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**Relation Between Art and Politics in  
Jacques Rancière's Theory of Aesthetics**

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Even though aesthetics and democracy are two key words of Rancière's entire opus, the main subject of current paper will neither be aesthetics as such nor democracy as such, but the problem of the not, fundamentally tying together politics and aesthetics, within the theory of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière, and the effects it has on his conception of art.

Jacques Rancière bases his theory on a presumption that aesthetics and politics are nothing less than synonyms. Rancière argues that politics as such is only thinkable through aesthetics (i.e. »distribution of the sensible«), and that the relation between politics and aesthetics is direct. That means that aesthetics is not to be understood as means by which a certain ideology runs its political struggles, but it is the immediate terrain of the political struggle. What Slavoj Žižek in his prologue to *The Politics of Aesthetic* defines as Rancière's major breakthrough, is »the aestheticization of politics, the assertion of the aesthetic dimension as INHERENT in any radical emancipatory politics«. <sup>1</sup> In other words, »the shift from the political to aesthetic is inherent in political itself. This argument is grounded on the premise that even the most basic sensual perception is always already political, because our perception is determined by the normativity of the division between reason (understanding) and senses, between visible and non-visible, distribution of »spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution«. <sup>2</sup> These lines of division are a coexistent with the fact of inequality as an unavoidable and necessary consequence of the formation of the community as such. The unavoidable division or inequality is according to Rancière thoroughly political. At the same time it is to be distinguished from the inequality as class exploitation within Marxism, which is in Rancière's view something, which he designates as “metapolitics”. In his most famous work *Disagreement (Méésentente)* Rancière writes that metapolitics stands symmetrically opposed to “archipolitics” in Plato's sense, which is a rejection of the fake politics or democracy. It declares the radical gap between the real justice as the divine harmony and the democratic embodiment of the injustice, which belongs to the government of injustice. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand Rancière thinks that the distinctive trace of metapolitics is in that it declares a radical excess of the inequality or injustice in contrast to its understanding of

the politics, which supposedly hides this excess behind the appearance of political equality. Metapolitics affirms absolute wrong as an excess of the injustice, which ruins every possible political act, which is founded on the argumentation of equality. In this excess metapolitics uncovers the hidden truth of the political and the society. From the point of view of metapolitics, the real purpose of politics is on the contrary uncovering its unreality, namely, the gap between political and the naming of its realities. The example of metapolitical criticism of the practice of politics is the criticism of the institution of human rights by Karl Marx and later Hannah Arendt. The first one saw the human rights as a protection of the bourgeois individuals and their private property and the second one saw the problem of human rights in that exclusively protect citizens, protected by state and by no means humans as such.

Contrary to the metapolitical relation to politics, Rancière understands inequality, the wrong (*le tort*), as he calls it, as the only prove for the existence of politics, and as an essential byproduct of every constitution of a community as such. Any community comes to existence by excluding »those who have no part in perceptual coordinates of the community«, which starts to function as a hidden motor of politics of the distribution of the sensible. The "part, which has no part" is a group of individuals, which have no access to the common of the society, but simultaneously represent the hidden condition for the equal distribution, which appears as the law of the community. Therefore Rancière claims that politics rests on the impossibility to undo this inequality or injustice.

Paradoxically, Rancière's vision of politics as democracy is rather specific. For him democracy represents neither a possible form of government nor a way of lifestyle, which is the target of the contemporary "resentment" against democracy, which Rancière analyses in his recent work *Hatred for Democracy (La haine de la démocratie)*. He states that after the fall of the iron curtain and the disintegration of the Soviet Union the line of division between totalitarianisms and democracies blurs, and all the burden and accusations of being totalitarian are oriented against democracy as such, which is at the present the only absolute and immanent horizon of any possible thinking of politics. Contrary to the contemporary disqualification of democracy by American sociologists like Scott Lash, Daniel Bell and certain schools of French sociologists such as Jean Baudrillard as a kind of consumerist and egoistic society on one side and professing democracy as a form of government by mainstream political philosophy on the other side, Rancière understands democracy as a concept of politics, which professes a government of those, who are no more entitled to govern than being governed. Democracy is a type of government, which destroys its own natural foundations by promoting an idea that nature itself cannot find a hierarchical model or justification of the government of the »better born« or »richer« or »better educated«. Rancière shows that already Plato in the third book of his work *Laws* tried to find a principle for justification of the government of aristocracy and listed seven possible titles for the privilege to govern; four of them connected to birth into the right family, two of them of some other natural privileges like the power of the stronger. But finally Plato put the last and most interesting right to govern, the right of the authority of the ones »loved by the Gods«, which is in itself a kind of destitution of all the previous titles. This implies that already nature by itself ruins the hierarchy of Greek principle *arché*, which divides those who govern and those who obey their government. For Rancière true democracy lies in the idea of a government, where pure contingency, hazard or a throw of the dice decides, who will occupy the side of those who govern and who the side of the governed.<sup>4</sup> Even though Rancière already

