

Theorizing Subjectivity and Community Through Film

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relation between film theory, subject and the idea of community building. I will give a detailed understanding of how both theoretical perspectives in film studies as well as the artistic practice of film making try to rethink new ways of possibility of being together. I will argue that the current approach of contemporary political film studies is to reconstruct/redefine the concept of subject and community building that was either deconstructed, mistakenly or wrongly rejected, by the modern and postmodern theorists. In my studies I will not only rethink the possible political and philosophical approach to new theoretical studies of film from the perspective of subject and forms of community, but also show how the history of film theory (or art theory in general) should be rewritten in such a manner. For my methodology I will be using a combination of concepts coined by contemporary philosophers that question historical divisions of Modern/Postmodern, High Art/Popular Art, Reality/Fiction, etc. This paper is primarily concerned with the theories of Jacques Rancière but is also inspired by Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou. All of these theorists have offered new approaches to understanding how art expresses political concerns about the notion of subject and community, and while not all of them focused on art, film or aesthetics, their ideas can be easily applied to this domain.

Keywords: Film theory, art theory, history of art, subject and community, postmodernism, Jacques Rancière, political aesthetics

Between Politics and Aesthetics

The question of the relation between cinema, production of subjectivity and the idea of community building is the question of potential meetings between art, and in a broader sense, aesthetics, ethics and politics. In the time of critical evaluation of postmodern legacy and rebuilding Metaphysics, rethinking and redefining the connections between them is – I believe – a matter of urgency. I would like to introduce and narrow down this very broad philosophical topic by specifying and outlining possible ways of talking, thinking and looking at cinema and its mode of production from the perspective of creating new forms of subjectivity and idea of the common. I will underpin my theoretical arguments by making direct references to the philosophical work of Jacques Rancière.

Rancière's interests in cinema can be perceived as a shift towards the practical examination of the aesthetical field with the use of theoretical tools presented in his previous works and dedicated to the study of relations between politics and aesthetics. The fundamental concept that binds his reflection in that field is "the partition of the sensible" (fr. *Le partage du sensible*). By coining this expression he urges for overpassing the dialectics of ontology and epistemology, form and matter, subject and object or more broadly the existing divisions in academic disciplines. In this sense the partition of the sensible should be understood as both continuously renewing and ongoing the process of dividing and sharing public and private space and time as well as the condition of possible configuration of material parameters within social, historical, political, artistic and academic fields.

Political and ethical implications of the above concept ought to be perceived from the aesthetical perspective, superior in Rancière's writings. This is clearly apparent in the way he defines his own understanding of politics. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* he states that: "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (Rancière 2004: 8). This definition derives inspiration from the Kantian theory of space and time as *a priori* forms of cognition and experience and also from the critical reading of Platonian notion of ideal Republic that is based on political exclusions and hierarchical organization of social field. The idea of the formulation of the political subject Rancière borrows from Aristotle, who claims in *Politics* that, "the human is a political animal" (Aristotle 1944: line 1253a). The combination of these three sources of inspirations allows Rancière to form an argument of aesthetical foundation of every political activity and that includes art, production of the subject and the common. If the human is a political animal it happens as a result of acquiring and possessing a language that can be spoken, heard and formed as statements expressing needs, desires and requests as fundamental acts for both political and community building activities. In contrast, animals possess only a meaningless voice that can express biological needs, fear and pain.

The first step in the process of forming political subject – according to Rancière – is based on including people's voice in the dominant public discourse and acknowledging it as a voice of political actors. In other words, humans become political subjects at the moment when their voice is permitted to enter space and time of political discourse that sets the stage for (re)distribution of the sensible. In an analogical sense Rancière defines aesthetics by surpassing its simple relation to art and by relating it to politics. "The word aesthetics does not refer to a theory of sensibility, taste,

and pleasure for art amateurs. It strictly refers to the specific mode of being of the object of art". (Rancière 2004: 18). This broad political understanding of art and artistic practices allows him to suppress dialectics of modern and postmodern art or, in a broader sense, autonomy and heteronomy of art, and to combine them in a united political field.

There is a mutual point of origin for both mentioned tendencies in art and it can be located in the possibilities of rethinking the subjectivity and introducing new forms of community. In this sense there is no significant distinction between modern art, its idea of autonomy, abstraction or de-figuration and postmodern art with its ludic, ironic and parodistic directives. Rancière proposes the concept of "Aesthetic regime of Art" in order to include both movements within one tendency of contemporary art and at the same time cancel the misunderstood contradiction that grounded historical periodization in the nineteenth and twentieth century art.

