



**HAL**  
open science

## Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible

Yves Citton

► **To cite this version:**

Yves Citton. Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible. Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Asthetics, Duke University Press, pp.120-139, 2009. hal-00847101

**HAL Id: hal-00847101**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00847101>**

Submitted on 22 Jul 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Yves Citton**

## **Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible**

Within a few years, the “partition of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*) has become something of a household word in France. With this phrase, Jacques Rancière refers to the most basic system of categorization through which we perceive and intuitively classify the data provided to our senses. Literary critics, philosophers and theorists of aesthetics, but also sociologists and scholars interested in migrations – everybody seems to find in this catchy phrase what s/he always wanted to express, but never dared to say. I, of course, count myself among these people seduced by the *partage du sensible*. Its role as a hinge between politics and aesthetics proves extremely useful whenever one attempts to talk just about anything. Far from being weakened by its status of *passe-partout*, this phrase allows us to dig tunnels under disciplinary frontiers, it sets up an interface through which various approaches can interact and shed light on each other, it offers a foundational common ground on the basis of which we can better root and articulate our various reflections on some of today’s most urgent problems.

Because of its very success and usefulness, I believe that the notion of the *partage du sensible* – and more generally the category of the “*sensible*” itself – deserves a closer look, which will be less critical than *analytical*: as in chemistry, I believe we need to *de-compose* various elements which (usefully) come together under the compound category of the *sensible*. This analysis will also provide me with the opportunity to discuss the subtle relations of both proximity and allergy which Jacques Rancière seems to entertain with the Spinoza-Deleuze-Negri constellation I am currently associated with, through my implication in the French journal *Multitudes*. I hope to show that what may look like two antagonistic conceptions of politics can in fact, and should indeed, be articulated with each other. Along the way, we will pass by an unlikely gallery of portraits gathering dinosaurs, rhinoceroses, actors and membranes – through which I will try to map out our current political postures.

### ***TWO SIDES OF THE SENSIBLE***

I will start by suggesting that the usefulness of the category of the *sensible* largely comes from the fact that it neutralizes the traditional opposition between activity and passivity. In an age when political agency appears as more problematic than ever, everybody falls back on issues of sensibility as if it were a protected place where the question of agency can be miraculously (if temporarily) suspended. It does not seem to take much effort, much willpower, much creativity, to “sense” or “feel”

something. Common sense tells us that objects and events are impressed upon our senses by their own movement, and that it is enough for us simply to *be there*, with our eyes and ears open, in order (passively) to receive such impressions – a fairly reassuring and suitably humble perspective, as it is minimally demanding on our part. We, people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – aware of all the traps and past failures of political agency, calls to arms and other glorious revolutionary projects (so the postmodern story goes...) –, we like it whenever someone suggests that we can be “subversive” by simply sitting there with our eyes open: our hands are unlikely to find themselves covered with blood in the process, we are unlikely to be hurt or jeopardize our (after all fairly comfortable) conditions of living.

For, when a philosopher like Jacques Rancière writes about the “*partage du sensible*,” we understand that this passivity is only apparent: our sensitivity results from an *activity* of partition and of partaking. Things don’t just project their images upon the blank screen of senses: we, humans, actively categorize them. We filter them, we select some and reject others, we classify them, according to complex mechanisms of distinction that are both socially constructed over time, and individually reconducted each time we sense anything. The fact that we can “develop our sensitivity”, our *capacity* to sense, suffices to show that some type of activity, whatever it may be, is involved in the process. We, people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are therefore fully entitled to feel good (about ourselves) when we “feel well”, i.e., when we *do* our best to “become sensitive” to the existence, sufferings and rights of all the creatures (women, colonial subjects, gays, and battery hens) that previously fell outside of the *partage du sensible* experienced by our barbarian ancestors.

17<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers like Leibniz or Spinoza provide us with a principle that neatly catches these two sides (passive and active) of the notion of sensitivity. They invite us to think that our (active) power-to-affect and our (passive) power-to-be-affected always tend to develop in direct proportion to each other. I cannot become more “powerful” without becoming more sensitive and, conversely, each time I gain in sensitivity, I also gain in my power to act (effectively). A rock can only be affected by monotonous gravity, centuries of erosion or extreme temperatures; in return for this insensitivity, it cannot “do” much, except resist winds, fall down a slope if pushed by something else, etc. A housecat is both more sensitive, i.e., more vulnerable, and more powerful: it is sensitive to smaller variations in temperatures, its perseverance-in-being depends upon the availability of specific forms of food, its happiness relies on the whims of its master; in return, it can, on its own movement, act drastically to shorten the life of the mice that live(d) in its vicinity, it can protect its master from depression, make him cry, etc. The same parallel expansion of the power to be affected and of the power to affect is obvious when one turns to us, human beings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and when one considers how many things and people our daily lives are sensitive and exposed to, and dependent upon, as well as how many things and people can be affected by our actions (or lack thereof) worldwide. (An obvious illustration of all this is provided by the US government foreign policies: the Super-Power to affect is bound to bite the dust when it launches military expeditions that prove insufficiently “sensitive” to the meta-stable realities of the local political field it attempts to reconfigure.)

