lastly, the fourth principle is the principle of actuality. This principle dictates the primacy of speech as act and performance in the present. Speech is the highest expression of intelligibility, “a rhetoric of contemporary existence, a way of life.”¹⁷ Artistic practices in this regime focus on the verbal articulation of the meaning of the world. In the representative regime, above any other form of expression and representation, speech is of primary importance since it is the medium through which the meaning of the world is made to make sense. Rancière summarizes all these four principles in the following way:

¹² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 16–17.

¹³ Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa,” 17.

¹⁴ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

... the primacy of action over characters, narration over description, the hierarchy of genres according to the dignity of their subject matter, and the primacy of speaking, of speech in actuality—all of these elements figure into an analogy with a full hierarchical vision of the community.¹⁸

These four principles are those from which the third regime, i.e. the aesthetic regime of the arts, breaks away. Even in the present times, however, it remains operative just like the ethical regime. For instance, the Hollywood film industry have produced commercial films with standardised plots where audiences can identify with the characters because of what these characters represent based on an implicit normative view of propriety.¹⁹

The Aesthetic Regime

The third and the most important regime of the arts for Rancière, since it is at the heart of contemporary period, is the aesthetic regime of the arts. The aesthetic regime of the arts is Rancière's name for artistic modernity, in contrast to the Platonic ethical regime and the Aristotelian representative regime. It is characterized by the reversal of the four principles that structure the previous representative regime. The principle of fiction gives way to the primacy of language. The emphasis is no longer on stories that are told to make sense of the world but rather in the power of expression. The genre is dismantled by the principle of the equality of all objects of description. Anything can be spoken about and there are no more prescriptions about who is supposed to speak and about what particular topic. The principle of decorum is overturned by the indifference of style in relation to the subject represented. Style becomes an absolute manner of seeing things, in which there are no longer base or beautiful subjects. Lastly, writing replaces performative speech. In the aesthetic regime of the arts, "the privileged space of the theatre, the consecrated domain of speech as act and efficacious rhetoric gives way to the novel as the democratic letter that wanders without a privileged place."²⁰ Silent things take on a language of their own and meaningless objects become systems of signs.²¹ The identification of art no longer occurs *via* a division of ways of doing and making but is based on

¹⁸ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 16–17.

¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. by Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 3.

²⁰ Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," 14.

²¹ A particular example that Rancière repetitively uses is Victor Hugo's cathedral of stones. See *ibid.*

distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to modern aesthetic regime. Rancière describes it thus:

In the aesthetic regime artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc.²²

The overturning of the principles of the representative regime by the aesthetic regime which I have just highlighted is thus premised upon a new sensorium, that is to say, a new connection between how individuals feel the world and how the world appears to them. The fundamental consequence of this new sensorium is that there is a detachment of discourse and meaning from any secure, essential, fixed, hierarchy-based reference which could be supported by an absolute objective or social reality. Thus we have a new regime of thinking about art in which “art is defined by its being the identity of a conscious procedure and an unconscious production.”²³ In this new regime where logos and pathos become intertwined, the movement from meaninglessness to meaning is coupled with the constant possibility of a movement from meaning to meaninglessness. Writing is the practice that typically captures and fully realizes this new vision of meaning.

Writing is thus the new favoured mode of speech in the aesthetic regime of arts. It takes hold and mobilizes the erring letter that wanders nomadically and is orphaned from its essential origins. By doing so, it asserts equality as it dismantles all the hierarchies established in the previous poetic regime. From now on, anything can be said about any topic by anyone. There is never a closure of discourse and everything is potentially meaningful. Anyone can express themselves and is entitled to witness their own situation or discuss external situations through their own words. Since there is no longer an essential and hierarchical basis that anchors meaning and definition to either an objective or social reference, the letter is available to anyone. Rancière refers to this new expressive material made available in the new regime as the democratic letter, the orphan or the erring letter, which has no specific origin and pre-determined structure. It “sets the stage for subsequent

²² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 22–23.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, trans. by Debra Keates and James Swenson (UK: Polity Press, 2009), 28.

confrontations between the anarchic power of literarity and the hierarchical distribution of bodies.”²⁴ The democracy of the erring letter is thus not merely descriptive of its wandering nature but, more importantly for us, is normative and political since it inherently challenges authorities and contests the exclusions of the representative mode of seeing and saying in the world.