The aesthetic regime is a transgression from the two previous regimes that Rancière defines as ethical and representational (poetical) regimes of art. The first one takes its origins from Plato and his ideal organization of the Republic, where art did not exist in its distinctive, autonomous status. It is important to understand that art in general can only exist within a constructed discursive field that enables its organization and identification. The form of such understood discourse includes three main factors: "modes of production of objects or interrelation of actions; forms of visibility of these manners of making and doing; and manners of conceptualizing these practices and these modes of visibility." (Rancière 2002: 7).

The specific modes of conceptualization are at the same time conditions of possibility for art and its existence within social and political reality. It does not simply allow art to enter the material reality but also enables the partition of the sensible in a way that art can be socially and culturally acknowledged, recognised and perceived in its distinctive and singular form. In the first regime of art objects enter public space as images of divinity and are only possible as a visual representation of dominant ideas and imagination of religious figures. Their conditions of possibility are grounded on the ethical judgement based on the following questions: "is it allowed to make images of the divinity? Is the divinity portrayed a true divinity? If she is, is she portrayed as she should be?" (Rancière 2002: 7). Images are not considered as art in this regime as they do not participate in the process of producing and dividing the sensible within the social field but rather serve as visual forms of ideological messages whose role is to reaffirm political and social orders. In the ethical regime we cannot speak of art as such, as produced objects of representation are strictly relying on the external judgments that do not allow any art piece to circulate freely in the society and go beyond the highlighted boundaries.

The second, poetical (or representational) regime of art separates from this external ethical judgment in order to form art in its autonomy and distinctive identity. The main category that defines this regime is Aristotelian *mimesis*. This should not be understood as a practice of producing similarities but rather following and repeating the norms and conventions strictly designated to the field of art. Shaping form out of matter is based on imposed rules and standards that clearly define subjects of art and forms or styles that can be represented. Art constructs a relatively closed system where its language becomes codified and determined by the set of representational and stylistic rules.

The third regime of art, the most important for Rancière, is called aesthetical. He defines it in relation to the Romantic art theory, mainly represented by Friedrich Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. In this regime of visibility and intelligibility both Modern and Postmodern objects of art are considered within the same partition of the sensible which means that producing autonomous art bears the same political reason as postmodern ludic or parodistic practices. Art in the aesthetic regime no longer belongs to a distinct universe where clear divisions and identities are enforced upon objects in order to enable them to exist as art works. Following Romantic theories Rancière names the evolving status of such understood art as, “free-appearance [...] meaning as a sensory form which is heterogeneous, with respect to other forms of experience. It is apprehended in a specific experience, suspending the ordinary connections between appearance and reality, form and matter, activity and passivity, thought and sensation”. (Rancière 2002: 8). In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he further explains:

In the aesthetic 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. (2004: 18).

Film Theory and the Common

Following such understood theory of contemporary art, I would like to link the outlined definition and its relation to politics by referring it to cinema and especially to the problem of can the above understanding of the aesthetic regime of art can be transferred into the field of film theory, without losing its political potential.

There is a direct transition between the proposed idea of intersecting politics and aesthetics and the philosophical film theory introduced by Jacques Rancière in his two fundamental texts: *The Future of the Image* and *Film Fables*. Rancière builds a mode of reading film that is illustrating his concepts of aesthetics and politics by expanding it into the cinematic field. The relation between images and world are central to his understanding of how to look at films and what films can make possible and productive. His way of analyzing films is both political and aesthetical by means of highlighting the importance of productive element that relates to the formation of both subjectivity as well as community.

He begins his book on cinema, titled *Film Fables*, by quoting French director and theorist, Jean Epstein, who said that “Cinema is true. A story is a lie” (Rancière 2006a: 1). In this formulation Rancière includes his ethical view on cinema by situating it within the aesthetic regime of art and at the same time rejecting the narrative as a constitutive element of both film and its evolution as an artistic medium. The history of narrative cinema is combined and rejected together with a narrative history of cinema that originates from the Aristotelian representational regime of art. Rancière rejects the idea that the origin of film as art is the moment when it started telling stories and coined its own specific artistic language. By doing so he also denies the historical

understanding of linear film evolution that follows the development of artistic forms. This is also the way to understand the title of his work in its double meaning. Film fable is both the fable existing in films as well as the fable of the history of cinema.

Contrary to this idea, Rancière believes that film will discard the Aristotelian fable. He argues that “life is not about stories, about actions oriented towards an end, but about situations open in every direction. Life has nothing to do with dramatic progression, but is instead a long and continuous movement made up of an infinity of micro-movements”. (Rancière 2006a: 2). Discarding film fable is equal to the transition from representational to aesthetical regime of art. This movement is fundamental to release the productive power of cinema, crucial for the new production of subjectivity that leads to new ways of forming the community. In order to do so Rancière rethinks the oppositions between object and subject, film in its technological dimensions and the people that enable it in a sense of creation, perception, experience. The productive power of cinema can be enabled once the oppositions are surpassed and redefined in a similar way that Romantic theorists understood art as a combination of the conscious and the unconscious.

