



Rancière, Jacques, Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art

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JACQUES RANCIÈRE. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Translated by Zakir Paul. New York: Verso, 2013. 272 pp.

Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis* (first published in French in 2011) is a provocative and fascinating rewriting of the history of modernism and of the very concept of artistic modernity. The book is relevant for Whitman studies since Rancière devotes much attention to Whitman's role in the evolution of modernism.

Rancière's account starts in 1764 and ends in 1941 (but the French philosopher notes that it could be extended beyond that historical moment). In spite of the linear and chronological order of presentation, Rancière insists that this history *happens* through events of electrical interruption that take place in different contexts and artistic scenes: sculpture, literature, dance, pantomime, theatre, photography, and cinema. By tracing a series of overlapping patterns, the book shows how figures as different as the German art historian and archaeologist Johann Winckelmann, writers Walt Whitman, Stendhal, and James Agee, and sculptor Auguste Rodin all contributed to the challenging of old artistic taxonomies which "defined discourse as a body with well-articulated parts, the poem as a plot, and a plot as an order of actions" (xiv). Rancière avoids any description of these figures as isolated champions of modernity, contextualizes their work, and shows how they participated in a networked, gradual revolution that led to a blurring of the traditional distinctions among different arts, thus eroding the classic dichotomous borders that used to separate art and life, the artistic and the prosaic, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the high and the low, the beautiful and the ugly. This progressive break with established taxonomies caused a radical displacement in the perception of what art signifies, yielding what Rancière has called in previous works the "aesthetic regime of art."

For Rancière, there have been three "regimes of art." In the "ethical regime of art" (in which art was not even identified as such, and it was fully heteronomous as it served the purpose of providing ethical models for the community) and in the "representative regime of art" (in which art was recognized in its specificity and autonomy, but only if it followed precise composition rules in order to belong to fixed artistic genres), art supported the maintenance of the existing distribution of the forms, fields, and hierarchies of human activities. In the "aesthetic regime," however, art ceases to do this and aims instead at "(re)distributing the sensible." This latter idea, which had appeared in previous works by Rancière, such as *Dissensus* and *The Politics of Aesthetics*, is in fact at the very center of this new book: in Ancient Greek, *aisthesis* means "what can be perceived by the senses." Liberated from ethical agendas and representative taxonomies, art (re)distributes the sensible by becoming a mode of aesthetic experience—an experience that instigates a perceptual rupture, a dissensual (and therefore inherently political) reframing of reality. Rancière's perspective is clearly in polemical opposition to the Adornian concept of art's autonomy and to the Greenbergian notion of modernism as the exceptional outbreak of an avant-gardist "high art" that became an end in itself, an art thus in opposition to industrialized culture and kitsch art. *Aisthesis* aims to show that, on the contrary, the motto of modernity, as incarnated by the aesthetic regime of

art, became that of shuttling between art and life, and that there was nothing exceptional in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. These latter simply were the natural result of a process of modernization of art that started with Winckelmann's appreciation of the mutilated *Belvedere Torso*, and eventually passed through Loie Fuller's and Isadora Duncan's serpentine dancing, and Dziga Vertov's attempt to establish a community of egalitarian movements through cinematic montage—just to mention some of the chapters of the history recreated by Rancière.

Whitman's name appears repeatedly throughout the book (and right up to the very last page) and functions as an emblem of modernist culture. Rancière emphasizes the international legacy left behind by the American poet, including his influence on cinematic montage. The fourth chapter, entitled "The Poet of the New World. (Boston, 1841-New York, 1855)," is completely dedicated to Whitman. The first half of the chapter shows how the poet responded to the Emersonian call (Rancière quotes from Emerson's 1841 lecture "The Poet") to the point that, as Rancière puts it, his poetry became the incarnation of Emerson's program: Whitman became the new poet who gave spiritual meaning to prosaic and material activities. The French philosopher praises Whitman's use of free verse and of long, enumerating catalogues, his accumulative rhythms, as well as his use of ellipses and his predilection for the form of the *poème en prose*. He argues that Whitman's work does not simply represent a radical rebellion against poetic conventions but also a way to break with the logics of hierarchical representation: the egalitarian procession of things, activities, sights, women and men, urban spaces and natural spaces, are all given to readers so that we can experience them, pass through them. Whitman thus contributed to the construction of a community "in possession of its own meaning" (64). Comments like this, although eloquent, might not sound original to the ears of Whitman scholars until we remember that the French philosopher emphasizes how this poetics should be read as axiomatically modernist and highly representative of the aesthetic regime he describes in *Aisthesis*: "the poet of plebeian America wants 'neither verse nor prose': neither the account book that maintains things in their commodity value, nor the poetic speech that separates its chosen subjects and rhythms from commonplace occupations" (72).

Rancière analyzes only the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He does acknowledge the existence of later editions, but only on one occasion (when he mentions that later versions of "Song of Myself" would be divided into fifty-two sections instead of flowing continuously as in the 1855 edition). This choice is certainly consistent with the general approach of *Aisthesis*, which deliberately presents only punctual episodes within the works of the different artists and never takes into consideration their overall production. His take on Whitman's work is also not the most accurate imaginable—he overstates the poet's indebtedness to Emerson, for example. Rancière's contribution is important, then, not because of his analysis of individual passages but for the compelling framework he builds, allowing us to achieve a deepened understanding of the modernist nature of Whitman's poetry.