This form of sensitivity, characterizing a solution that espouses as closely as possible the specificity of the situation it is faced with, exemplifies the bi-facial association of passivity and activity I stressed earlier on. The agent's power to *act* effectively, its capacity to reach the goal he has intentionally set for himself, appears to be in direct proportion with the agent's capacity (passively) to *record data* provided by the situation on which he purports to act. In between the recording phase (where these data can be seen as simply impressed upon the agent's sensory organs) and the moment when a course of action is set and put into motion, a window opens during which "the real action" can take place: not simply the carrying out of a plan, but the very devising of this plan, in light of all the data currently at the agent's disposal. This "real action" takes place at the level that Jacques Rancière isolates as the *partage du sensible*: some data are perceived and selected as relevant, others are rejected as irrelevant, others still are simply ignored. Each time this happens, the agent inherits a specific social configuration of the *partage du sensible*, which he can reconduct as it has been transmitted to him, or which the encounter with this singular set of data can lead him to alter, at an infinitesimal or sometimes at a more dramatic level. This reconfiguration of the *partage du sensible* appears, within Jacques Rancière's system, as the founding moment of political subjectivation: whether I stand in front of a work of art or am involved in a social movement, the possibility of politics rests on such a moment when I am led to reconfigure the *partage du sensible* I have inherited from the majoritarian norm (along with its blind spots, its denial of "rights" and its hierarchy of privileges).

### ***FATALISM AND THE RHINOCEROS***

The capacity to "espouse" a given situation has been seen as a major virtue by a number of philosophical traditions, most famously Oriental ones – valuing flexibility, suppleness, adaptability, openness, fluidity, dissolution of the self, all virtues culminating in the Chinese ideal of *wu-wei*, or "action through non-action." Apart from Roland Barthes' deep interest in *wu-wei*, most notably during his *Cours du Collège de France* on "The Neutral" (1977-1978), which paved the way for a dramatically renewed articulation between aesthetics and politics, one important site of exchanges between Western thinking on agency and Chinese *wu-wei* has been provided by 17<sup>th</sup>-century metaphysicians like Leibniz and Spinoza. While the former philosopher was explicitly interested in Eastern philosophy, the "fatalism" of the second was frequently denounced as converging with "Chinese atheism." Here is not the place to study such a convergence between Leibnizianism, Spinozism, "fatalism", a certain form of "pantheism" and "l'athéisme des Chinois"<sup>1</sup>, but one can certainly see why such an assimilation may have taken place: if the efficiency of my action is directly determined by my espousing the lines already provided by the reality on which I intend to work, then it is no longer *I* who act on this reality in order to alter it

---

<sup>1</sup> On these issues, see my articles « L'Ordre économique de la mondialisation libérale : une importation chinoise dans la France des Lumières ? », *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 2007-1: 9-32, and « ConcateNations. Globalization in a Spinozist Context » in Diane Morgan and Gary Bantham (ed.), *Cosmopolitics and the Emergence of a Future* (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: 91-117.

according to *my* choices and desires; I find myself in a situation where reality transforms *itself*, evolves, follow *its* own courses through my intervention. Isn't it what Spinoza suggests when he describes human beings, along with all other natural "things", as mere "modes", determined "modifications" of a substance which is the only reality endowed with the full privilege of agency? Whenever I illusion myself into thinking that I (freely) act, it is in fact only "the substance" which unfolds itself through this part of Nature that I happen to embody.

Apart from a serious blow to humans who, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were still proud of being God's favourite creatures, a lasting discomfort with such a worldview comes from the *transparency* to which it condemns human (non-)agency. Spinoza's "free necessity" – which calls for my understanding of and voluntary adaptation to the laws of nature – suggests an *ideal* of (non-)action in which the data from the situation would impress themselves upon my senses without any waste, would be wholly processed by my intellect, and directly translated into a reaction perfectly adapted to all the dimensions of the situation. The fact that Spinoza earned his living by polishing glass becomes an emblem for the ultimate goal (or danger) of his philosophy: to transform us into transparent mediations through which natural necessity expresses and follows its own course.

I know that Jacques Rancière has little patience with this type of neo-Spinozist thinking – which, in France, has been filtered through Gilles Deleuze's writings and courses on Leibniz and Spinoza. When asked in 2004 by the journal *Dissonance* to comment upon an excerpt of *Empire* in which Hardt and Negri claim that "the great masses need a material religion of the senses." he made a series of remarks that I will now quote at length (since this interview seems never to have been published), and that I will later comment upon briefly. After noting that "Negri's philosophy becomes more and more a sort of pantheism, a great pantheism of life" and that, when interpreted through Deleuzian glasses, "the Marxist scheme is turned into a vitalist scheme", Jacques Rancière adds :

I believe that [in this neo-vitalist approach] the sphere of politics gets stuck between two things: the sphere of economics, the sphere of productive forces, and the sphere of aesthetics in the sense of a new religion, the Romantic idea that the community is a sensitive community [*une communauté sensible*] of people reunited by a faith, by a belief which is shared by [*commune à*] the man of the people and the philosophers<sup>2</sup>.