In talking about writing as the medium of the aesthetic regime of the arts, Rancière took his cue from Plato who criticized writing as a form of mute speech. For Plato, Rancière argues, writing is “considered to be a mute *logos*, speech that is incapable of saying what it says differently or of choosing not to speak.”²⁵ Writing is thus ‘mute speech’ in two different ways. First it is the capacity of signification that is inscribed in all bodies. For instance, in Victor Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), a cathedral of silent stones that speak replaces the speech of the human beings and becomes the heart of the novel.²⁶ In this sense, writing is mute speech as it brings *logos*, meaning and signification to nonhuman bodies and objects, thus attesting to the Romantic assertion, ‘everything speaks.’

There is however another dimension of mute speech. It pertains to the movement from *logos* to *pathos*, from what speaks and what is meaningful to the absurdity at the heart of meaning. Rancière describes this second form of ‘mute speech’ as “a soliloquy, speaking to no one and saying nothing but the impersonal and unconscious conditions of speech itself.”²⁷ It is the voiceless speech of an objective power which resists full expression in *logos*. There is a force in the things themselves that resists meaning. *Logos* can never fully capture the world, the sensible, precisely because everything is potentially meaningful. The world resists a full transparency of *logos* because infinite scope for meaning in the world means that *logos* can never get to the bottom of its own conditions, can never reach to a final principle where it goes free in full transparency.

The aesthetic regime of the arts thus mirrors the reality of democracy regime. In principle, where anyone and even anything can speak, equality is asserted. The present condition of modernity and the atmosphere of political equality brought about by democracy therefore come with a freedom of expression in a very radical sense. This proliferation of the heteronomous sensible brought about by the aesthetic revolution is precisely what Plato was

²⁴ Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa,” 8.

²⁵ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 32.

²⁶ Rockhill, “Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa,” 13.

²⁷ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 393.

wary of in his critique of the orphan letter. For Rancière, Plato's critique of writing is an early sign of the realisation of the risks of democratic literarity.²⁸ Democracy is the regime of the orphan letter which does not follow any pre-given rules and continuously asserts equality that results to a democratic distribution of the sensible. The letter distorts already established spaces of meaning wherever it travels as it opens discourse to multiple possible meanings and is available to multiple speakers for a multiplicity of audiences. Rancière interprets Plato's fear in the following way: "Democracy is the regime of writing, the regime in which the perversion of the letter is the law of the community. It is instituted by the spaces of writing whose overpopulated voids and overly loquacious muteness rends the living tissue of communal ethos."²⁹

Amidst the democratic, aesthetic regime of the arts stands a subject who speaks but whose speech is resisted by the pathos of the world. She who speaks encounters the pathos in logos through a body with feelings and experiences. And being part of this modern regime of the arts, the subject can speak meaningfully about her experiences. Furthermore, what makes this possible is the world itself because the pathos of speech within the subject is also the pathos of things which have meaning. When individuals speak, they are not talking about just their individual subjective experience but at the same time they present the world as a space of contestation. Underneath the psychology of the subject is a world that is open to anyone.

However, the same subjects experience moments of self-doubt and helplessness because while the erring letter allows individuals and objects to speak, "the pure suffering of existence and the pure reproduction of the meaninglessness of life" are also at work.³⁰ This ambiguity of the modern predicament sets the limitations to the political power of aesthetics. Since the aesthetic regime of the arts is both at the same time the realm of pathos and logos, the subject is caught up in a struggle within it.

The only way out of this contradiction is through the assertion of creative action by the subject that is in the middle of it all, the subject who experiences the sensible. Despite the fact that this subject can always be overwhelmed by pathos, overwhelmed by the absence of a secure foundation for logos, the same subject can always struggle to find means to make sense of its experiences. In this limitation and obscurity at the heart of the discourse of modernity, who is exactly the subject of politics and what is the role of the subject for politics?

²⁸ Rockhill, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," 16.

²⁹ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 95.

³⁰ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 39.

