

JACQUES RANCIÈRE (2007) *THE FUTURE OF THE IMAGE*. TRANS. G. ELLIOTT. LONDON AND NEW YORK: VERSO. ISBN: 978-1-84467-297-4.

T.J.V. Vermeulen

If we are to judge a book by its cover, Jacques Rancière's latest collection of essays and lectures, *The Future of the Image* (*Le Destin des Images*), offers its readers a 'consistent conceptualization of how we are to continue to resist' (Zizek), 'relight[s] the flame that was extinguished for many' (Hirschhorn), and 'shows us a way out of the malaise' (Gillick). As the jacket reviewers' terms imply ('continue', 'relighting'), the future of the image lies within an image of the past for Rancière. Or rather within a past image of the future. Yet, contrary to what these reviewers seem keen to presume, this is hardly the past of Marxism, the past of Hegel's 'positive idealism'; it is, instead, the past of early German Romanticism, the past of Kant's 'negative idealism'. Indeed, for Rancière, the future of aesthetics is, perhaps unintentionally, unwittingly even, tied up with a particular past of the philosophy of history.

So what is Rancière resisting, and how is he resisting it? What he is resisting, in short, is the (post)modern, (post)modernity, (post)modernism (for these three are distinctly different paradigms), and, most specifically, (post)modern discourse on the history of art. He never mentions the (post)modern as such, but the aesthetic categories he takes on, from Baudrillard and Virilio's overpresent simulacra to Lyotard's 'unrepresentable' sublime, leave little doubt about the paradigm(s) at stake. He resists the (post)modern by rethinking the qualities of the image, and, perhaps more so, the historiography of the image. If the (post)modern tends to argue that history and the image have come to an end, Rancière claims that what has come to an end is not history or the image as such, but merely a specific perception (and projection) of both (18-19). And if the (post)modern suggests that some things are unrepresentable, Rancière states that in a discourse of anti-representation, something being unrepresentable is principally a

contradiction in terms (123, 137). Of course, my account of Rancière's reasoning is a simplification (and, given the mobility and fluidity of his arguments, perhaps even a falsification) that does no justice to the nuance and originality of his *pointe*. Yet it does highlight the extent to which his rhetoric, much like Alain Badiou's, rethinks (post)modern assumptions through the processes of thinking that led to those assumptions to begin with – and thus draws attention to their inconsistencies and contradictions.

The five essays of which *The Future of the Image* is comprised are essentially structured around one single yet inherently pluralistic concept: the image. In particular, Rancière is interested in the image of the future (which is the image of contemporary art), the sentence-image (*le phrase-image*). The first essay, 'The Future of the Image', a rephrasing of the history of art, anticipates it. The second, 'Sentence, Image, History', conceptualizes it. The third and fourth essays, contemplations respectively on the relationship between the 'sayable' (*dicible*) and the 'visible' (*visible*) and the nature of the artistic surface, elaborate and illustrate it. And the fifth and final essay, 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', attempts, as a conclusion of sorts, to perform all of these tasks in the service of the image at once.

Rancière conceptualizes and defines the sentence-image on various occasions, in a variety of words, and across multiple media, artforms, genres and surfaces, and at times one is inclined to think its nature is itself as fluid and mobile as its identity, never precisely that which it was before. But fundamentally (if one allows oneself to use such an impossible and infinite term), by the sentence-image, Rancière seems to intend 'the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically – that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image' (46). These two functions can be summarized as follows: '[i]t is the unit that divides the chaotic force of the great parataxis into phrasal power of continuity and imaging power of rupture' (46).

This definition is essentially (to use another such impossible and infinite term) the description of a relation between three binary oppositions: the aesthetic vs. the representative, text vs. image, and continuity vs. rupture. In order to be able to understand the scope of these oppositions we need to briefly return to Rancière's previous discussion of the history of art and the image.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), Rancière proposes nothing less than a rewriting of the history of art. He suggests the history and historiography of art can be distinguished into three regimes: the Aesthetic, the Representative, and the Ethical. The Aesthetic regime is a reinterpretation of (post)modernism (Rancière, 2004: 24); the Representative regime compares to the Aristotelian poetics of mimesis (2004: 22); and the Ethical regime can be identified in the Platonic ethos of community (2004: 21). Each new regime, Rancière argues, defines a 'specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter' (2004: 20). Each new regime, moreover, seems to be a liberation or emancipation from the one that preceded it. The Aesthetic regime, for instance, liberates the Representative regime from its restraints of surface, genre, subject and the relation between the sayable and the visible; the Representative regime, in turn, emancipates the Ethical regime from its moral and political requirements.