Let me first raise the question of the relationship that we are to establish (or not) between this Negrian *communauté sensible* and the *partage du sensible*. Doesn't Jacques Rancière tell us, through his use of the latter notion, that *any* community is a *communauté sensible*, sharing a certain partition of what is to be felt, seen, noticed, respected, taken care of (or, conversely, ignored, used and despised)? Does the main difference between him and Toni Negri come from the fact that the Italian philosopher emphasises the need to form a community, to construct a platform of reunion, while the French thinker defines politics as a moment of partition, division, secession? I leave such questions open for the moment, and move on to a very specific and

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Jacques Rancière, destined to be published in the French journal *Dissonance* in 2005, but apparently never released. My translations.

concrete criticism raised by Jacques Rancière against *Empire*, concerning the view that this book proposes on migrations:

in *Empire*, they write about nomadic movements which break the borders within Empire. However, the nomadic movements which break Empire's borders are groups of workers who pay astronomical amounts of money to smugglers in order to get to Europe, workers who are then parked in confinement zones, waiting to be turned back. To transform this reality of displacements into anti-imperialist political movements and energies is something totally extravagant.

I read this (fairly common) criticism of *Empire* as a denunciation of the *rhinocerial danger* that looms over neo-Spinozism. From the Ancient Stoics to the Chinese Atheists discussed in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and to Leibnizian optimism, all forms of "fatalism" have been suspected of being excessively ready to *accept reality* as it is, and to invent hopeful and encouraging forms of coating, destined to paint over its various horrors. In the case at hand: destitute migrants following the lines of flight inscribed in the wood of our global economic imbalances *do* point the way that our understanding should, too, *follow*, in order to seize the post-national nature of politics in the global age. Fluxes of bodies crossing national borders indicate profound trends that our analysis has to notice, to understand by its causes, and finally to use positively in our effort to reconfigure the current transformations for the better. A politics of hope finds its foundation in the Spinozian attitude asking us, neither to hate (*detestari*) nor to mock (*ridere*), but to understand (*intelligere*) reality as it is. Spinoza suggests in the scholium of *Ethics* V,10, that, "in arranging our thoughts and conceptions, we should always bear in mind that which is good in every individual thing:" in spite of their untold and saddening sufferings – and even if such hardships obviously need to be alleviated, and their exploiters denounced – destitute migrants *do* put national borders under a pressure that tends to erode, in the long run, the very sustainability of the barriers that currently maintain "totally extravagant" levels of inequality among the world's populations.

Of course, as we all know, in the long run we are all dead – and poor migrants unfortunately tend to die much younger than the neo-Spinozist thinkers who try to sense "that which is good" in other people's sufferings. As a matter of fact, this hopeful acceptance of what appears as deep and irresistible trends of reality has been portrayed with remarkable accuracy in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. In our post-Cold War era, the play can be disengaged from its anti-communist message and become available for renewed allegorical projections, in particular as a description of our range of attitudes towards globalization, "economic rationalization", and "modernization" at large. Between Bérenger-the-loser, an all-too-human misfit, fragile and mediocre, and his friend Jean-the-achiever, eager to be well adapted, to overcome his weaknesses, and to make something out of his life, the contrast is precipitated by the irruption of rhinoceroses, who unexpectedly and randomly run havoc in the city, trampling and terrorizing people in ever greater number. The animals soon no longer appear as intruders but as humans transformed into monsters by a growing epidemic (traditionally read as a metaphor of the spread of Nazism in Germany or of communist conformism in Eastern European countries).

This play could be relevant in a discussion of sensitivity and Spinozism, insofar as it stages a certain form of *acceptance of the given* based on a certain *reference to*

*Nature*, both of which have long been denounced as inherent dangers looming over this philosophy. The last dialogue between Bérenger-the-loser and Jean-the-achiever, which takes place while the latter is going through his own transformation into a rhinoceros, summarizes this dimension of the play: rejecting traditional “morality”, and asking for its replacement by “Nature”, rejecting any reference to “Man” and calling “Humanism” outdated, Jean claims that he “welcomes change” and has freed himself from all the “prejudices” that portray our species as superior to the other animals. It would be very easy to read between these lines a direct parody of some of the defining theses of the *Ethics*: Man in Nature is no special “empire within an empire;” traditional morality and transcendental definitions of Rights must be replaced by an ontology of power; definitions of the good and the bad are always relative, and evolutionary; the relations between individual *conatus* are ruled by the survival of the fittest and the elimination of the misfits.

Jean’s trajectory is one of refusal of prejudices and of acceptance of reality-as-it-is: he goes with the flow and finds reasons to see this flow as a natural, inescapable, and even desirable reality, a reality in which we can find joy and reasons for hope. Of course, he does not accept it, as Spinozism would like us to do, on the basis of a *rational understanding* of the causal relations at work within this reality: he is mostly carried away by the flow, merely *rationalizing* the changes that affect him (rather than reasoning upon their emancipatory potential). (And this no doubt points to the limit of Ionesco’s play: no real event inexplicably comes out of the blue like his rhinoceroses do.) But countless criticisms of *Empire* have presented it as a mere rationalization (and acceptance) of the dissolution of the (national) welfare State, of the erosion of the status of wage-earners, of the overlapping of work over leisure time: isn’t Negri *condoning* the shuffling around of poor workers by the inhumane laws of capitalism when he “extravagantly” presents destitute migrants as an avant-garde of the anti-imperialist struggle?