The Political Subject in the Aesthetic Regime of Arts

Given that the aesthetic regime is the realm of the letter, which both at the same time disrupts established hierarchies and opens up a new world of sensibilities, what becomes of the political subject? What does it mean to be a political subject in a period of multiple available meanings? The aesthetic regime of the arts reveals a dimension of the political subject that seems to contradict Rancière's position in his early works where he defined politics as an act of discourse and claiming one's right to speech.³¹ Caught up in pathos and logos, the subject unfolds as a subject who does not know, shaken by the loosening of ties between bodies and meanings brought about by the aesthetic revolution yet struggling to make sense of all these experiences. Rancière shows that the subject's struggle to get out of the contradiction does not stop it from being a political subject. In fact, the definition of what is 'political' now involves the realm of sensibilities. The capacity to feel, dream, hope, and even refuse action is very much part of political mobility and political subjectivity. The subject through its bodily commitment, whether in choosing to act or to be passive, "speaks" not necessarily through words.

The Aesthetic Subject: Logos in Pathos, Pathos in Logos

Rancière has made it clear that the aesthetic regime has liberated the subject from the hierarchies and structures of representation. And yet in this new revolution which has brought about an anarchy of sensibilities, the subject is in danger of losing its own voice. Rancière who is aware of the possibility of the subject being lost in obscurity, poses the question in *The Flesh of Words*: "How can the wondering 'I' of the poet who has been liberated from the hierarchies of representation become visible and hearable in aesthetic modernity where there is both passivity and movement?"³² The question makes us aware of the contradiction that the subject is caught up in the aesthetic regime. On the one hand, the subject has been freed from the constraints of hierarchical structures of the representative regime and yet, on the other hand, the democratic character of the aesthetic regime itself threatens to drown this very subject into meaninglessness, notably the meaninglessness of action.

Rancière first explores this phenomenon of subjectivity within the aesthetic regime through literature. In *Mute Speech*, he talks about "writing" and the notion of the 'orphan letter' as playing a major role in the displacement of the subject amidst modernity. What the orphan letter does is

³¹ Here, I am specifically referring to *Disagreement*.

³² Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. by Charlotte Mendell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.

bring the subject into a sensory level of experience, awaken her sensibilities through words or what Rancière describes as the “sensory coming into being of reason” that would eventually allow the poet to “wander like a cloud.”³³ In short, the orphan letter allows for the subject to confront her experience by materially representing her thoughts and her experiences. As Rancière describes in the following words: “A principle of the politics of the sensory: against the hierarchies of representation, poetics is identified with a general aesthetic that expresses the laws of feeling, the conveyance of sensation in general.”³⁴

Indeed, the aesthetic regime of the arts is a regime of sensation and the orphan letter dictates the new rule of this regime which is itself the lack of any pre-given rules. The subject is brought face to face with the intensity of her experience, the validity of her thoughts and the depth of her misfortunes which in other regimes of art would have been deemed as foolish and insignificant. Since the pathos of the subject is also the pathos of the things in the world, the world itself is a key component of this unfolding of sensibilities. As the subject discloses itself in the world, it also reveals the logos of the world where it belongs. By grabbing hold of the letter, the subjects can now express themselves and account for their place in the world. Nonetheless, they remain stuck in the world. This is what we can draw from the example of the carpenter Gauny. Gauny’s days in the workshop are lost in the grim hours of labor. Yet he finds the time to write about trees, birds, the towering buildings outside the workshop windows, and about his imagined ownership of the room whose floors he himself installed. This paradigmatic example shows how the ‘erring’ letter functions as the tool of the subject to make sense of the meaninglessness of his experience. Gauny writes in the manner of the great bourgeois poets of his time about the forlornness of his working conditions, hence we witness how the pathos of the worker’s condition is translated into logos.

