



Mundane Hybrids: Rancière Against the Sublime Image

Ted Kafala

College of Mount Saint Vincent and Manhattan College, USA

Jacques Rancière (2007) *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gregory Elliot.
London: Verso.
ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-107-6
160 pp.

Barraged with an onslaught of images, both extraordinary and mundane, the contemporary viewer may encounter the critical, the metaphorical and the unthinkable in photographs, cinema, paintings and digital media. Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image*, a series of related essays with several points of convergence, searches for common properties and transcendent qualities in the aesthetics of the image. Rancière returns his readers to a radical politics of representation, and denounces postmodern "revisionism" and the acceptance of the constraints of information culture. Concerning the naked power of the image in modernist culture, the book reawakens in the reader the convictions and motivations of the twentieth century avant-garde, their triumphs and failures. It evokes some very romantic notions about the image, although oftentimes accurate and on the mark, which remind us that images may still be the objects of contemplation and reflection.

Rancière relies heavily on Adorno's negative form of representation and his attempts at demystification, or inversion of the Hegelian teleology toward the Absolute Idea: The reader will find no "new ideas" in *The Future of the Image*, just an elegant rearticulation of concepts and methods already stated elsewhere - ideas about the heterogeneous, polyvalent image, the meaning found in nonfigural abstraction, the force of the dialectic in filmic montage, the blurring of high art and commonplace commodities, and the issue of the impossibility of the "sublime" in art.

Montage as Hybrid Media

The reader with an interest in film studies will find most interesting and pertinent the first two chapters, which discuss the way visual and textual elements are interlaced together in cinema and photography, particularly when they reveal alterity, or collide through disjuncture. Rancière uses the experimental cinematic images of Robert Bresson to undermine the idea of “medium specificity” associated with the material substance of the image. He suggests that Bresson’s images follow operations that repeatedly couple and uncouple visual signification and its effects, and which create and frustrate expectations in their division and reconfiguration. Bresson’s use of image fragmentation does not simply break up the narrative sequence; rather by separating the hands from the facial expressions, it reduces the action to its essence (Rancière 2007, 5). Rancière situates Bresson’s radical cinema as part of a novelistic tradition begun by Flaubert: It works through “operations of ambivalence” in which the same procedures create and retract meaning, and can ensure and undo the link between perceptions, actions and affects. Bresson arranges visual elements in meaningful tropes that reveal textual and analogical resemblances, and conversely words deploy a visibility that can connect and traverse visual media, regardless of whether the image is cinematic, telematic, photographic, or digital. (ibid. 7).

Rancière shows how Bresson’s visual devices play in complex ways with the construction of meaning. Bresson’s operations are not intrinsic to the cinema, his “alteration of resemblance” may take the form of brush strokes in painting, a turn of language that accentuates a feeling, or renders the perception of an idea more complex, a camera movement that anticipates one thought and discloses something else, the substitution of shots, and so forth (Rancière 2007, 6).

Contemporary photography often lacks such subtle connotations and metaphoric play. Rancière doesn’t take much stock in still photography, which he suggests has been largely replaced by commercial images with their glossy emulsion regarded as bodily surface, a “skin replacing the appearances of resemblance” (Rancière 2007, 9). He writes, “Images no longer hide anything, no longer conceal a distinction between the pleasure of pure presence and the bite of the Absolute Other” (ibid., 22). The photograph’s naked, senseless, wordless, immediate effect is the subject of the early Roland Barthes of *Camera Lucida*, who contrasted the *punctum*, the interrupting function of the photo’s naked, non-signifying presence, with the *studium*, the hieroglyph, or the indexical relationship of the photograph to reality (Barthes 1985). The power of the *punctum* is a strongly conceptual presence; the naked and obstensive image holds an obtuse presence that interrupts

discourse with its luminous power of the face-to-face (ibid., 23). Rancière describes this photographic resemblance, in a post-Althusserian sense, as the remainder of what derives from the contemporary stress on distinguishing the genuine image from its simulacrum on the basis of the precise mode of its material reproduction; an early twentieth century quality that emerges from the gap that separates the operations of art from the techniques utilized by the machines of reproduction (ibid., 8-9). Here Rancière references a simplistic Barthes who fetishizes an aesthetic image that gravitates solely between hieroglyph and senseless presence (ibid., 15).