Film in its technological form does not possess any essence in a way that it does not want anything and has no immanent message or desire that is attached to it. It is unconscious and passive and it is up to the active and conscious intention of the subject (film maker, critic, spectator) to turn the passivity of the image into the meaning and intention of the film. It however should not be done so in a way of constructing a closed narrative structure, but on the contrary, by introducing a continual “play between the oppositions of form and matter, subject and object, the conscious and unconscious” (Dasgupta 2009: 340).

Rancière is not radical in his claims. His theory can be placed somewhere between postmodern philosophers, such as Baudrillard, whose most famous concept of *simulacrum* was introduced by him to show how everything becomes a sign without its point of reference and visual culture studies with its attitude towards analyzing world as an image. In *The future of the Image* Rancière clearly demonstrates his position by saying that “the end of images is behind us” (Rancière 2007: 17) and by introducing the concept of the “sentence-image” as an answer to it (2007: 43). Both “the end of the images” and “the future of the images” serve here not as statements of truth but rather as problematic rhetorical sentences characteristic of linear thinking of images that have their history with their goals and ending points attached to it. By introducing sentence-images Rancière becomes close to Lacanian psychoanalytical ethics whose main message is to “approach the real” (Lacan 1997, 31).

For Rancière the image (but also art in general and cinema in particular) neither can completely fall into narrative categories nor should it be perceived simply as a form of narrative. On the other hand, the image is never simply what appears in front of our eyes, it should not be perceived in phenomenological categories. This approach to images, similar to Lacanian approach to the real, is through the language and its ruptures that constitute possibility of production. This is the important moment where Rancière clarifies the similarity between cinema, subjectivity and community. By the concept of sentence-image he understands:

something different from the combination of a verbal sequence and a visual form. The power of the sentence-image can be expressed in sentences from a novel, but also in forms of theatrical representation or cinematic montage or the relationship between the said and unsaid in a photograph. The sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically – that is, by the way in which they undo the representational relationship between text and image”. (Rancière 2007: 45-46).

In cinema films offer us narrative forms that are the combination of – what Roland Barthes has called – *punctum* and *studium* (Barthes 1981: 25). The first one refers to the visible “truth” of the image, a trace of history in its visual form and the second represents the meaning, symbolic layer that every image must contain in order to be grasped by the gaze. The productive power of art, images and cinema lays in their impossibility to translate symbolic into real or, in other words, represent the idea by the complete material form. Production relies here on the notion of desire that is based on fundamental lack that cannot be surpassed. Cinema reproduces desire by putting this impossibility into play on several levels – between director and film, film and spectator or imagination, desire and actual images.

The power of cinema is not simply in the idea of offering absorbing and attractive stories that we immediately become to desire. It is rather the opposite, that is the constant dissolution and reproduction of desire that can never meet with the story and stays in the conflict with itself. This is what Rancière means when he says that “cinema seems to accomplish naturally the writing of *opsis* that reverses Aristotle’s privileging of *muthos*. The conclusion, however, is false, for the very simple reason that cinema, being by nature what the arts of the aesthetic age strive to be, invariably reverts the movement” (Rancière 2006a: 9). Following Schiller’s and Schlegel’s understanding of art as the perfect identity of the conscious and the unconscious “film remains caught within this desire and its failed fulfilment – and this failure is precisely what is *productive* in film” (Dasgupta 2009: 341).

The political potential of cinema follows here the Lacanian ethical directives and relies on ongoing reproduction of this irresolvable tension between the narrative and matter, the subject and object. It does so not by trying to subsume these dialectics into one category (similar to the hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*) but rather by agreeing on their impossibility and a need for a constant search for possible common meeting points between them that are not derived from the enforced orders but rather rely on contingency, singular opportunities and non-imposed unions. Rancière borrows the Romantic concept of the art as the play and offers new ways of both producing and looking at artistic objects as free of political content or determined structure that offers one possible way of experiencing it.

Finally, what brings closer cinema, subjectivity and the possibility of producing the common is a wish to overcome any normative relations between objects and events in reality and its representation. Introducing this possible break is a political act of overcoming the representational logic of art that limits discourse to the form of representation. The effect can be called a democratization of art which is based on rejecting and rethinking the relations between knowledge

and non-knowledge, form and matter, senses and forms of expressions, used to manifest them as well as visual representations of ideas.

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