early distanced himself from his master Louis Althusser, it is interesting to see, that there are nevertheless quite a few similarities of the work of late Louis Althusser (after 1980), of the so called materialism of encounter or aleatory materialism, and Rancière's radical understanding of democracy as his unique understanding of politics. Namely, Althusser's idea of a pure *alēa* or hazard, which reigns the elements and the structure of the mode of production, also implies an idea of the aleatory nature of the encounter of the exploiters (those entitled to govern) and the exploited (those who are governed), which interestingly resembles Rancière's conception of the hazard as the eminent principle of democracy, which unfortunately won't be the object of our further analysis in this paper.

As we have pointed out, the lines of division in the so called distribution of the sensible are a consequence of the existence of the ineffaceable wrong in any community or society. Rancière further explains, how the division between speech and plain noise (the stem of the word "barbaric" in Greek language), was a decisive line of demarcation between citizens of Greek states and the slaves. In his work *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière writes:

Democracy is a community of the distribution in two senses of the word: it means a belonging to the same world, which is however only expressible in a polemic, division, which can only be achieved through struggle.<sup>5</sup>

If we repeat again our starting-point, according to Rancière, aesthetics is immediately political and politics immediately aesthetic. The field of aesthetics concurs with the field of the distribution of the sensible, which Rancière named the »police«. Within the field of police, every part has its own place and the whole as such is presented as the sum of all the constituent parts. However, as we have seen, behind this harmony lies the act of exclusion, which is its fundamental condition of existence. Therefore, the only possible way of the politics of emancipation (i.e. subjectivation) for Rancière exists in the form of constant and never-ending acts of demonstration of the dissensus in the seeming reign of equality of the order of the police. Political subjectivation is therefore an embodiment or presentation of the excluded part, or mere demonstration of it. Politics therefore operates through the logic of so called heterology, the logic of otherness, according to the three Rancière's determinations of alterity. Firstly, there is no way we can call it an affirmation of identity, because it is always a negotiation of the identity imposed or imposed by the regime of the politics as the police. Politics is connected to »the misnamed« or »improperly named«, which embody the wrong of the community. Secondly, it is a demonstration of the wrong, a constitution of the common ground, even though not the ground of dialogue or consensus, but a place for the demonstration of equality. Thirdly, subjectivation stands in opposition to standard identification. Rancière shows, how and why is that today we are facing the dissolution of the political heterology. The absence of this form of politics in the guise of polymorphic alterity, opens the space for a new infra-political figure of the other and the culture of dissensus is actually dying out.

In reference to his conception of politics, there is no doubt that from the point of view of analysis of the conditions of the possibility of understanding and sensation, analysis of »*a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience«, Rancière is an advocate of the tradition of Kantian aesthetics. As far as politics of sense perception is concerned, we could add that Rancière could be offering us a kind of political way of reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand it is important to point out that Rancière's aesthetics has rather little in common with Walter Benjamin's discussion

of the "aesthetisation of the politics" specific to the age of masses and forms of presenting of the power:

This aesthetic should not be understood as perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people *qua* work of art. If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience ... Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.<sup>7</sup>

Rancière understands "aesthetic practices" on the basis of the forms of visibility that disclose them only on the basis of so called primary aesthetics, which determines the places and »what this practices 'do' from the standpoint of what is common to the community. He sees them as "ways of doing and making" that intervene in the "general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility".<sup>8</sup> In his work *The Uneasiness in Aesthetics (Malaise dans l'esthétique)* Jacques Rancière writes:

Art is not political because of its messages and sentiments, which transmits to the order of the world. Not even because of the way it represents the structures of the society, the conflicts or identities of the social groups. It is political for the distance it takes from her functions, from the type of time and space it institutes, for the way it parceling out the time and people the space.<sup>9</sup>

When considering relationship between aesthetics and politics according to Rancière, it is important to take into the consideration the level of sensible delimitation of what is concerned as common to the community, the forms of its visibility and its organization. Whereas arts aim is to examine or attack these stable forms and make new interfaces between different mediums, which are directly political, and which revoke the politics inherent in previous logic. For example Rancière's case of the appearance of the so called representational regime of art, which broke the platonic *mimesis* and wanted to "endow the 'flat surface' with speech or with a scene of life, a specific depth such as the manifestation of an action, the expression of interiority, transmission of meaning, and later on the 'anti-representative revolution' of the artists who abolished figurative representation (like for example Kazimir Malevich) and mixed pure art and decorative art, which then became intertwined and so they invented a context that had immediate political signification".<sup>10</sup> This is the reason, why according to Rancière there is no autonomy of art or its submission to politics:

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.<sup>11</sup>

As far as the subject of this paper, the relation between politics and art in Rancière's work is concerned, there is no immediate accordance between the two: "There is no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue".<sup>12</sup> According to Rancière art is never directly politically committed, but always only metapolitically. There are inherent political communities within the aesthetic field. That means that, if art is to be considered political, it is by way of displaying its specific distribution in the field of perception of sensible, that is, in the field of aesthetics. If we said above that Rancière understanding of politics as emancipation is a kind of intervention within the aesthetic field as the method of the transformation of the

distribution of the sensible, in the way of displaying this singular universal ("a part which has no part") in the field of aesthetics, than art is political only if it manages to do the same. That means that politics is immanently aesthetical, and that it represents the transcendental condition for the field of art practices. Committed art always has to calculate and work on the objective politics as its field of possibility. Politics has its own aesthetics and aesthetics its own politics, but there is no possible correlation between politics of aesthetics and aesthetics of politics.

Equality as the core of the politics is not a fundament, out of which politics raises as a kind of construction, but a mere presupposition and prescription. It is the condition for being able to speak about the politics. It is utterly aleatory and it rarely materializes in a specific form of dissensus. Therefore it is also not possible to say that political equality is directly translatable into artistic equality, moreover, different kinds of equalities can even come into conflict. For example the democratic equality incarnated in literature of the nineteenth century is not a manifestation of the equality of political subjectivation, but an immanent equality or passive equality of all subject matters and discourses. The notion of equality allows us to rethink certain categories in certain artistic era, for example "modernity". The supposed dismissal of the subject matter in modern literature was according to Rancière only possible under the condition of establishing a regime of equality regarding subject matter, etc. If we go further, the surpassing of the representational regime is achieved, when the necessary connections between a type of subject matter and a specific form of expression, between saying and meaning, are interrupted. Assuming that it is possible to abandon the subject matter in abstract painting altogether, we can understand Rancière's emphasizing of the notion of heterology: "The notion of 'heterology' refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed: a spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings, an expression does not find its place in the system of visible coordinates where it appears."<sup>13</sup> The system of heterologies in art "throws off" the previous political modes of framing, but with no pre-established and completely uncertain outcome. Rancière gives us an example of his interpretation of Rossellini's film *Europa 51'*, where the main heroine leaves her little-bourgeois environment and visits her cousin in workers-class world. The heroine loses her original aesthetical frame and becomes more and more disoriented. Her world starts to lose the coordinates and she finds her recourse in charity. According to Rancière this last scene could be interpreted in communist schema as well as in Christian schema. For the same reason Rancière in his work *The Names of History* argues that reading Virginia Woolf's novels gives us a much better insight into thinking and writing democratic history than novels of Émile Zola, because it doesn't have much to do with social novels, but with working on temporalities "establishes a grid that makes it possible to think through the forms of political dissensus". In connection to that Rancière writes that:

The politics of works of art plays itself out to a larger extent – in a global and diffuse manner – in the reconfiguration of worlds of experience based on which political consensus or political dissensus are defined. It plays itself out in the way in which modes of narration or new forms of visibility established by artistic practices enter into politics' own field of aesthetic possibilities ... it is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around.<sup>14</sup>