Rancière finds in Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire du cinéma* a mixed, hybrid media that replaces and redeems by a "pseudometamorphoses" the emptiness of avant-garde purity embodied in the photograph (Rancière 2007, 41). Although in print, Godard's *Histoire* is wholly woven out of mixed media (collages, cinematic shots mixed up with news, photographs), and therefore, alike to Bresson's cinema, engages in metaphoric processes that transcend artistic boundaries and reject the specificity of materials (ibid.). While rendering the construction of plots from the narrative tradition, Godard's *Histoire* also creates visible presences from a variety of visual and sonorous elements, which comprise in combination a new kind of syntactical construction, and are meaningful like the signs of language (ibid., 33). In this context, Rancière proceeds to take issue with Lyotard's notion of *incommensurability*, the gap between material presences and meanings that some postmodernists identify as a common feature of our contemporary culture (Lyotard 1984, 66).

In Rancière's analysis, Godard has overcome any sublime gap between the Idea and its empirical presentation and its iterant cultural decenteredness by producing in his cinema a *communus* of signs, an interweaving of visual and textual elements in tandem. Godard gives this "common measure" of signs a concrete form that seems to contradict this idea (Rancière 2007, 40). His heterogeneous visual elements have enigmatic connections on the screen, an enigmatic relationship between text and the voice, and between the voice and the bodies we see. Rancière posits that Godard's montage draws inspiration from the "law of the great parataxis" that underlines with chaotic juxtaposition the continuity between images, and between different media formats. With a brief nod to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the role of chaos in art and philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), Rancière writes, "On the one side, there is a great schizophrenic explosion, and on the other the juxtaposition of commodities and their doubles, or the intoxication of manipulated intensities and bodies moving together in time – schizophrenia or consensus" (ibid., 45).

In Godard's films, the power of radical heterogeneity uncouples the conceptual linking of actions in cinematic montage, which in Godard's *mélange* of materialities takes on a kind of "parataxic syntax": The "sentence-image" in Godard's montage, an oxymoronic formula that involves the metaphoric displacement of two polar opposites, the forces of consensus and rupture, differs substantially from the simple analogies of Eisenstein's "image collisions" and their more recent redeployment in the short films of Chris Marker (Rancière 2007, 48-50). Rancière implies that Godard's montage, or assemblage techniques are "world-making" in the construction of his intransitive narratives. They operate differently than conventional filmmaking, not through narrative description, digression, ellipsis, etc., but through an unspecified kind of "metaphoric" construction that reifies its artifice (a dialectical method) while paradoxically hiding it through a seamlessness that connects images while simultaneously displacing them (an associationist-symbolist method). Regardless of the level of the reader's familiarity with Godard's films, a closer description of these procedures is missing from the book, so the argument sits on the level of the theoretical abstraction.

Rancière may be less interested in the particularities of Godard's filmmaking than in the fact that his style of montage was formed in the Pop era (1960s and early 1970s, although Rancière does not specify the exact time frame), at a time of the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, and a shifting focus between critical irony and pastiche. Rancière values Pop Art for its practice of "jumping" between subject matter ("subject-hopping"), which effectively opposes and destabilizes the imperialism of commodities (Rancière 2007, 51). He acknowledges the importance of Godard's brand of hybrid "mixology" and its power of connecting which simultaneously undermines the solitude of the filmic shot in both dialectical and symbolic ways, working with two contrasting logics (*ibid.*, 60). However the symbolist sentence-image has swallowed the dialectical one, and the strong temptation of symbolism remains inherent in video art and the immateriality of the electronic image. The new media offer an artistic milieu where images can vanish and intermingle *ad infinitum* (*ibid.*, 66). Rancière tries to justify how the symbolic way relates heterogeneous elements through associationist metaphor, through the same manufacture of analogy that erases the seams in Mallarmé's poems a la the meandering arabesque, fold, thyrus and spatial calligram, and obliterates the disruptive edits contained in Godard's film narratives (*ibid.*, 57-63). The seamless fabric of words and images that comprise all artistic surfaces emerges as a recurring theme throughout *The Future of the Image*.

