Jacques Rancière and Contemporary Art: Swapping Stories of Love and Tyrannicide

Oliver Davis

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/8295>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.8295

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 24 June 2013

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Oliver Davis, « Jacques Rancière and Contemporary Art: Swapping Stories of Love and Tyrannicide », *Critique d'art* [Online], 41 | Printemps/Été 2013, Online since 24 June 2014, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/8295> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.8295

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Jacques Rancière and Contemporary Art: Swapping Stories of Love and Tyrannicide

Oliver Davis

REFERENCES

Jacques Rancière, *Figures de l'histoire*, Paris : PUF, 2012, (Travaux pratiques)

Jacques Rancière, *La Méthode de l'égalité : entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, Montrouge : Bayard, 2012

Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: the Philosophy of Radical Equality, Londres : Continuum, 2012. Sous la dir. de Jean-Philippe Deranty, Alison Ross

Esther Shalev-Gerz, Zürich : JRP/Ringier ; Lausanne : Musée cantonal des beaux-arts, 2012

- 1 This is neither the place nor the time to say that the love affair between the contemporary art world and philosopher Jacques Rancière is over, even if signs of a certain decrystallization are beginning to appear. The philosopher seems coy, wary: "I get letters all the time from people who are organising biennales which, they say, have been conceived according to my principles, this being the reason I must come. Since I cannot go everywhere I am unable to tell."
- 2 "Moreover there is, as is well known, a multitude of artists and curators who are only thinking of one thing: to get a philosopher who is supposedly trendy for their catalogue."
- 3 I am quoting selectively – for these are, in fact, two sceptical sallies between which sits a more positive and perhaps palatable estimation of the use-value of his work in the contemporary art world – but this is to open by pointing to one side of a certain ambivalence on Rancière's part. To take only the notion with which his name has become synonymous, in the art world as on the conference circuit, *le partage du sensible* – the 'distribution', or 'division', or 'sharing out' of 'the sensible' – while he complains that the term sometimes functions as a 'shibboleth'³, a paradoxically anti-egalitarian term the

primary purpose of which is to identify and circumscribe an in-crowd of *cognoscenti*, it may also have served, he hazards more hopefully, to offer artists and curators a little breathing-space, 'to reintroduce a certain play [*du jeu*] into the relationship between art, the market and politics and to say that, notwithstanding everything that can be known about institutions and the market, it is still possible today to suggest different ways of constructing worlds.'⁴ The concept as ventilator, or oil-can.

- 4 At first glance Esther Shalev-Gerz's installation *On Two / D'Eux* (2009) could be thought indicative of the art world's continuing infatuation with Rancière. For she incorporates him into the fabric of the work; part of the installation is a projected video-recording of him reading a passage from the first chapter of *The Emancipated Spectator* in which he asserts that "the power shared by spectators is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other. This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot their own path."⁵
- 5 However, in Shalev-Gerz's installation the some seven pages from Rancière's book are spoken in alternation with a text by one Rola Younes, a then twenty-five year-old polyglot student of philosophy who was born in Beirut but lives in Paris. Younes: "As a Lebanese woman and as an Arab, the figure of the Other is the Jew, and the Iranian. For me, taking an interest in Iranian culture and the Iranian language meant continuing along this path of discovering the Other, and incorporating it, eating it, digesting it is an accomplishment [...] and for me it was very important to know the Hebrew world and the Yiddish world from inside."⁶
- 6 Rancière's almost mercantile account of spectatorial story-swapping and path-plotting, of reciprocal translation and counter-translation, which I think implies a certain conception of translation as a transparent process that takes effect across an intersubjective distance, is thus juxtaposed to and intercut with Younes's quasi-psychoanalytic commitment to a kind of understanding 'from the inside', allied with incorporation, with eating and digesting, and with what would be, were it not given here as primarily a private fantasy, an atavistic apprehension of the intrinsic tonalities and uses of individual languages redolent of a certain strain of nineteenth-century racist theorizing. In turn, Shalev-Gerz, in her installation, both incorporates *à la* Younes and juxtaposes *à la* Rancière, Rancière and Younes. 'Rancière' emerges in the work on the side of an abstract universal exchangeability of stories and self-understandings; Younes, by contrast, remains mired in the intractably personal, in the embodied stickiness of the signifier; close indeed to the mother. Younes was once, or so her mother's story goes, a foetus who jumped in her mother's womb 'at the sound of blasts and shells' raining down over Beirut.⁷ Rancière, by contrast, in the interview rather than the installation, has a way of saying "I left Algiers at the age of two"⁸ which suggests an extraordinary continuity of autonomous selfhood stretching back over seventy years to little Jacques at the age of two. To the extent that the English and French titles of the installation, *On Two* and *D'Eux*, not only mean slightly different things but resonate differently as signifiers in their respective languages ('On[e] Two' – a mutilated counting, a 'miscount', even; 'D'eux', 'of them' or 'about them' or simply, reading only the letters, 'two'), the installation itself privileges Younes's version of understanding-as-incorporation and suggests not only that her story and Rancière's cannot be interchanged – an incommensurability Rancière not only

concedes but insists on, in the abstract, in the excerpt he reads – but also, ultimately, that they cannot readily be exchanged either, that too much of what is essential would be lost in an equalizing work of translation.