This seemingly chaotic description of the subject as caught up in logos and pathos is best described in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*. No longer is the subject the subject of reasoned and logical utterances but she is the carrier of the power of thought and non-thought, the pathos of not knowing and the unconscious drive to know. Rancière likens the subject of the aesthetic regime to the tragic hero Oedipus whom he describes as the defective subject whose drive is “the pathos of knowledge: the maniacal relentless determination to know, the furor that prevents understanding, the refusal to recognize the truth in the form in which it presents itself, the catastrophe of unsuitable knowing, a knowing that obliges one to withdraw from the world of

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

visibility.”³⁵ Oedipus best represents the experience of the subject within aesthetic modernity as he embodies the “tragic identity of knowing and not knowing, of action undertaken and pathos undergone.”³⁶ As Oedipus withdraws from a world of visibility, we come to an understanding of how the pathos of the things threatens to overwhelm the subject:

The aesthetic unconscious, consubstantial with the aesthetic regime of art, manifests itself in the polarity of this double scene of mute speech: on the one hand, a speech written on the body that must be restored to a linguistic signification by a labour of deciphering and rewriting; on the other hand, the voiceless speech of a nameless power that lurks behind any consciousness and any signification, to which voice and body must be given.³⁷

Oedipus in fact embodies a way of knowing that is in contradiction to how in general we have always been taught about knowledge being a subjective act of grasping an objective reality. Instead, he demonstrates a kind of knowing by way of affectation, passion, or even sickness of a living being all the while aiming for rational understanding.³⁸ Going back to the example of the 19th century workers who managed to produce their own writings, these workers ‘know’ their conditions which may not necessarily be similar to how the thinkers knew—an objective, abstract, matter-of-factly kind of knowledge. The workers know subjectively through their bodies, passion, and experiences; a kind of knowing that is full of pathos and of subjectivity, being borne out of the very fabric of the affects, passions, and embodied experience of the workers themselves. Yet these workers also signify their pathos through logos. They revealed meaning in their experiences through their journals and poems.

Within the aesthetic regime of the arts, there are different regimes of sensibility and activity, which are either positive or negative for the subject. There is the manic, hyperactivity without logos as exemplified by Oedipus. He is the hero who does not know, wants what he does not want, acts by suffering, and speaks through muteness.³⁹ Hence, we have a subject who acts without a clear goal or does not know what it wants, who speaks without any intended meaning. There is also the passive subject who withdraws into the

³⁵ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁹ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 52.

total opposite of this manic activity, a subject who lacks a drive to do anything, inactive, apathetic, as exemplified by some examples that Rancière described in *Aisthesis*.⁴⁰ The positive side of this is that these limitations of the subject also open the door to endless potentialities for the same subject who possesses a body. The embodied subject can engage in the political act of dissent by interrupting the logos not just through the flesh of words but also through the flesh of the body.

This is the case of the subject in the aesthetic regime of arts. The subject is trapped in the dilemma of having the means of pure expression about its thoughts, feelings, and sensations and yet the opening of the multiplicity of sensibilities around this very subject presents a formidable challenge. In fact, Rancière's questions include how can the sensible fabric of subjective experience find means of expressions in the aesthetic regime wherein the sensible is disclosed and discloses a world where everything is up for grabs? Or how many ways are there to be both at the same time logical but not really understand one's meaning? After outlining the basic characteristics of the aesthetic regime through literature in *Mute Speech*, Rancière extends his questioning into how bodies become the vessel of the sensible in everyday experience. Here we see Rancière moving beyond politics as discourse to a politics which involves the subject's material body. The next section explores another dimension involved in this aesthetic modernity, which is focused on finding out what bodies can possibly teach us about politics.

Speaking Bodies

In the texts that followed *Mute Speech* from *The Flesh of Words* until *Aisthesis*, Rancière began to increasingly focus on what he called in *Aisthesis* as "bodies that speak." This expression pertains to the embodied subject of aesthetic modernity who, as described above, is confronted by a deep, mysterious, unconscious sensible that seeks to incarnate itself in the fabric of our sensible experience. Rancière identifies the different ways of being a body that arrests established logos, messes up the distribution of the sensible, and opens up new modalities of "poietic" action. He issues an invitation to explore this alternative way of becoming a political subject in the aesthetic regime. In the aesthetic regime of arts, we can begin to explore how bodies speak and thereby challenge established dimensions and invent new forms of life. The purpose of this exploration is to show how, through the discovery of various potential dimensions of the body, new meanings become possible.

