

We Are All Spectators

Jacques Rancière. *Le Spectateur Emancipé* [*The Emancipated Spectator*]
(Paris: La Fabrique, 2008)

Spectatorship constitutes the new focus in Jacques Rancière's continuous interrogation of the ground that supports our understanding of the efficacy of the arts 'to change something in the world we live in' (p.29). In *The Emancipated Spectator* he calls into question the recurrent production of pitiable spectators in the Western critical tradition and its contemporary mutations. The book is particularly engaging in its fierce stance against practices of intellectual paternalism in art and philosophy. Rancière repeatedly portrays numerous authors as pathologists who presuppose that the spectacle 'weakens the heads of the children of the people' (p.52), or that too many images 'soften the brains of the multitude' (p.105). The emphasis on the pseudo-medical veneer of cultural expertise stresses that what is at stake in this book is not a mere affair of intellectual condescension but the complete incapacitation of the spectators. The five conference papers composing this volume effectively dismantle the all too often characterization of the spectator as a *malade* of passivity and ignorance in order to vehemently affirm that spectatorship is a capacity of all and anyone.

An heir of Foucault, Rancière builds an expeditious genealogy that associates the work of disparate authors whose common premise is the spectator's *idiocy*. The resonance of this genealogy of stultification is amplified by the re-activation of Rancière's investigation of pedagogical relations in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [1987]. This pivotal book in Rancière's re-conceptualisation of emancipation examined the practice of Joseph Jacotot, who at the beginning of the 19th century developed a pedagogy not aimed at the instruction of the people but their emancipation. Jacotot refused to accept the instruction model because it repeatedly produces a hierarchical distance between the teacher and the student; instead he developed a methodology based on the equality of all intelligences. The parallelism Rancière draws between Jacotot's conclusions and the case of the spectator persistently galvanizes the anti-mastery brio of this book. But rather than a parallelism, Rancière recognizes the very same process of stultification at work in the ways various philosophers and cultural revolutionaries indoctrinated and continue to indoctrinate the spectator. Rancière, with undisciplined ardour, identifies the hierarchical distance between actors and spectators with a historical consensus produced by the work of stultifying pedagogues from Plato to Nicholas Bourriaud.

If the instruction of the spectator dates back to Plato, it seems reasonable for Rancière to declare it is high time to situate spectatorship on different grounds (p.54). However Rancière is chiefly concerned here with the current version of the instructional consensus and with what he recognizes as its particularly powerful stultifying effects. Post-critical thought (chapter 2) and different practices calling for a re-politicisation of the arts (chapters 3 and 4) continue to entertain today a paternalistic relation with spectatorship. Rancière regards this *malaise* as evidence of the persistence of the modernist model of critique and its determination to restore to health the 'fragile brains of the people' (p.54). But he also introduces a discontinuity between modernity and our present, and this difference is the key to understand the urgent pathos of these

pages. Authors from the modern critical tradition such as Bertolt Brecht or Guy Debord *got it wrong*, and yet their horizon was the emancipation of the spectator. Since the winter, as Félix Guattari called the 1980s, the consensus to overturn the modernist paradigm disconnected the critique of capitalist spectatorship from any process of emancipation. Rancière is vociferous against the disenchanting and apocalyptic subtraction of capability operated by what he calls ‘leftist melancholia’ (p.43). Theories of notorious authors such as Jean Baudrillard or Peter Sloterdijk are disgraced without ceremony as ‘tools against any process or even any dream of emancipation’ (p.38). In this sense post-critical consensus has re-doubled the incapacity of the spectators: we are not only seduced into passivity and ignorance by the capitalist spectacle but our experiments and desires are doomed to end up ‘swallowed in the belly of the monster’ (p.40).

The Emancipated Spectator argues that to verify the capacity of art to resist the voracity of consensus it is crucial to re-conceptualize the political efficacy of spectatorship. Political art most often regulates the agency of the spectator according to the hierarchical opposition of doing and looking. The current will to re-politicize the arts is not an exception; its modus operandi is footed on the hierarchy between ‘active intelligence’ and ‘material passivity’ (p.69). Rancière perceives a ‘strange schizophrenia’ in contemporary art: artists denounce the impasses of critique and post-critique and yet they continue to massively validate their consensual rationale of political action (p.57). The two usual suspects are targeted in this book: the critique of representation and the ethical immediacy between art and life. Both models are genealogically reconstructed as pedagogies of efficacy presupposing that spectators are ignorant of what they are *really* looking at and/or they are passive because they are *only* looking at. For Rancière the current mobilization of concepts such as participation or community most often confirms the distribution of capacities and incapacities between actors and spectators. Different art practices, relational and other, seek to directly produce social relations in order to erase the distance between the spectator and the real world. Rancière rightly insists that there is no evil distance that needs to be abolished between the spectator and the reality of political action. Rancière, always ready to remove the act of looking an image from ‘the trial atmosphere it is so often immersed in’ (p.104), affirms spectatorship as an action that intervenes to confirm or modify the consensual order.