Thereby we conclude that Rancière doesn't equate art with aesthetics. For him aesthetics amounts to the transcendental condition of our perception which is historical and above

all political. For the same reason art is not to be confused with politics, because politics for Rancière equals with aesthetics and is divided between order of police as an archipolitical model of government, which aesthetically expressed as field with no exceptions (no supernumeraries), a whole with all parts counted in or as political subjectivation, i.e. the manifesting of the part with no part, the fundamental inequality, which is inscribed in the politics as a fact. As was we stated above, art can only contingently concur with politics, if and only if it manages to fracture the previous frame or mode of distribution and reveal or point out something, which was foreclosed of the previous order of sensibility (order of police). But there is absolutely no guarantee that art would *a priori* contest or strive for political subjectivity. Art is as completely aleatory in the same vain as political subjectivation is, and aesthetics is the field of both possible subjectivations, political and artistic. As Rancière commented on the relation between art and politics in a recent interview, "arts always function by defining shifted forms of experience; there are no particular works, which could define the capacities for political subjectivation ... Today we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. There is a deficiency of political subjectivation and this is the cause of various attempts to think artistic practices as substitutive forms ... We retrospectively attribute political capacity to artistic provocations often forgetting the fact that the existence of political movements only gave them visibility and the codes for their interpretation".<sup>15</sup>

We shall conclude this paper with three important issues concerning Rancière's understanding of the relation between art and politics. Firstly, the fact that art can intervene in the domain of politics also means that art can intervene in the domain of aesthetics as a transcendental field of possibility. Art can intervene in the distribution of sensible in the same amount as other practices. According to Rancière this can be best seen in the so called "aesthetic regime of art". This is also the meaning of Rancière's thesis, that the so called "aesthetic regime of art" presents the constant negotiation and identification of art and non-art, which ruined the hierarchies of the representative regime. In his writing on art Rancière tries to show different historically conditioned interventions and transformations of the distribution of sensible by art, which are not necessarily intentionally political. They become political only after they interfere and transform or change the aesthetic order, which is a synonym for the police order:

The relation between aesthetics and politics is more precisely, the relation between aesthetics of politics and "politics of aesthetics", the way in which practices and forms of visibility of art intervene themselves in the distribution of sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they parcel out the spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and singular.<sup>16</sup>

Within the so called "aesthetic regime of art" art comes very close to the Rancière's conception of the aesthetic as such, but nevertheless doesn't coincide with it. That's also the reason, why Rancière stresses the meaning of its singularity and impossibility to discriminate art from non-art. We think that at this point precisely Rancière's conception of art and Badiou's inaesthetics (*Petit manuel d'inesthétique*) are in accord. They both try to think art in its singularity and immanence, nevertheless, the first one (Rancière's) stays within the field of ontological substance and the latter one (Badiou's) in a form of radical rupture or void of the event. To put it differently, the first one persists in the non-ruptural form of thinking it and the latter one tries to do it with the help of the theory of torsion of the event (which exceeds count-for-one) and subject as the fidelity it, which is the only guarantee that the event had taken place. Therefore the domain of counting and the element which exceeds count-for-one is present in both theories. The only difference is

that Rancière takes Alain Badiou's »state of situation« for invariable fact, and the matter of subjectivation is manifesting the hidden excluded element, whereas Badiou thinks that the rupture, the void in the fullness of the sensible field (state of situation) is the single way of presenting the newness of the subject in immanence, without taking the meta-position, without judging it "from the outside".