⁴⁰ Jean-Philippe Deranty, "The Symbolic and the Material: A Review of Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso 2013)," in *Parrhesia* 18 (2013), 139–144.

This idea of speaking bodies could first be glimpsed in *Proletarian Nights* and then re-emerged in Rancière's later writings on mute speech and literature. In the proletarian encounter with literature, he described how the new language of the aesthetic regime became merged with bodies. We have proletarians who were suffering in the work that they do and who, upon encountering the erring letter, became aware of how their own subjective utterances were also political. As a paradigmatic example, Rancière's favorite joiner-philosopher Gauny, in his journals, suggested that one must walk from morning to night.⁴¹ This body that insists on walking claims its independence by revelling in the enjoyment of the physical space where it exists. Gauny's body occupies the space that is being deprived from it as a worker. He rebels by trying to be everywhere where he is not expected to be. Underneath the words used by Gauny to articulate his "cenobitic" philosophy and beyond the words of the philosopher who rediscovers them, it is through the simple actions of the body that one becomes a visible political subject. The suffering proletarian's body, his gesture of putting down his tools and looking outside the window and the practice of spending his time in walking around the city is as equally political as appropriating the words of the bourgeois poets in his journals. Political subjects are in fact embodied subjects, subjects who are enclosed within bodies, physical subjects made of flesh, bones, and blood, who engage in politics by mobilising bodily experiences and affects.

We find the same use of bodies in the works of poets who began to incorporate in their poetry figures of dead and abandoned children, as well as sweaty bodies and idiotic utterances of the proletarian. The best example of this for Rancière is Rimbaud's references to the conditions of the workers in the century within which he lived:

New poetry for Rimbaud must be identified with the whole of language. His fate is necessarily linked to the utopia of the new language and of reconciled bodies. Rimbaud travels through this utopia and undoes it by accompanying it with other music: the speech of an uncounted, the idiot romance of obscure misfortune.⁴²

This new poetry that emerged found a way to bring together the embodied experiences of workers and the suffering and misfortunes of the proletarian class with the lyric verses of the poets. These workers who are depicted in the

⁴¹ "When one disposes of oneself in absolute independence, one must walk from morning to night." Gauny quoted in Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. by John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 84.

⁴² Rancière, *The Flesh of Words*, 65.

representative regime as being beneath meaningful relevance are suddenly subjects who speak through their bodies in the new regime. This means that the passivity and apathy which are attributed to them by the representative regime are not sophisticated enough. There is something essential in this newfound attention to the embodiment of the subject of the aesthetic regime. Aside from the poets awakening the proletarians to their capacities to think, Rancière brings to the fore the contrast between the representative versus the aesthetic regime's treatment of the body of the subject and the new potentials for expression and action.

In fact, in *Aisthesis*, Rancière performs an exhaustive study of the type of bodily potentialities opened up by the aesthetic regime. In his review of the book, Deranty has defined the many norms that are at play in Rancière's quasi-phenomenological description of the subject's representation and place in the aesthetic regime in contrast to the representative regime: (1) the contrast between the active and the passive where passivity is viewed as low status and a pathological state; (2) the body as means and medium of action in contrast to a functional body caught up internally and externally in the logic of means and ends, cause and effect; (3) the body as an organism obeying the laws of good proportion between its different parts versus a principle defining beauty as harmony without necessarily any care about proportion; (4) the body as one fully articulated and integrated entity in contrast to the anarchy of parts; and finally, (5) the body as unitary, expressive centre of affect, perception, and thought versus anarchy of affects and passions.⁴³

The shift in the representation of bodies within the aesthetic regime of arts ushers in a new dimension of political subjectivity, which takes the material condition of the body as a means of expression of the sensible within itself when the body becomes something outside of itself. One of Rancière's more recent works, *Aisthesis* shows the different ways of being an embodied subject that disrupts the distribution of the sensible in the aesthetic regime of arts. For this article, I will discuss Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance as an example of this idea of the embodied subject within the aesthetic regime.