Pedagogies of action are not only fallacious; for Rancière to produce one model of efficacy is always a critical error. In *The Emancipated Spectator* political efficacy is constructed as an incalculable relation between the spectators and a political subjectivation. There is no model to be founded on the activation of spectatorship because, quite simply, we are all spectators. With unfussy statements such as ‘spectatorship is our normal situation’ (p.23), rather than through meticulous argumentation, Rancière displaces the omnipotent logic of instruction inherent to countless edifying pedagogies to postulate spectatorship as a condition of all. Following his usual production of vacant names, Rancière evacuates any specificity from the term spectatorship to problematize its capacity to designate one identifiable audience. The name-without-a-specific-content *spectator* becomes an operator performing in different configurations the gap between an identification and anonymity. Thus spectators become alternatively in these pages readers, viewers or consumers, but also poets, authors, translators. From the film *La Société du Spectacle* to the photographs of Sophie Ristelhueber, from the documentary films of Rithy Panh

to *Madame Bovary*, from the installation *The Sound of Silence* by Alfredo Jaar to media images, the book gathers contrasting voices across disciplinary boundaries to attest to the emancipation of the spectators. This *indisciplinarity* is not a virtuoso amplification of the scope of the book; it works to stage different theatrical manoeuvres to address different stakes of *our* spectatorship.

Each chapter is best understood as a singular intervention pursuing the implications of the axiom *we are all spectators* for a re-conceptualisation of critical art and in particular for the relation actor/spectator. The emancipated spectator of the title is not celebrated in this book as an active creator. In contrast to an author like Michel de Certeau who rejoiced in productive everyday tactics ('the ways of operating of the weak'¹), Rancière understands the transformation of the consumer into a producer as a validation of the dominant hierarchy between action and passivity. In the chapter entitled 'The Misadventures of Critical Thinking' Rancière points out that strategies of reversal like de Certeau's continue to thrive among the critical intelligentsia and continue to be useless. Thus he understands the photographs of Josephine Meckseper or the work of Bernard Stiegler as the futile propositions from an up-to-date 'inverted activism' (p.42).² The emancipation at stake in this book is not about turning the passive spectator into an active participant. It is about constructing another ground of efficacy through the disarticulation of the order equating the actor with activity, living-reality, self-possession and the spectator with passivity, illusion and alienation. For Rancière this hierarchical order is untenable because actors are always and already immersed in spectatorship. Actors and spectators actively engage with images and words through a 'poetic work of translation' (p.16). The distance between the actor, the spectator and the spectacle is not the evidence of a process of alienation but 'the pathway that endlessly abolishes any fixation and hierarchy of positions' (p.17). With welcomed polemical impetus Rancière transforms the evil litany of interpretation, representation and mediation into a series of crucial components in the process of our emancipation as spectators. Spectatorship is thus constructed as a common, active, anonymous distancing that allows different re-distributions of capacities and incapacities between proper and improper bodies.

The Emancipated Spectator re-formulates the critical capacity of numerous films, photographs and texts to verify that they produce effects inasmuch as they do not tell us what to do. Rancière performs himself this anti-authoritarian stance with a conflictive equilibrium between a doctrinal style of writing and the declaration that the equalitarian ground of his *oeuvre* is a 'foolish assumption' (p.54). But the engagement against postures of mastery in these pages does not simply resonate in an anarchist vacuum that negates the hierarchy between authors and moronic spectators, readers or consumers. Very differently the cinema of Pedro Costa or a photograph by Walker Evans are interpreted as the 'work of a spectator addressed to other spectators' (p.91). Rancière advocates a critical art that disqualifies its instructional authority and confirms an anonymous capacity of all to re-organise the set of distances and proximities of a consensual order. Spectatorship is re-worked as the cultural counterpart of the *empty name* people, i.e. an anonymous *we* that ruins any definitive formula to regulate cause and effects between art and political efficacy. The insistence on the un-decidability of the relation between spectators and a specific political subjectivation is not a sophisticated allegory of the state of the world or a cunning strategy of suspension. It works as an affirmative call to the readers of these pages to re-distribute again the grounds from where we read, write or look.

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Notes

The five conference papers composing this book have been modified for this publication. Early English versions of two papers have been published: 'The Emancipated Spectator' in *Art Forum*, XLV, 7, (2007) and 'The Misadventures of Critical Thinking' in *Aporia, Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy*, Autumn 2007. I have used these English versions in my quotations and translated myself the French versions of the remaining papers. The English version of this book will be published in August 2009 by Verso.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [1980], trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp.34-39.

² The reference to Bernard Stiegler is a new addition to the text for this publication (together with references to Paolo Virno and Brian Holmes).