Bérenger, on the other hand, is the only character that manages *not* to become a rhinoceros until the end of the play: far from developing a higher understanding of the situation, he does so mostly by clinging to rather ridiculous, narrow-minded and outmoded prejudices about Man, his transcendent Duties and his natural Rights. He just *resists* the transformation that affects the world around him, with obstinacy and desperation: he grinds his heels into his memory of how things used to be before the arrival of the rhinoceroses. He refuses to adapt to the new reality that surrounds him. Of course, there is an ironical and suggestive chiasm to be read in the fact that, by being “sensitive” and reactive to the transformations of our world, the likes of Jean are led to become thick-skinned pachyderms, while the short-sighted and thick-spirited Bérenger perceives more clearly the mutilation imposed upon his (old-fashioned) idea of Man by an adaptation to the current trends. Similarly, one is led to think that the “extravagance” of those who accept the dissolution of “the people” into mere “multitudes” results from the fact that their very *sensitivity* to the logic at work within (cognitive) capitalism tends to make them *insensitive* and *blind* to the human reality of constrained migrations.

At this point, we seem to be caught between two equally unappealing figures. On the (traditional) Left hand, we would have the *dinosaurs* of trade-union leaders, Communist survivors and populist figures who blame all current social evils on

globalization : like Bérenger, they cling on to unsustainable notions (like “job security”, national sovereignty or the so-called “*idéal républicain*”), they invoke mythical entities like “the people” and grind their heels in an attitude of pure refusal to budge. On the other hand (described either as an “ultra-Left” hand or as a “crypto-liberal” one), we would have the *rhinoceroses* of the thinkers of the multitudes: like Jean, they position themselves as sensitive and adaptable to the new reconfigurations of the given, they are ready to revise and amend their partition of the sensible, they are eager to propose new tools to understand, explain and exploit the new state of things, in which they positively try to discover constitutive potentials for new forms of emancipation – while critics see their work as an extravagant rationalization and acceptance of new forms of alienation.

### ***FROM THE AGENT TO THE ACTOR***

Even if Jacques Rancière’s general definition of “politics” strikes me as putting a much heavier load on an attitude of resistance, of secession, of refusal, rather than on the positive, inventive and creative work that Toni Negri pins down under the notion of “constitution,” he largely manages to escape from this alternative between the dinosaur and the rhinoceros by opening an original line of flight in the direction of *a theatrical conception of political agency*. I find it highly significant that it is in the same interview with *Dissonance*, where he denounced the “extravagance” of *Empire*’s perception of the migrants, that he would articulate most clearly (to my knowledge) this theatrical conception as an alternative to the neo-Spinozist tradition emblematised by the Deleuze-Negri couple. Jacques Rancière starts by acknowledging the interest of the Deleuzian opposition between the “molar” and the “molecular” as a way to escape the limitations of pre-constituted individualities and categories: the molecular approach has indeed played a major role in the “esthetic revolution” that, for two centuries, has questioned any given *partage du sensible*, and denounced such partitions as a mutilating “molarization” of the complexity of the molecular. Jacques Rancière rejects however the transposition of this “physico-esthetic” model into the sphere of politics:

[The authors of *Empire*] try to present [this model] as a solution to the problem of representation. The idea is to oppose to a mass, perceived as fixed in its concept, a circulating energy without subject. This is what multitude means. But the problem is that, in politics, one always creates a stage (*une scène*). They try to avoid the theatrical model. One could almost say that they try to oppose a novelistic model of dissolved identity to the theatrical model. However, I think that politics always takes, more or less, the shape of the constitution of a theater. It means that politics always needs to constitute small worlds on which units take shape; I would call them “subjects” or “forms of subjectivation”; they stage a conflict, a litigation, an opposition between various worlds. [The thinkers of the multitude] don’t want to hear about that. What they want is a world-energy that breaks up masses. But this does not constitute politics, that is the problem, at least in my view.

This is how Jacques Rancière justifies his clinging on the “old fashioned molar concept” of “the people” and his refusal to replace it with “the molecular energy of the

multitudes”: *the people* “does not constitute a type of group; it is not a mass; it is purely the name of an act of subjectivation”:

For me, politics is never a question of identity; it always stages a gap (*un écart*). When one says “we are the people”, I would say precisely that “we” and “the people” are not the same thing; politics takes place in the gap between the two. It seems to me that when they oppose the molecular to the molar, they do the contrary: they need some sort of reality for the political subject. For me, politics is the constitution of a theatrical and artificial sphere. Whereas what they really want is a stage of reality (*une scène de réalité*). That is why they transform any migration into an act of political resistance. [...] This is the consequence of the opposition between the molecular and the molar, which in fact always draws us back to the need for a political subject that would be real, that would be a truly vital energy at work. I do not believe so: a political subject is a type of theatrical being, temporary and localized.