In Loïe Fuller's "Dance of Light," the 'figure' of the body, according to Rancière, sums up two things in one. "It is the literal, material, presence of a body that is at the same time, the poetic operation of metaphor, condensation and metonymic displacement: the body outside itself condensing the late evening, the body in movement writing the latent poem of the dreamer 'without the apparatus of a scribe.'"⁴⁴ In Fuller's performance, the body represents the complex layerings of the sensible inside of itself

⁴³ Deranty, "The Symbolic and the Material," 142.

⁴⁴ Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 99.

through a manner of expression that is outside of itself. The movement made by the dancer in the centre is invisible but what becomes visible are the many different shapes that are formed through the absent figure of the dancer. The body of the dancer merged with the fabric with which it is clothed becomes invisible and transforms itself into various forms, a butterfly or a flower through a play of movements, light, and shadows, far from the body of a human being that it really is. The *Serpentine Dance* defies the laws of good proportion through its constant movement and fluidity without necessarily representing any sort of wholeness and geometrical symmetry. This is a body that is energetic, dynamic, but lacking a unity within itself. Here is a frenetic body that destroys common representations of what role bodies should play in a dance performance. There is no narrative but constant movement which is devoted to its own disappearance as a body and a combination of theatrical lights and movement. In its frenetic pacing and creation of numerous sensible forms, it shows the constant transformation of logos into pathos, the transition from meaning to a reproduction of the meaninglessness of life that is however meaningful.

Fuller's serpentine dance thus, in the analysis of Rancière is political because in general, it shatters the laws of the regime of representation about what it means to be a body that is expected to follow the laws of good proportion. More interestingly, it does this destruction through the use of the body itself, by showing another way of being a body. Fuller reinvents the body in classical representation by shifting the focus of attention from the central figure of the dancer to a condensation of the subjective will and action where the mass of flesh that is the dancer and the movement of this dancer becomes a pure act, which is entirely material. Subjectivity therefore becomes a pure movement, thus a subjectivity without a subject but a pure abstract form. The dance becomes a pure form of contestation of the hierarchy of representation according to causality, symmetry, and good proportion. Moreover, the use of "industrial accomplishment" (light, electricity, smoke) in Fuller's performance to destroy the monotony of machine and the production of what makes sense, the beautiful and the useful, is the critique of the industrial period that itself feeds on the logic of causality also contributes to this contestation of the industrial stage itself. Rancière avers that, "through artifice they re-invent the very forms in which sensible events are given to us and assembled to constitute a world."⁴⁵ And in the reinvention, more importantly, it opens the possibility of being a new body in the aesthetic regime.

Fuller's example demonstrates how every single body has a political potential to contest visibility and perception. She reinvents her own body in

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

order to critique the mechanical logic of everyday life in the capitalist structure of production. They demonstrated possibilities of how the pathos of the aesthetic regime is embodied to destroy the logos of mechanical reproduction by mimicking the frenetic movement and energy of this mechanical life.

From Rancière's aesthetic writings we can pinpoint the role that bodies play in politics. If politics is about the subject's dissensus, the arresting of organised time and structured space, and a rare moment of interrupting already established hierarchies and structures, Rancière demonstrates in *Aisthesis* how politics is not performed by wills and words alone, but just as importantly by embodied subjects whose gestures, and not just speeches, can be modes of revolt. The affect of a body in a state of non-stop movement captures the pathos and the loss of reason that is characteristic of aesthetic modernity and thus functions as a critique of logos, order, hierarchy, and structure that in many ways create various forms of oppression. Modern art, not just high art as in the case of the *Serpentine Dance*, demonstrates new modes of being embodied subjects that participate in transforming our understanding of the pathos of the modern aesthetic regime.

Conclusion

The link that Rancière establishes between aesthetics and politics demonstrates to us that there are various ways of being a political subject in modernity. The erring letter has made meaning possible although it always entails an obscure dimension at the end which collapses and does not quite capture experience. The subjects that Rancière highlighted in *Aisthesis* are far from accepted representations of what political subjects are supposed to be since they deviate from the pre-given standards in their practices and this is precisely what makes them political. In their digression and dis-identification, they challenge the distribution of the sensible and invent new forms of practices that traverse the obscure dimension of meaning in order to make visible the hidden pathos of life. Their manner of digression is not done merely at the level of discourse but in the level of the body and the sensible. Rancière seemingly contradicts his official position in *Disagreement* and moves beyond politics as discourse in his works on aesthetics and politics. The plastic form of a sculpture, the camera, immobile theatre, dance of light—all of these are forms of revolt against established representations and at the same time an attempt to capture the dilemma of the subject in the regime of arts.