The Canvas as Tableau: Withdrawing from Formalism

Rancière uses the idea of the “metaphor made visible” through images and words, or more particularly the play between visible presence and invisibility, to explain the procedures of de-figuration and re-figuration in abstract painting. So, in the last three essays of *The Future of the Image*, Rancière returns to his interests in aesthetic production in the arts and the rethinking of Hegel’s teleology of the Absolute Idea, which are also visited in his *Politics of Aesthetics*. The metaphor made visible in re-figuration -- the apex of the synthesis of words and forms, the manifestation of an Absolute -- is what is rendered as an end-point in late modernist painting. The third essay in *The Future of the Image*, “Painting in the Text”, is less a criticism of Clement Greenberg’s writings on formalism in modernist art than a correction of Greenberg’s last ideas from the 1960s on the specificity of the artistic medium: These ideas insist that the content of any medium can only be understood as an ineffable aesthetic quality, and so formalism’s tropism always refers to aesthetic value as such, and to its specific tendency to surrender to the flatness of each medium. Indeed Rancière and Greenberg agree on several substantive ideas about abstraction and painting, such as the vacillation between the flatness of the surface of the canvas and the illusionism of three-dimensional space, the autonomy of the painting’s presence as signs-ideas, art practices that act as both a “way of seeing” and a “way of thinking”, and so forth (Rancière 2007, 78).

Rancière locates the turn away from mimesis in representational art and the imitation of the third dimension in the rupture with the system of beaux arts (German Art Nouveau) at the turn of the 20th century, which ushered in a new regime of visibility and redefined a relationship between the “orders of making, seeing and saying” whereby one art may be distinguished from others (Rancière 2007, 75). With a ring to it reminiscent of Althusser and Balibar (1979), Rancière defines this new “aesthetic regime” in the arts as a unique and different articulation between practices, forms of visibility, and modes of intelligibility (Rancière 2007, 75.). Some art historians, such as Jonathan Crary (2002), suggest a somewhat earlier post-impressionist break with Cartesian realism that created a new model of vision along with a massive reorganization of knowledge. Greenberg’s schema for abstract painting is really much more nuanced than the simple reduction that Rancière credits to him (Rancière 2007, 72). Greenberg suggests that the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s turned away from the absolute geometric formalism of the Synthetic Cubists, with their clean contoured shapes and flat color, toward more painterly forms of fused, layered, and broken color, and saturations and intensities of paint. He

associated “painterliness” with a heightening of illusion in three-dimensional space (Greenberg 1993, 122-123).

Nonetheless, Rancière rightly critiques Greenberg’s ultra formalism for overemphasizing the nonrepresentational conquest of the surface of the canvas, creating a closed, autonomous self-contained idea or feeling. This brand of formalism modifies Kandinsky’s earlier program that the important property of modernist painting is the abandonment of figuration, not representation. Rancière dismisses Kandinsky for his early 20th century “naivety”, whereas Greenberg condemns him for his lack of vision and foresight, his inability to anticipate the nonrepresentational use of abstract form and space by the Analytical Cubists. Greenberg’s New York critics, particularly contributors to the *October* journal, resisted his stark and rigid formalism in order to reassert Duchamp’s conceptualism and the transgressive elements of the 1960s avant-garde, to abolish the autonomy of the art object by promoting an anti-aesthetics, and to overturn art institutions by blurring its boundaries with generic, commercial, and everyday practices (Foster 1996, 1998). We may observe these transgressive practices in Warhol’s silkscreens, Judd’s specific objects, Morris’s *gestalten* environments, and Rauchenberg’s collages.

Rancière however uses his invective against Greenberg’s formalist defense of “pigment on flat surface” as a revisionist device. He invokes a Hegelian interpretation of the de-figuration/re-figuration process in abstract painting: De-figuration works to alter what is visible on the surface, but then the “regime of visibility” restores meaning in the arrangement of words and in *darstellung*, the “immediacy of presence” (Rancière 2007, 78). Similarly in his consideration of Stephan Mallarmé, “prince of Symbolist aesthetes”, Rancière posits that the object of art and design “poetics” is not the assemblage of precious words and rare pearls, but a common physical surface, a flat surface of alphabetical signs and other visible forms (ibid., 94-96). Hegel’s prediction of the “end of art” finds no meaning in a moment in time, but only in the condition where the visible surface is no longer wordless and silent, no longer merely a projection of pigments (ibid., 89). Rancière warns that this condition should not be interpreted in a nihilistic sense leading to pastiche and simulation, but that the presence of art is always two places at once, alive as long as it is signifying something different outside itself through visibility and de-figuration.