- 7 The installation not only presents two people but two places, by way both of projected colour film footage and twelve black and white still photographs: the desolate Île Seguin, in the Seine, and the verdant Cortes Island near Vancouver. As islands they evoke the ‘idiom’ and intersubjective distance of which Rancière speaks. Seguin Island, in the municipality of Boulogne-Billancourt, is a post-industrial wasteland once home to a gargantuan Renault factory before its demolition in 2005. At the time of writing, it is on the point of being redeveloped into what one municipal website proudly hails as a ‘contemporary art hub’, local residents having voted, at the end of 2012, for the second of three regeneration plans drawn up by Jean Nouvel. On Cortes Island, by contrast, as we can ascertain from its ‘Official Community Plan’ of 2011, ‘Large development projects are discouraged’ (p. 7). One or two lines of verse caption each of these still photographs in the manner of film subtitles; some are taken from Aragon’s oft-sung poem, ‘Il n’y a pas d’amour heureux’ (1943), with its unflinching assertion both of the necessity of love in its romantic and patriotic forms and simultaneously of the manifold unhappinesses and misapprehensions that are always involved. Yet just as there is in the pairing of Younes with Rancière, there is a striking differential – a blatant inequality – between the relative imbricatedness of these two islands in existing networks of signification and something provocatively wishful on the artist’s part in offering them up together to the spectator’s gaze.
- 8 Despite the way the installation positions Younes and Rancière, the latter’s own working methods, notwithstanding what he says about them in the excerpt he reads, in fact owe much to Younes-style understanding-by-incorporation. “I don’t know exactly, when it comes down to it, what is meant by a concept”⁹ is not the kind of thing a philosopher is expected to say, not even in passing, and particularly not to two academics who are interrogating him in order to ‘establish with precision the origin, function and definition of certain notions or several watchwords (division of the sensible, dissensus, ignorant schoolmaster, disagreement, the part of those who have no part, etc.) which are sometimes taken up by readers automatically and unquestioningly’.¹⁰ Anyone even vaguely, even ‘unquestioningly’ or ‘automatically’, familiar with Rancière’s work will be well enough equipped to feel the irony of this particular prefatory act of self-positioning by the interviewers in relation to Rancière and his readership, an irony compounded by the way their two distinct voices are merged in the questioning into one rather sternly probing expression of the academic institution’s belated curiosity. (The contrast with Benny Lévy/Pierre Victor and Philippe Gavi’s infamous 1974 joint interviews with an elderly Jean-Paul Sartre, published under the *gauchiste* slogan, *On a raison de se révolter*, is instructive.) Nevertheless, *La Méthode de l’égalité*, is full of gems and no small part of the pleasure lies in watching Rancière push back against the policing enterprise of his well-meaning interlocutors with vigour and sometimes humour. There are also unguarded moments in which pregnant biographemes emerge: the precision he prizes in his own intellectual work is “a quality fostered in me by my continual practice of gardening. With plants you cannot be vague and this is the rule I have also applied to texts.”¹¹ Rancière’s father, we learn, was killed just before the armistice in June 1940, around the time of his son’s birth.¹² Sartre quipped at the expense of psychoanalytic jargon in his autobiography, *The Words*, that the early death of his father had spared him a super-ego.

Rancière's own hostility towards psychoanalysis has been less jokey and less qualified. A psychoanalytically-inspired interpretation of Rancière's 'indisciplined' anti-methodology could easily be worked up from such elements, although I for one would be unable to be entirely dismissive of such a venture, especially when one recalls Rancière's celebration of the anti-authoritarian potency of writing (as opposed to speech), in which writing's 'fatherlessness', famously criticized by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, is precisely what enables it to speak to anyone, regardless of social status. Doubtless too the germ of such an explanation could also be fruitfully propagated to embrace Rancière's enabling function as a paradoxically permissive father-figure to a generation of scholars, artists and activists.