Politics is never apart from embodied subjects. Despite the efforts of some thinkers to reduce politics to the notion of pure rational discourse, Rancière shows that the very core of politics can be rooted in the struggle and

confusion of the individual. The passive body in its unwillingness to do anything is a very powerful vessel of political action because it goes against expectations of how a body should behave. The same is true for overly active bodies, fragmented bodies, mechanical bodies, and so on. Their frenetic movements are visible critiques of the logic of the mechanical causality in the same manner that political disruptions transform the mechanisms of politics as police. This is the reason why the fragmented sculpture of a torso which represents a laid-back state of a hero is equally as powerful as a 19th century woman who forms an association of women workers. Both bodies demand perception as they both question existing perceptions; both bodies interrupt logos.

Artistic practices are political not necessarily because they represent virtues and values that should be emulated by their audiences but because of their break from representation by asserting other possibilities which require presumption of equality. Artistic practices teach the possibility that anyone can say (or not say) anything at any given moment. They therefore give way to moments of surprise that can shatter already established standards and rules. The artists and artworks that Rancière highlights in *Aisthesis* are similar to the proletarians of *Proletarian Nights* who acceded to forms of experience that had been denied them before. Now the worker is not the sole representative of the struggle for emancipation because artists too are political subjects who struggle to make sense of aesthetic modernity. These artists have shown in many ways how bodies can be utilised and they lived to dis-identify from standard norms by exploring a different side of fragmentation, passivity, fluidity, and silence—in other words, the infinite possible forms and state of the body.

All of these compelling ideas are present in Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics but the predominant reading of Rancière is mostly focused on the debate about his notion of politics. It seems that the understanding of Rancière's work on politics have been reduced to *Disagreement* along with scattered interest on his writings about film and education.⁴⁶ Reading his rich aesthetic writings can alert us to the way in

⁴⁶ Many of these uses of Rancière emphasize the radical democratic theory of disagreement, which first made him famous in the English-speaking academe when *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* appeared in an English translation in 1995. It was this translation of *Disagreement* that propelled Rancière into the limelight, whereas many of his writings up until then had remained limited to French readers. Prior to the translation of *Disagreement*, Rancière was already well known among labor theorists and post-Althusserians because of his work on *The Nights of Labor*, later re-published as *Proletarian Nights*. It was also because of the attention on *Disagreement* that an "official" orthodox reading of Rancière's work developed. This reading focused around the clarification of his idea of 'politics' and its discursive, eventual character rather than on the experiences of the political subjects, which he had substantially described notably in his earlier works. And although it made Rancière

which forms of experiences or artistic practices can be innovative tools for politics, most especially if the goal is to move away from representative politics. While there are attempts to put together aesthetics and politics, many of these efforts are still fixed at either the ethical or the representative regime. Rancière teaches us, however, that if effective changes are to be made and old ineffective systems are to be transformed, we must give space for creativity in a precarious wide variety of experiences and practices.

Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

References

- Deranty, Jean-Philippe, *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010).
- _____, "The Symbolic and the Material: A Review of Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso 2013)," in *Parrhesia* 18 (2013).
- Rancière, Jacques, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013).
- _____, *Film Fables*, trans. by Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006).
- _____, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, trans. by James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- _____, *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. by John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
- _____, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, trans. by Debra Keates and James Swenson (UK: Polity Press, 2009).
- _____, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. by Charlotte Mendell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- _____, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).
- Rockhill, Gabriel, "Introduction: Through the Looking Glass, the Subversion of the Modernist Doxa," in Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, Politics*, trans. by James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

influential among English-speaking thinkers, the focus on *Disagreement* generated a partial interpretation of his oeuvre that is concentrated on the discursive aspect of politics and political subjectivation.