Jacques Rancière’s escape from the trapped alternative between the dinosaur and the rhinoceros invites us to see ourselves as *actors*, and to trade the vocabulary of political *acts* (with its implications in terms of actions-reactions, activity/passivity, proportionality between power-to-affect and power-to-be-affected, etc.) for a vocabulary of political *gestures*. The sphere of politics thus appears as a theatrical stage rather than as a battlefield, as a matter of role-playing rather than as a matter of anticipating, espousing and utilizing flows within an organic body.

Of course, this elegant solution is bound to sound extremely appealing to those of us who have special interests in theater, literature, and the arts. Far from studying marginal and obsolete forms of expression, we suddenly find ourselves at the very core of the essence of “political action.” The dinosaursque attitude which appeared earlier as one of refusal and secession, vocally denouncing the injustice of the various *mécomptes* at work, but falling short of proposing creative ways to adjust our calculation to our pressing needs, this attitude is turned around, now that Rancierian politics call us to “the constitution of a theatrical and artificial sphere” (the construction of a stage, the design of sets and costumes, the creation of gripping characters, the invention of catchy phrases and slogans).

Such a *fuite en avant* from the register of political action into the register theatrical performance resonates well, not only with Jacques Rancière’s current work on esthetics (cinema, poetry, novel, etc), but also with the reflection articulated around the notion of *spectacle* by Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and their countless followers. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technological and commercial evolutions have turned our mass-communication and mass-consumption societies upside down, inverting the primacy of reality over appearance: no longer a mere (and secondary) expression of reality, the *spectacle* is seen as that which gives reality its very shape and strength. From Judith Butler’s sexual performativity to Peter Sloterdijk’s interest in bubbles and foam, a definition of politics as theater is definitely well attuned to a major feature of our *Zeitgeist*.

The elegance of such theatrical politics also comes from the image of *collective agency* that it projects: when Jacques Rancière evokes political “subjects” and “subjectivation,” he tends to describe a world of “we”s rather than a world of “I”s. Those who end up climbing on the political stage they have constructed do not speak

as individuals but as (problematic and gap-ridden) collectives. This may be a discreet but relevant implication of the opposition between the “novelistic model” espoused by Deleuzian neo-Spinozists and the “theatrical model” advanced by Jacques Rancière. The “multitude” tends to present itself as a mere collection of singularities, a chaotic aggregation of the type of personal trajectories described from the inside in modern novels – while the “people” pre-requires some form of pre-constituted group structure, be it strongly organized as in the case of a theater company, or minimally united, as in the case of a theater audience, which, in spite of its loose nature, falls into what Gabriel Tarde would have labelled a “crowd” rather than a dislocated “public.”

More generally, *les sans-parts* are always to be conjugated in the plural within Jacques Rancière’s grammar: the stage is constituted only after they have managed to speak as a group – even if this group is always constituted by an inner gap, a tension between its “temporary and localized” nature and the universal claims to which it appeals. We can hence see the originality and power of the Rancierian construct: it provides us with a theory of representation where *the representatives are the represented themselves*, even though there is a distance (a gap) between the two (justifying us in seeing this mechanism as a *re-presentation*, and not merely as a *presence*).

Theatrical politics, however, have always been haunted by an anti-model: that of *the Jester*, who represents the voice of the kingdom’s lowest subjects in the court of the Prince. The Fool tends to be looked upon with suspicion, due to his deeply compromised position as the Outsiders’ voice within the small circle of the Insiders: everyone knows that, even if he manages to represent a form of critical Reason at the table of the autocrat, he will be tolerated only as long as he does not transgress the threshold of what would be really “subversive;” his main function is not to give voice to the voiceless, but to entertain the loud laughter of the powerful. In other words, if he is to remain the court’s jester, the theatrical gestures through which he may express the grievances of the subjects are bound to betray these very grievances, by the very movement that makes them audible and acceptable to the powerful. Hence the eternal complaints about the traps of representation, and other betrayal of the clerks.

Within Rancierian theatrical politics, it is no longer a group of (un)representative jesters, but *the subjects* who invite themselves to play the Fools at the King’s table. If there is a betrayal, it will come from the ranks of the spectators rather than from those of the actors, since the latter speak for themselves. Jacques Rancière thus answers Gayatri Spivak’s question : yes, within certain historical junctures, the “subaltern” *can* speak. These moments are relatively rare : “politics” for Rancière, like “thought” for Deleuze and Guattari, is the exception, not the rule (which is the reconduction of the existing “police” or “opinion”); but it has occurred in the past, and it may be in gestation around us all the time.