Rancière's rewriting of the history of art in *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* proscribes his rethinking of the image in the *Future of the Image*. In the latter, Rancière asserts that every image (of art as much as non-art) is an operation between what he terms the 'sayable' and what he calls the 'visible' – it is also an operation between the visible and signification, and between the visible and the invisible. Simply put, the sayable is the *representative* – the representation of a narrative or plot or action – and the visible the *present* – presence for its own sake. Rancière maintains that in Representative images, the sayable tends to order and direct the visible. That is to say, a narrative or plot or action defines and delineates the extent to which the event or subject is, quite literally, exposed. In Aesthetic images, however, the sayable is subsumed by the visible. The event, if it is still there at all, is shown with the same intensity or indifference as the non-eventful that used to anticipate it, situate it and follow it – temporal and/or spatial causalities now no longer necessarily discernable. If the former images are informed and indeed formed by action, the latter are an expression of description. As Rancière writes, '[c]ontrasting with the representative scene of the visibility of speech is an equality of the visible that invades discourse and paralyzes action... It does not make visible; it imposes presence' (121).

The sentence-image marks the transition from one regime – the representative – to the other – the aesthetic (if it is not already the

materialization of the latter). In this sentence-image, Rancière warns, the sentence does not simply equal the sayable, nor does the image match the visible. In some sense the sentence is both the sayable and the visible, and neither. Similarly, to some extent the image is neither the visible nor the sayable, and both. That is to say, in the sentence-image, the sayable and the visible are released from their individual form and function, their distinct qualities dispersed and distributed over the image's various functions. Thus, if, as Rancière has it, 'the text's part in the representative schema was the conceptual linking of actions, while the image's was the supplement of presence that imparted ... substance to it' (46), its function in the sentence-image, and by extension the aesthetic regime, is both the linking and the imparting of substance. The image, on the other hand, no longer supplements but implements, does not so much sustain as interrupt. Moreover, the sentence (formerly the sayable) now functions as the passive element, present in its own sake; whereas the image (i.e. formerly the visible) is active. To return to Rancière's quotation above, the sentence provides the 'phrasal power of continuity', while the image operates as the 'imagining power of rupture'. The sentence-image is both continuous and ruptured, both an attempt at coherent articulation and a stab at the impossibility of that articulation.

The sentence-image is not so much a balancing act but an *oscillation* between two opposite poles (as examples Rancière gives the paratactic syntax, or montage). The sentence-image oscillates between continuity and fragmentation, between articulation and inarticulateness, between heterogeneous media, forms and surfaces (106), between the dialectic and the symbolic (56-58), between consensus and chaos (47), between *logos* and *pathos*, between lethargy and energy (46), and, perhaps, between the visible and the sayable. It is the democratization of the undemocratic. Or, as Rancière himself aptly puts it, the sentence-image is 'a measure of that which is measureless' (48). If one insists on putting a finger on it, of making it tangible, it is perhaps best described as a pulse, a rhythm. Even when he is not discussing the sentence-image, Rancière, whether knowingly or unwittingly, writes in terms of oscillations. Indeed, the essays of which *The Future of the Image* is comprised consistently operate between and by means of binary oppositions. They abound in phrases like 'on the one hand ... on the other', and 'between the former and the latter'.

And it is precisely in Rancière's identification of the sentence-image with the double-bind, the *both-neither* of oscillation, that his thinking

bears a more than incidental resemblance to Romanticism and negative idealism. To be sure, I do not intend either Romanticism or negative idealism as an epoch or paradigm, nor do I mean Schiller, Schlegel or Kant's philosophy of art. When I speak of Romanticism, I am talking about an ontology more than anything else; and when I say negative idealism, I am only thinking about Kant's particular conception of history. Of course, I am aware I might be reading too much, or, conversely, too little, in Rancière's argument by tying it to these past concepts of the future or fate. And of course, there are as many – if not more – differences between Rancière's approach to the historiography of the image and the Romantic and Kantian notion of history (as Rancière himself is careful to spell out in later chapters) as there are similarities. But I am nevertheless inclined to make a comparison between them.