Unfortunately Rancière dismisses cursorily any common terrain between his post-Hegelian reinterpretation of art and other embodied and phenomenological approaches that acknowledge dematerialized art forms. So, Rancière criticizes phenomenology and Deleuzian philosophy for readily assigning “art the task of creating presence *under*

representation" (my emphasis), for attributing to the arts the operation that "cancels one visibility in order to produce another" (ibid, 79). The surface of forms-signs is the only *real medium* of painting that constructs the surface of conversion, a medium not identified with any support, or any material. This transcendental premise gives Rancière credence to reject the Deleuzian diagram (Deleuze 1995), the conceptualization of the formless a la Bataille and the Surrealists (Bataille 1985, 105-129), Rosslyn Krauss' notion of a tactile visibility, the visibility of gesture of the painter substituted for that of its results found in Pollock's drip painting (Krauss 1994, 243-269), and many other late modernist and postmodernist notions. Rancière reverts to Hegel's description of 17th century Dutch painting to justify the surface as an interface for word-image transfers, where pictorial elements are atomized and severed from the "threads of representation" so that they can be redeployed syntactically to achieve "the reproduction of a repetitive style". In such a manner an "epiphany of the visible", and an "autonomy of pictorial presence" may be attained through painting (ibid., 76-77). The bond between painting and the third dimension is a bond between painting and the poetic power of words. Rancière relies on Hegelian idealism to refute the real ethos and motivations of suprematism and neoplasticism: Abstraction loses Kandinsky's sense of a radical re-figuration, the "spiritualism" of pure form and color, the interruption of color planes by lines, and lines by repetition, and the shift away from pictorial conventions of painting, such as perspective. By essentializing the "surface of conversion" as a site of exchange value without use value where words, forms and things exchange roles, Rancière underlines the sense of instability and rupture caused by Adorno's dialectical separation of pure art forms and aestheticized commodity forms found in commercial design. The remaining "heteronomous art" also prohibits, or makes impossible, notions of the sublime and unthinkable in art, since everything can be "represented", or "said" in either an affirmative or negative forms (ibid., 107).

Negating the Sublime, or the Negative in the Sublime?

Any interpretation that privileges the textual and descriptive in the image over the gestural, indeterminate and ambiguous would have little place for the sublime, or the "under-determination between the visible and sayable" that exists between images and words (Rancière 2007, 303). So, it's not surprising in the book's last chapter that Rancière comes out against Lyotard's reinvigoration of the pathos of the sublime. This difficult chapter, "Are some things unrepresentable?" is paradoxical in that it reads like a focused,

self-contained essay while it summarizes Rancière's position throughout this book on the philosophy of aesthetics. Rancière reviews Lyotard's references to Kant's analysis of the powerlessness of both the imagination and thought to represent the sublime spectacle and indeterminate things, which is also equated with a disconnect between the idea and its material presentation (ibid., 132-133). He accuses Lyotard of radicalizing Adorno's dialectic of reason and its disruption as it came up against the "impossibility of art after Auschwitz" (rather than a proscription against its representation), transforming it into the sublime art of the unrepresentable and thereby constructing a "hyperbolic" inversion of the Hegelian operation (ibid., 134).

Rancière goes to great lengths to demonstrate that nothing is unrepresentable as a property of an event, but that the choice always exists whether or not to document and historicize the event, as we know from the examples of Sebastiao Salgado's deeply disturbing photographs, or from John Tagg's analysis of documentary photography (Tagg 1988). Lyotard's double subreption, as put forward in *The Inhuman* (Lyotard 1991), that the unthinkable in the event also coincides with the unrepresentable in art (an art which exists and takes form) is a fallacious equation, according to Rancière (Rancière 2007, 137). He insists that it encompasses the paradoxical desire for a regime that abolishes its own form (sublimity) to take an exceptional and appropriate form (art). Rancière writes, "The logic of the unrepresentable can only be sustained by the hyperbole that ends up destroying it" (ibid., 138), and "The unrepresentable paradoxically becomes the ultimate form in which the speculative postulates are preserved", including "the idea of a correspondence between the explanatory reason of events and the formative reason of art" (ibid., 136).

However it's the limitlessness, playfulness, unexpectedness, shock, and intensity of effects, which Lyotard associates with an aesthetics of the sublime from Burke and to a lesser degree Kant, that are most threatening to Rancière's Hegelianism. Regarding aesthetics, Rancière understands Adorno's binding dilemma in *Ésthetische Theorie*, that art must become autonomous and self-authorizing after it has lost its communal spirit (Adorno 1998, 1-14). But instead of accepting an art outside of culture, an art that must be critically objective in order to be immanent, Rancière works art out of this dilemma by reimposing the 19th century, symbolist idea of sign-images, while reinterpreting art in terms of hybrid textual and commodity forms. The blurring, or erasing of the boundaries between high and low art, between art and social/commodity imagery, is a purely accidental and desirable aftereffect of a more deliberate return to the Romanticism of

Schlegelian poetics that invents new forms and meanings by recombining them in hybrid media (Rancière 2007, 30).