The subaltern, however, in Jacques Rancière’s theatrical politics, never speak *directly* for themselves: it is they who speak, but they do so from under a mask that they have painted upon their face, from under a costume they have collectively designed for themselves, on a carnivalesque stage they are building with each of their interventions. This precision is crucial because it prevents us from confusing this type of political performance with the form of popular spectacle described by Rousseau in his *Letter to d’Alembert on the Spectacles*. In Rousseau’s idealization of his

fatherland, the people of Geneva were a pre-defined collective which comes fully to coincide with itself when a troop of militia men dance in the streets, soon rejoined by joyful young women. Contrary to what happens in the traditional theater that d'Alembert and Voltaire wanted to see allowed in Geneva, the barriers between the stage and the audience, between those who actively play and those who passively watch, between those who speak and those who listen, between the bodies that are present and the characters that are represented – all these barriers vanish, only to leave a community (“the people” of Geneva) become transparent to itself. The fact that they would *dance* (rather than role-play) emphasizes the *immediacy* of this presence which fully collapses the gap between the represented and the representative: even if their steps can be watched by a third party (in this case, Jean-Jacques and his father), their true essence and their goal remain within themselves, they are a self-realization of joy, rather than an evocation of something absent.

Through such dance steps, the militiamen and their female partners assert their *identity* as “the people of Geneva.” Jacques Rancière takes great pain to tell us that nothing of the sort is happening in his theatrical politics. What is staged is not an identity, but *a gap* between the “we” that is speaking and “the people” in the name of which this “we” purports to speak. This crucial difference takes us from the world of Rousseau’s *Letter to d’Alembert* to that of Diderot’s *Paradox on the Comedian*. Far from abolishing all barriers and establishing a regime of transparency, this analysis of the comedian’s play advocates the erection of a barrier *within* the subjectivity of each agent. A good actor is one who manages fully to distance his person from the *persona* that he plays. The efficiency of acting is based, not on a coincidence, but on an inner distance and a separation between the representative and the represented, even if both are located within one single body. When Diderot attempts to unfold the political implications of his theory, he focuses his attention on the figure of *the courtier*, which seems to throw us back into the anti-model of the jester. But in fact, he thus subverts in advance – in a very Rancierian manner – the model of intellectual intervention in the “public sphere” that Kant and Habermas will later theorize. For Diderot, it is insufficient and naive for the intellectual to conceive of himself as “a scholar writing for other scholars.” One always speaks from a certain *position* within complex structures of social dominance and oppression, and, as a result, one always has to *pose* as *this* persona (a serious, disinterested and rational scholar) or as *that* other persona (the fool, the activist, the despot’s adviser, etc.). For Diderot also, politics is first and foremost a matter role-playing. One is never better represented than by oneself; but one has to split oneself in two, and maintain a healthy gap between the two, if one wants this self-representation to be fully effective.

The main difference between Denis Diderot and Jacques Rancière on this point is that the latter, as we have noted above, describes a collective of actors, while the former only theorizes the behavior of individual agents. This difference, of course, is very significant. Political agency, within Rancierian theatrical politics, seems to require the constitution not only of a theater, but also of a some sort of collective company. From politics-as-a-battlefield to politics-as-a-stage, the French language interestingly uses the same word: *une troupe*. It is by coalescing into a theatrical “troop” that individual speaking bodies become a political subject, “temporary and localized”. Here again, the metaphorical field exploited by Jacques Rancière in his

theatrical modelization of political agency proves suggestive: contrary to a military troop, where organization and order are always imposed from the top down, a *troupe* of actors can be more open to bottom-up forms of self-organization. Given the fact that the play of politics is never written-out in advance, such a troupe has to be conceived as an *improvising collective*, along the lines of models provided by the world of modern dance or free jazz. What is at work within the many “small worlds” of such units is a complex (and dramatically understudied) dynamics of general responsivity, temporary guidance, coordinative framing, opening up of free spaces for individual explorations, exacerbation of singularity through common empowerment and reciprocal stimulation<sup>3</sup>.

To my (incomplete) knowledge, Jacques Rancière has not (yet) attempted to theorize and map out this dynamics of an improvising *troupe*, a dynamics which is nevertheless crucial to fleshing out his theatrical model of politics – although one could of course read *Le maître ignorant* or *La nuit des prolétaires* as early attempts to study and understand such collective dynamics. The question that will lead me into my conclusion is however the following: *should Rancière attempt to theorize the dynamics of collective improvisation on which his model of theatrical politics implicitly relies, wouldn't he be led to fall back on the type of molecular, vitalist, “physico-esthetic” models he rejects in neo-Spinozist thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Toni Negri?*

## **MEMBRANE POLITICS**

It would be easy (but possibly pointless) to show that a neo-Spinozist journal like *Multitudes* spends a good deal of its issues trying precisely to map out this dynamics (for instance in the work of Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonella Corsani with the Coordination of the *Intermittents du spectacle*), or to show that Diderot's theory of politics and justice as spectacle is intricately linked to its neo-Spinozist vitalism, or even to show how Rancierian Gilles Deleuze was when he stated, on numerous occasions (after Paul Klee), that “the people is what is missing” and that “literature has to invent this missing people.”<sup>4</sup> In spite of Jacques Rancière's allergy for the vitalist streak of neo-Spinozism, and in spite of the traditional parochial rivalries between church-goers of various Parisian chapels, I wonder whether Toni Negri's “multitude” and Jacques Rancière's “people” are as incompatible as their authors, and some of their readers, seem to think. More precisely, I wonder whether their disagreements do not come from the fact that they each approach the ambivalence of the sensible from a different, but ultimately *complementary*, perspective.