Secondly, the question remains, why is political dissensus, i.e. the ultimate conception of politics, which stands in opposition to the police, for Rancière only achievable in the aesthetic regime of art. The answer can be found in his statement that "the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art or even better, its metapolitics, is determined by a fundamental paradox: in this regime, art is art only so far as it is simultaneously non-art, something other than art ... the solitude of an art work carries the promise of emancipation. But the attaining of this promise lies in the suppression of art as separate reality, its transformation into the form of life".<sup>17</sup> Aesthetic regime of art is the first regime, which acknowledges the common ground of politics and aesthetics. Aesthetic program in this regime of art becomes metapolitical, which means that "to effectuate in reality or in the order of sensibility is a task, which politics could never accomplish elsewhere then in the order of appearance and form".<sup>18</sup> The project of art becoming a form of life is somehow coexistent with Marxist program of a human as a producer, producing objects and human relations, and therefore not identifiable only with great utopian and totalitarian programs, but concurs with the entire aesthetic regime of art. According to Rancière it already inspired the craftsman in Middle Ages, and was a part of the artists of the decorative arts like Bauhaus, in utopian projects of situational town planners or social plastics like those of Joseph Boeys, etc.<sup>19</sup> Hence, art and politics for Rancière do not represent two separate permanent realities, which should or could get intertwined, but two forms of distribution of the sensible both in suspension from the specific regime of identification.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly we can say that, although there are different forms of government, that doesn't necessary mean that there is any kind of politics and if there is poetry, painting and sculpture and music, that doesn't mean that there is art. On the other hand, according to Rancière, we couldn't speak of politics or of aesthetics in the so called ethical regime of art.<sup>21</sup> This is also the reason, why Plato banned both embodiments of democracy in his Republic, assembly and theatre as institutions at the same time:

Theatre and assembly are two sympathetic forms of the same distribution of the sensible, two spaces of heterogeneity, which Platon had to simultaneously repudiate so as to constitute the Republic as the organic life of the community.«<sup>22</sup>

Let us conclude this paper with a short comment from the viewpoint of Jacques Rancière's understanding of art of the question raised during the panel "Art and Politics" at the Aesthetic Congress in Ankara (July 2007), namely, before determining whether something is political art, shouldn't we determine, whether it is art at all. If art is to be understood as the intervention in the distribution of the sensible or the order of the police according to Rancière, we should also raise the question of the artistic value of the digital art and its "relational ontology". According to the theory of Jacques Rancière we should ask ourselves, whether contingent relations of coincidental digital data, which are randomly and contingently related by a computer (for instance installation *Match of the Day*, 2006) really attack "the invisible", namely, "the excluded" part of our visual schema or the "part which has no part" as the consequence of the political function of the distribution of the sensible as such, which finally determines our field of visibility or

perception as such. If and only if this is the case, we are dealing with art and, what is more, with political art.

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. »Afterword« in :Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. London. New York: Continuum, 2004. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. London. New York: Continuum, 2004.12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rancière. Jacques. *Disagreement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rancière. Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy*. London and New York: Verso, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Rancière. Jacques. *Aux bords du politique*, Paris: Éditions de La Fabrique, 1998. Translation to English by Katja Kolšek.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rado. Riha & Jelica. Šumič-Riha, *Entretien avec Jacques Rancière* in: *Filozofski vestnik*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. London. New York: Continuum, 2004.12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Malaise dans l'esthétique*. Paris: Éditions Galilée. 2004. 36, 37. Translation to English by Katja Kolšek.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Rancière. Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Politique et esthétique. Entretien réalisé par Jean-Marc Lachaud le 30 novembre 2005* in: *Actuel Marx*. No. 39. First semester. Paris: Puf, 2006. 199.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Paris: Galilée 2004. 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 39, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Rancière proposes three major regimes of identification in Western tradition of art: ethical regime of images, the poetic-representative regime of arts and the aesthetic regime of arts. The ethical regime of art more or less covers the field of platonic polemic against simulacra of painting, poems and theatre. It argues for truth and its educational purpose. In his *Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière states that in this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities. If this first regime art is subsumed under the question of images, distinguished by their end or purpose which poem's images provide to spectators within the city's occupation, the second regime, the poetic-representative regime, identifies the particular substance of art in the couple of *poēsis/mimesis*. According to Aristotle through privileging the tragic action, mimetic principle changes from normative to pragmatic principle, which isolates within »general domain of arts« (ways of doing and making), particular forms of art that produces imitations. Not the essence of the image, a copy examined with regard to the model becomes less important than the substance of the poem, which represents the activities of men. This principle develops its own inherent normativity according to which various imitations can be recognized as exclusively belonging to art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate: partitions between the representable and irrepresentable, it defines proper ways of doing and making, seeing or judging. It is "a regime of visibility regarding the arts". And finally, the third one is the aesthetic regime of art. It is called aesthetic because of the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. The word aesthetic does not refer to a theory of sensibility, taste, and pleasure of art amateurs. It strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. In the aesthetic regime of art artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, *logos* identical with *pathos*, the intention of the unintentional, etc. Cf. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. 22, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Galilée, Paris, 2004. 40.