The critique of Lyotard boils down to a very different interpretation of Adorno's dialectic of the negative form. In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard discusses how minimalism and *arte povera* overturned the post-plastic abstraction celebrated by Clement Greenberg, thus animating Cézanne's "small perceptions" and undertaking the small executions, minute processes, and "micrologies" sketched and predicted by Adorno at the end of *Negative Dialectics* (Lyotard 1991, 103). Lyotard writes, "Micrology inscribes the occurrence of thought as the unthought that remains to be thought in the decline of 'great' philosophical thought" (ibid.). Lyotard goes on to show how sublimity and innovation in art have been swallowed by the redistribution of commodity forms so that "artistic success" now resides in the balance between what is surprising and what is reused and reappropriated, or between information and code (ibid., 206). For Rancière, on the other side of this argument, the anti-representative "boundlessness" that emerges where no language or form is appropriate to a subject, or where there is a split between sense and nonsense, signifies the Hegelian "end of art". This is the extreme moment of symbolic, non-figural art, the moment when the sublime returns in a strictly negative form of what it originally signified, the original event (Rancière 2007, 135). Readers are left wondering, how can art so wordless, nontextual and indeterminate also be the negative presentation of some actual event? Doesn't the Hegelian sublime undermine Rancière's whole premise of an art that always inscribes both words and images on its surface through metaphorical operations like montage and collage?

To conclude, *The Future of the Image* is a challenging and engrossing read that asks more questions than it answers. After untangling the oftentimes arcane critical exegesis presented in the various essays on media, photography, graphic design and art, the reader is still left grappling with the political uses and interpretations of images, uncertain how to grasp the decenteredness, Otherness and ambivalence of meanings. Rancière's Hegelian-inspired arguments often defeat themselves as he reveals over many passages his revisionism and resistance to postmodernist interpretation. The generation of poststructuralist thinkers may share in common the generalized anti-Hegelianism of the time, but with Rancière's ideas we see a reassertion of Hegelian discourse about art and the image that proposes the *ceaseless unfolding of the Absolute* in the mixing and merging of creative, mundane and commodity images. What is the role of the avant-garde, or does an avant-garde any longer exist in the era of the naked commodity form? Rancière joins the chorus of critics, Peter Berger (1984) and others, who decry the failure of

the disruptive elements of the neo avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s to undermine the institutionalization of art by promoting an anti-aesthetics that made indistinguishable art, commodity, and everyday images.

Rancière misinterprets the image in simulation, equating it with debasement, nihilist redundancy, shallow “naked” appearance and useless pastiche. The refraction of the serial form in simulationist art does not complicate the autonomy of the art object by providing it two contrary readings of value, one as art in terms of exchange value and one as commodity in terms of use value; this was the role and motive of the Duchampian readymade and found object. Rather, the serial form now reduces art to discrete, discontinuous, differential information, as Lyotard (1991) suggests, giving new impetus to inventiveness by combining and subsuming aesthetic, use, and exchange values as sign exchange for cynical and parodic play. Appropriation and reuse of past images are particularly easy with new media, where discrete image data are endlessly variable and programmable, and where anarchically political, synaesthetic, and simulationist art appear to go far beyond the expression of the Dadaist aesthetic. In comparison, Rancière’s notions of the filmic montage of words and images seem outdated and obsolete, and his criticism of Lyotard’s notion of uncanny and indeterminate forms remains unsubstantiated.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor (1998) *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hulot-Kanter. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Adorno, Theodor (1990) *The Negative Dialectics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar (1979) *Reading Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London and New York: Verso.
- Barthes, Roland (1985) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bataille, Georges (1985) *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burger, Peter (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Crary, Jonathan (1990) *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1995) *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foster, Hal (ed.) (1998) *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*. New York: New Press.
- Foster, Hal (1996) *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press October Series.
- Godard, Jean-Luc (1998) *Histoire du Cinema*. Paris: Gallimand.
- Greenberg, Clement (1993) *Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Krauss, Rosalind (1996) *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press October Series.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois (1991) *The Inhuman*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, Jacque (2007) *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. London: Verso.
- Rancière, Jacque (2006) *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum.
- Tagg, John (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.