It is obvious, as Jacques Rancière strongly stresses, that the question of representation cannot simply “dissolve” in the molecular flows of a world-energy supposedly at work in the given bio-economic processes that shape “globalization.”

---

<sup>3</sup> On such issues, see the dossier devoted to the “Power of Collective Improvisation” in *Multitudes* 16 (2004): 131-178 available online at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/rubrique444.html>. See as well the various issues of the online journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation* at <http://www.criticalimprov.com>.

<sup>4</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, “Les Intersseurs,” in *Pourparlers*. Paris: Minuit, 1990: 172 and “La littérature et la vie” in *Critique et clinique*. Paris: Minuit, 1993: 14.

Toni Negri himself often stressed the need to go beyond a naive reliance on the immediate (re)actions of the multitude, and the correlative need to theorize the constitution of collective agents through the actual mechanisms provided by the given “representative democracies.” A Rancierian translation would read: what stage is now to be constituted, on which the theatrical play of mass-media democracies can be best penetrated, in order to redirect its plot towards the empowerment of the people/multitude?

It seems to me equally obvious, however, that one cannot simply disregard the actual pressure of molecular bio-economic flows, in the hope that theatrical politics *alone* will alter the current relations of power. Migratory pressures (along with the hopes and fears that ride upon them) and productive reconfigurations (whether theorized as cognitive capitalism or under rival models) are – at least – as likely as theatrical politics to play a role in the reduction (or exacerbation) of our currently extravagant global inequalities. Most migrants are *simultaneously* displaced, exploited “workers who pay astronomical amounts of money to smugglers in order to get to Europe, workers who are then parked in confinement zones, waiting to be turned back,” *and* vectors of movements and energies that *do* carry considerable potentials for “anti-imperialist political resistance.” The real question is not to “choose” between one side of this reality and the other, but to try and see how they can be articulated with each other.

The ambivalence of the sensible discussed throughout this article may help us make sense of the complementarity between the Rancierian and the neo-Spinozist approach. There are at least two implicit aspects of theatrical politics that inscribe it within the Deleuzian attempt to “get out of the universe of pre-constituted individualities” that Jacques Rancière identifies with the “aesthetic revolution.” From this point of view, the figure of the political agent as an actor tends to dissolve into two contrary directions, towards the collective reality of the *troupe* and towards the molecular reality of the *sensible*. If we follow the first direction (towards the collective), we will encounter the Deleuzian notion of *agencement*, through which he characterized his opposition to the psychoanalytical image of the Unconscious as (precisely) *a theater*: one of the main points of the *Anti-Oedipus* was that one should not conceive of “desire” in the theatrical vocabulary of representation, stage, or masks, but in the constructivist vocabulary of production, fabrication, and machine. In the word *agencement*, we obviously recognize *agency*, but an agency that results from *putting things and people together*, an agency that does not result from splitting oneself into two (the representative and the represented), but from connecting oneself in a specific manner to *a multiplicity* of exterior things. *Agencements* are by nature collective. The actor/agent can only act through a certain mode of connection with other actors/agents and with exterior things, as they are determined and conditioned by a specific situation, by a specific state of things. As I suggested above, it seems to me that, if we take seriously the implications of the notion of *agencement*, we are likely to meet the type of vitalist questions (about the “state of things”: their energy, force, production, flows, economics) that Jacques Rancière rejects in the neo-Spinozist tradition. This is the “*scène de réalité*” with which the neo-Spinozist thinkers try to articulate their conception of political agency ( “*le mouvement réel*”, in Laurent

Bove's vocabulary): it appears here simply as *the reality of the theatrical stage of politics*.

In the second direction, the figure of the actor tends to dissolve into the molecular complexity of our sensitivity. Theatrical politics draws on the active side of the *partage du sensible*, on our capacity to re-partition it along slightly altered lines: we can cross-dress, we can pose as something we are not (“*Juifs allemands*”, “*sans papiers*”, “*intermittents*” or “*recalculés*”) when we demonstrate and yell in the streets, just as we can blur the borders between music and noise when we give a concert. We should not forget, however, that we can only do so from a certain *given* (inherited) configuration of the *partage du sensible*, a “state of things” that pre-exists and largely pre-determines our possible work of reconfiguration. Before taking place towards *other people* (in our cross-dressing, yelling and demonstrating), the re-presentation takes place *within us*, within the activity that defines our sensitivity: some of the features of the situation that were present at the level of our sensory inputs are selected as relevant and manage to define the nature and quality of our behavioural output (remaining present at this secondary level), while other features are rejected as irrelevant or simply ignored (and become absent at this secondary level).