The early German Romantic ontology and Kant's perception of history too can – in an inevitably reductive form – be identified with oscillation. Both Isaiah Berlin and Jos de Mul, two of the most adept critics of the Romantic worldview, identify oscillation as one of Romanticism's defining features. And indeed, Schlegel described the Romantic spirit as the 'eternal oscillation between enthusiasm and irony' (quoted in De Mul, 1999: 10). Schiller wrote that it was about 'what we will never achieve, yet what we hope to approach' (quoted in De Mul, 1999: 9). Similarly, as amongst others Curtis Peters has noted, Kant's philosophy of history is perhaps most appropriately summarized as 'as-if' thinking. Peters suggests that according to Kant, 'we may view human history *as if* mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential ... to view history *as if* it were the story of mankind's development' (Peters, 1993: 117, my emphasis). Indeed, Kant himself adopts the as-if terminology when he writes '[e]ach ... people, *as if* following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal' (Kant, 2001: 11-12, my emphasis). That is to say, we are not really going towards a natural but unknown goal, but we pretend we do so in order to progress, morally as well as politically. Both the Romantic ontology and Kant's philosophy of history thus wilfully follow a kind of donkey-and-carrot wisdom: in the Romantic notion, a real donkey chases an actual carrot but never manages to eat it because it is too far away or too big; in the Kantian perspective a real donkey chases a virtual carrot that it never manages to eat because it is virtual. (To contrast these perceptions to the Marxist and Hegelian ones, in both those two visions a real donkey chases a more or less real carrot and respectively manages and will eventually manage to eat it.) In this sense they both

oscillate, and cannot but oscillate, must oscillate in order to uphold or sustain their logic, between an enthusiasm and an irony, a hope and a melancholy, continuity and the fragment, and so on.

Rancière's sentence-image, which, to an extent, is always already an Aesthetic image (yet not every Aesthetic image is necessarily a sentence-image), is the (post)modernist image, the image of (post)modernism. Rancière informs us it is the more or less modern image of Godard, of Flaubert, of Mallarmé and, yes, of Behrens. But one imagines it is also the more postmodern image of Matthew Weiner (the creator of *Mad Men*), of David Thorpe, Bas Jan Ader, Roberto Bolaño and perhaps even Haruki Murakami. However, the sentence-image is also the (post)modern image, the image of (post)modernity. It is the image that, like the postmodern, deconstructs, distrusts, ruptures, contradicts, fragments and differentiates; but it is also the sentence that, like the modern, constructs, believes, seeks continuity and tries to overcome and unify. De Mul has argued that the Romantic ontology too is at once postmodern and modern. For if the Romantic, he states, oscillates between enthusiasm and irony, the postmodern is irony without enthusiasm (pure deconstruction) and the modern is enthusiasm without irony (pure fanaticism). As he writes, 'the Romantic experience oscillates between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, between the modern aspiration for totality and postmodern pluralism, between the modern desire for infinity and the radical postmodern appreciation of human finiteness' (De Mul, 1999: 25).

I do not want to argue that the sentence-image and the Romantic conception of art are identical, similar or even comparable. Nor do I want to argue that the sentence-image and the Romantic notion of art or even history have the same preoccupations. I do however, want to assert that the sentence-image, however original – and it is original – expresses a 'historical' (and yes, perhaps, ontological) sensibility that is tied up with that of early German Romanticism's and Kant's philosophy of history. The sentence-image shares with the Romantic ontology and Kantian philosophy of history a fundamental sense of closed openness, of impossible possibility, of 'homogenous' heterogeneity between various spheres (aesthetic, political, moral), media (film, photography, painting, poetry), genres and surfaces. It is a sense, perhaps, inherent to the moment of transition, to the moment of being neither before nor after, neither here nor there. Because that is the paradox of the sentence-image – the paradox of the future of the image: it is a transition that never

remains what it transits from nor becomes what it transits to; a transition that is continuous and consistent.

The cover of *The Future of the Image* features another review (by an academic very much admired by this reader) that I haven't yet made mention of. It claims that Rancière's 'art lies in ... not treating his reader, whether university professor or unemployed actress, as an imbecile'. I think it is safe to say that Rancière indeed does not treat his reader as an imbecile. Rancière treats his reader in the same fashion as that other French thinker-du-jour, Gilles Deleuze: as a truly patient academic or intellectual who is well versed not only in French poststructuralist thought, but also in German idealism and the history of philosophy. To therefore presume that an unemployed – or employed, for that matter – actress (or artist, or writer, etc.) has either the surplus of necessary time or the excess of indispensable knowledge required to understand one page from the other, one sentence from the next, one binary opposition from, well, endless more, seems like the wishful thinking of the Marxist intellectual expecting the uneducated worker to read the theses on Feuerbach. One almost-academic who has not yet had to begin working found it a provocative and intriguing but rather difficult read, and he has all the time in the world to read up on his philosophy of art.

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