- 9 The most striking thing about the interview is what it reveals about Rancière's idiosyncratic – both regimented and intuitive – way of working. On the one hand there is his longstanding rule of going to the library every day it is open, 'rather as the filmmaker Pedro Costa says: "every day I went to Fontainhas with my little DV camera, like going to work"'¹³ and his indication that, following on from several years of frequenting the factory gates as a *gauchiste* activist at the cusp of the 1960s and 70s, he started going to the library every day with the same kind of self-regulating honesty. Rather than following the other *établis* into the factory, as his friend Linhart did, Rancière would 'establish' himself in the archive of the worker's movement, doing intellectual work as though it were manual labour, or as though the distinction, which stood in for the division of labour in its entirety, were arbitrary and to be disregarded. "One goes to work every day like everybody else does because one thinks that thought belong to everybody."¹⁴ Thus the interview puts autobiographical flesh on the conceptual bones of Jean-Philippe Deranty's argument that *work* is always Rancière's 'central category'¹⁵, even as it also gives pause to wonder about the kinds of discourse that overvalue categories, concepts and theories at the expense of other, more materially entrenched but paradoxically less graspable configurations, ones which may be less readily exchangeable and teachable, or at least which may seem so in more established social and academic fora, yet which are also more tangible in the literal sense of the word: "Thought realizes itself in a whole series of institutions, regulations, social strategies and polemical discourses. And a 'theory' is something that must be thought as a particular organization of the elements of this ensemble."¹⁶
- 10 Rancière has sometimes worked with concepts almost as though they were material objects: "all of the strong points of my work are tied to a personal process of research during which I learned things by immersing myself in an unknown matter, with one source leading to another and the pattern coming into relief little by little, as I felt my way."¹⁷ This 'immersion' in the matter at hand involves more a knowing rematerialisation than a naïve materialism; it seeks its material footing in order better to effect a jump, or graft, that is all the more daringly incongruous: "my method has always combined immanent reading, which looks for the kind of relationships between meaning and meaning that make the texture of a text, with the practice of savage *rapprochements* that seek to grasp the text's wider implications by making one text resound within another."¹⁸ This working method already sounds a lot like a certain kind of conceptual artistic practice.
- 11 Although Shalev-Gerz may be thought to humble and relativize Rancière, even as her installation faithfully enacts his call for equality, there remains every hope that his work will continue to seduce some of contemporary art's finest, most politically attuned

practitioners, as our world of flagrant inequalities finally lurches forward again towards something that was once called class struggle: “What is in question today is the very existence of places in which equality and inequality encounter one another [...] In a certain sense the class struggle in its entirety, as the ruling class conducts it, is a struggle which seeks systematically to lay waste to all such sites of encounter.”¹⁹ The 1 per cent, as they have been named, are indeed laying waste to what were once the common bases of social solidarity, to “that which was the common fabric of solidarity: the fact that the poor can go to the same hospitals as the rich.”²⁰ By bringing Younes and Rancière together and projecting them such that they share the same light, which in turn is shared by the spectator, Shalev-Gerz recreates just such an egalitarian space of encounter. The risk, though, is that her humbling, if faithful, way of using Rancière makes him seem more innocuous than he is.

- 12 Rancière’s work overall is, I would contend, ultimately less an encouragement to relatively anodine acts of spectatorial ‘sharing’ in art galleries and museums than it is an incitement to revolt. I would also hazard that this is, ironically, why it has appealed in the way that it has to many contemporary artists. It houses an arsenal of technologies of resistance which have yet to be essayed on anything like a grand enough scale, foremost among them the presumption of equality.
- 13 As the neo-tsarist Russian regime of today projects its power – whether in the international art market or the boardrooms of English football clubs, in the ostentatious aesthetico-political decadence of its radioactive assassinations or in the crackdown on internal dissent from feminist and gay rights activists – Rancière’s work invites us to look again at the turn-of-the-century footage with which Chris Marker’s *The Last Bolshevik* (1992) opens.²¹ An officer tells the assembled poor of Saint Petersburg that they should take off their hats when the tsar’s cortege passes. What the technical device that is the movie camera actualizes is “the material existence of this common light that Heraclitus spoke of, this sun of judgment from which there is no escape.”²² A certain sharing of light by rich and poor is thus captured and relayed, first by Marker then by Rancière, a sharing which promises, I think, rather more than merely water-cooler moments of story-swapping about, for example, American ‘identity’ and ‘values’, the conversations which some delight in seeing ‘movies’ enable. Unless, that is, one insists, with J.M. Bernstein, on taking ‘America’ back to its most radical political meaning as a collective experiment in democratic self-government in the openness of history.²³ For the egalitarian sharing of light by rich and poor alike must also mean tyrannicide.

NOTES

1. Rancière, Jacques. *La Méthode de l'égalité : entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*, Paris : Bayard, 2012, p. 304 (my translation)
2. Ibid., p. 305 (my translation)
3. Ibid., p. 180
4. Ibid., p. 305

5. Jacques Rancière cited in *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, Zurich : JRP/Ringier ; Lausanne : Musée cantonal des beaux-arts 2012, p. 145
6. Rola Younes cited in *ibid.*, p. 148
7. *Ibid.*, p. 147
8. Rancière, Jacques. *La Méthode de l'égalité*, op. cit., p. 15
9. *Ibid.*, p. 150
10. *Ibid.*, p. 8
11. *Ibid.*, p. 64
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18
13. *Ibid.*, p. 70
14. *Ibid.*, p. 164
15. Deranty, Jean-Philippe. 'Work in the Writings of Jacques Rancière', in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: the Philosophy of Radical Equality*, Londres ; New York : Continuum, 2012, (Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross eds.), p. 187-204 at p. 193
16. Rancière, Jacques. *La Méthode de l'égalité*, op. cit., p. 69
17. *Ibid.*, p. 54
18. *Ibid.*, p. 67
19. *Ibid.*, p. 200
20. *Ibid.*, p. 273
21. Rancière, Jacques. *Figures de l'histoire*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2012, p. 11
22. *Ibid.*, p. 13
23. Bernstein, J.M. "Movies as the Great Democratic Art Form of the Modern World (Notes on Rancière)", in *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene*, op. cit., p. 15-42