Since our initial question is that of *agency*, I would like to suggest that if anything can be seen as *active* in us, it is at the precise stage of this *selective re-presentation* that it should be located. In other words: it is in the process through which certain data perceived by our sensory apparatus get to be considered as *relevant*, and make it to the point where they become a deciding factor in the determination of our future behaviours (while other comparable data get lost along the way), it is in *this* process that we can be said to become agents (political or otherwise). This selective re-presentation thus appears as a way to manage a situation of *excess*: there are too many data in our sensory input for us to give an exhaustive account of all the features. Not everything can *count*: any given state of things carries an excess, which our perceptive and intellectual faculties do not allow us to absorb and digest in its multifarious wealth; most aspects of a situation must be *discounted*.

I find it significant that such issues of accounting (of counts, excesses, miscounts and discounts) play a pivotal role in the manner Jacques Rancière recently articulated political disagreement (*la mésentente politique*) with literary misunderstanding (*le malentendu littéraire*).

Literature has to do with democracy, not as “the reign of the masses”, but as an excess in the relation between bodies and words. Democracy is first and foremost the invention of words through which those who do not count get to be counted, thus blurring the well-ordered partition of speech and silence which constitutes the community as a “harmonious animal”, an organic totality. [...] Political disagreement and literary misunderstanding both take to task an aspect of this consensual paradigm which establishes a proportion between words and things. The disagreement invents names, enunciations, arguments and demonstrations which institute new collectives, in which anybody can be counted to the account of the discounted. The [*literary*] misunderstanding works on the relation and on the counting from yet another side,

suspending the forms of individuality through which the consensual logic attaches meaning to bodies. Politics works on the whole, literature works on the parts.<sup>5</sup>

By its very nature, any *partage du sensible* consists in *counting-in* certain features of a state of things, and in *leaving-out* others. The spectacular gestures of reconfiguration enacted on the political or literary stage merely repeat on a large scale the type of minute reconfigurations that are performed at the molecular level, when we process sensory data into affective or intellectual perceptions. The “consensual paradigm of a proportion between words and things,” as well as the uncovering of an excess from one to the other, find their roots in the gap between the superabundance of features provided by any state of things and our limited capacity (and need) to count some in. Political subjectivation and aesthetic creation both rely on the same mechanism of selective re-presentation<sup>6</sup>.

By locating agency within this moment of selective re-presentation, I may be suspected of falling back on a very un-Spinozist equation between agency and *choice* – with the implicit metaphysics of “free will” that usually accompany this notion in our liberal tradition. In order to rule out such interpretations, it should suffice to say that the type of selection and filtering I have described above is best illustrated by the simple workings of a *membrane*: even if things are of course infinitely more complex in the case of human agents than in the case of fuel cells, such mechanisms can generally be described without making any reference to the will (free or not).

In membrane politics, the emphasis is placed less on the moment of *expression*, as we currently do by seeing *the author* as the real agent at work in the text, than on the moment of *filtering*, which would bring to the foreground the active role played by *the reader* in the actual efficiency of textual communication. For, as we all realize by now, it is the interpreter who selects, among the superabundant potential meanings conveyed by the text, which ones are to be counted-in as relevant, which ones are to be discounted, and which ones will remain unnoticed. As we also know, in this active work of partition of the (textual) sensible, a great deal of the criteria determining his selections are bound to remain beyond the grasp of his intentional will – a fact which should not necessarily undermine the value of his agency. What matters is the quality of the output (the interpretation, the meaning constructed in the text), in its capacity to improve upon the current partition between what counts and what doesn't.

Such reversals could lead to a dramatic reconfiguration of our *partage du sensible*: would it be truly revolutionary, totally extravagant, or merely obvious, to locate political agency in the figure of *the inventive reader* rather than in the politician who yells the same empty slogans meeting after meeting? Doesn't our everyday experience already tell us that the curator matters more than the artists in shaping what modern art really is? that a few popular DJs, even if they never open their mouth and microphone, have a more decisive impact on a generation's musical tastes than the countless musicians who stomp their feet behind the highly selective doors of commercial radio? that, by filtering which news are fit to broadcast, TV anchor men

---

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Le malentendu littéraire” in Bruno Clément & Marc Escola, *Le malentendu. Généalogie du geste herméneutique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2004: 128-129 – translation mine).

<sup>6</sup> For more on these issues, see the chapter IV of my book *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pour quoi les études littéraires?*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007.

often have more power than heads of state when it comes to steering the national political debates?

Should one say that all such *operators of selection* work within the register of what Jacques Rancière calls “police,” and therefore remain outside of the exceptional sphere of politics? Judging by their current submissive behaviour, they certainly do. But shouldn’t one allow for their position to be at least *potentially* political, should they one day decide to throw a monkey wrench into “the consensual paradigm which establishes a proportion between words and things” (by venturing outside of their usual playlist)? Another type of political agency takes shape, where the main form of activity does not so much consist in taking on a role or in constituting a theatrical stage, as in *shifting modalities of selection* without necessarily opening one’s mouth, or without even walking onstage. Unglamorous as they may be, unafraid of remaining in the darkness of remote control rooms, such membrane politics may nevertheless deserve to appear on our theoretical radars – as they might be more true to the humble and discreet poses apparently favoured by the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.