

# Cinema and Agency: Rancière's Political-Aesthetics and Contemporary Film

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Jacques Rancière has provided some of the most innovative and stimulating analyses of society and culture in recent times: some cynical and some hopeful. In the contemporary “consensual” climate which attempts to prohibit social disruption through an omniscient demarcation of the “us vs. them,” people are immobilised, change is restricted, and what is “common” is granted from above: this is the scene of the end of politics. How does one negotiate this pessimistic outlook, with a somewhat utopian perspective on the subjectivizing potential of art? Since politics exists because “those who have no right [...] make themselves of some account,”<sup>2</sup> the case is such that politics is always a latent possibility – that potential interruption always exists beneath the stagnant facade. This potential, it seems, is signalled most decisively in art. To this extent, I believe cinema is of urgent consideration.

*The relationship between aesthetics and politics consists [...] in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular.<sup>3</sup>*

Politics is thus enacted through, envisaged by, and describable as an aesthetic experience. Therefore, the relationship between the “consensual times” constructed by state mechanisms, and the films produced in recent years, invoke an urgent inquiry regarding their discrepancy. How does cinema intervene in the social situation from which it arises? How might cinema imagine new “distributions of the sensible?” Yet this is not a wholly new proposition. From its inception, scholars have mused over the emancipatory potential of film, and its pedagogical possibilities in the cinema. Apparatus theories of interpellation, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1999, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Polity Press, Cambridge (MA)-Malden (MA) 2009, p. 25.

counter-interpellation, have been proposed and critiqued, then revived and rethwarted. What I propose is a reconsideration of what is commonly understood as “politics,” through the lenses of Rancière’s political-aesthetics. The stakes of this are such that the relationship between cinema and politics becomes positive: departing from the subordination of spectators and minorities, the appearance of politics in the cinema becomes a matter of empowerment and innovation.

To elaborate, my thesis is concerned with considering two conceits: the possibility of cinema altering the politics of states and state-governed societies, and the possibility of a politics reliant solely on the cinema itself (the “politics of aesthetics” that defines and reconfigures a social distribution of the sensible, as it appears in the space of, and experience of, a film). The first of these I term “a cinema of politics.” Here, I consider two recent examples of cinema engaging with state mechanisms and innovating upon official discourses, in a uniquely cinematic way. Pablo Larraín’s *Tony Manero* (2008), *Post Mortem* (2010), and *NO* (2012) is a trilogy of films which intervene into the official, documented truths about recent traumatic events in Chilean history. But they also interrogate the simplistic dichotomy of partisan politics, in a way which caused furore in their reception. Poetically and aesthetically challenging the representation of history, Larraín’s films invoke a radical ambivalence, which Rancière describes as appropriate to the homonymy of *histoire* (1994): entangling both art and science, fiction and reality. Larraín’s are films which intervene into the way political histories generally represent the winners, or the leaders, or even the unacknowledged masses, offering instead something quite unique and distinct. Moving on from representations of the political past, the second chapter considers a presently occurring political event, in the form of a video-diary of an imprisoned filmmaker: Jafar Panahi’s *This is Not a Film* (2010). Panahi’s “non-film” is an urgent appeal for sight upon a helpless situation, an effort to confront and disrupt the Iranian state’s decree upon his movement and vocation. However, confined to the absurd situation of attempting to *describe* a film he was banned from making, I claim that while intervening in the social situation in which he finds himself, Panahi also produces a rich investigation into the politics of aesthetics. As he sets about delineating the limits of his film, he tests and stretches the limits of film in general. Larraín and Panahi’s are examples of films *about* politics, which are at the same time in the process of playing an active, political role.

By “a politics of cinema,” I play upon the difference invoked by Rancière when he describes an aesthetics of politics (what is and is not perceivable in the social environment) and “the politics of aesthetics” (what is political – what of novelty appears and disrupts – in a space definable as “art”). Diverging wholly from films with any apparent relation to politics “as we know it,” I focus instead on instances definable as political in the sense that they are opposed to delimiting the social and propose unique explorations into novelty (in the first film) and equality (in the second). Firstly, I consider Charlie Kaufman’s *Synechdoche, New York* (2008): a biting appeal for heterogeneity in the face of Baudrillardian uniformity. Putting Rancière’s political-aesthetics into dialogue with Thomas Elsaesser’s writing on

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“productive pathologies,” I claim that Kaufman’s consistent concern with peripheral characters (those on the fringes of mainstream society) challenges both commonplace pathologizing, and the conviction that “there is no such thing as the subject,” in order to claim that novelty is always possible. My final analysis considers the concept of *the author*, and the critical writing emanating from the subject. The author symbolises an unjust distribution of power – a hierarchy of meaning which must be overturned for the empowerment of the spectator: this is the critical stance promoted by poststructuralists. With particular attention to Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*,<sup>4</sup> I contemplate the possibility of a more agonistic relationship between author and audience. Through a close analysis of Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Climates* (2006), I consider the political potential involved in the filmmaker’s traversing of several roles in the filmic space – at once, director, actor, character, my claim is that Ceylan disrupts several hierarchies and in turn invites the spectator into a dialogue of equality.

Through each of these chapters, my aim is to reconsider the relationship between film and politics, as a vital one for the restoration of social participation, both inside and outside the cinema. I aim to reiterate Rancière’s claims on the politics of aesthetics in order to confuse the simplistic subordination of film to politics, or politics to film, instead proposing a productive negotiation between two equal sites of social engagement.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London-New York 2009.