

From Flesh to Words and Back:

How Performances Intervene in Space to Realise Rancière's Politics

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This paper inquires what kind of art best enhances what Jacques Rancière means by "politics". It argues that performance (theatre) and other types of artistic manifestations that include a performative component achieve what Rancière considers political equality. The paper argues on two fronts. First, it argues that artistic manifestations should not be understood as a special event, as understood in the traditional form of "ritual". Secondly, the paper takes this discussion to the question of the use of space in artistic manifestations. It is argued that performances should make a differential use of space, constituting spaces of categorical confusion, called thresholds, in order to better enhance Rancière's politics.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Ritual, Performance, Urbanism, Thresholds.

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Introduction

This article explores what kind of artistic manifestations help to identify and displace, following Jacques Rancière's theory, the codes and norms that assign tasks and roles to individuals in a community (what the French philosopher calls "partage du sensible"). Certain kinds of arts help to identify such allocations; they point out their arbitrariness and, at the same time, perform a different "partage"¹, thus achieving, in a way, what Rancière considers to be "politics". This paper proposes that performances (theatre), primarily, and even better if they interact wisely with urban space, are one type of artistic manifestation that achieves this goal. The paper aims to show why and how.

The main issue that the paper engages with is about how to produce the passage from police to politics, following Rancière's terms, through art, without falling into the contradictions of understanding art as a ritual. I argue that combining performances and a rethinking of urban space may be the answer. To this end, the paper explores four displacements posed by Laura Quintana from which I develop a deeper thinking to engage the issue.

¹ In the paper I stick to the French word because most English translations (they use "distribution") are not able to capture the two meanings implied by the French term. "Partage" expresses at the same time Distribution (of persons, tasks and so on) but also Partition (separation of the space where people do these tasks).

Section I briefly introduces Jacques Rancière's theory following the key concepts of his thought that are better related to the purpose of the paper. Section II introduces the question of the "ritual" as "special event". It develops further on the intersection between Rancière's theory and what is necessary for artistic manifestations to enhance his conception of politics. It relates the issue of art as a ritual to politics as passivity. Finally, it also develops these connections to the commodification of industrial art and art understood as a container of "experiences" for consumers to buy. Section III follows these issues raised in section II (ritualistic aspect of art, politics as passivity and commodification through experiences) and tries to answer them correlating performances and space and urban design. This third section argues the potential of space to reveal the arbitrary codification of space, and the task needed to, at the same time, alter the frame under which that space is codified. The section argues that performances combined with urban space can intervene the way in which individuals understand the relationship between actions and words under the general categorical distinction between infrastructure and superstructure. The section argues that this displacement manages to take art to a categorical "threshold" where individuals appropriate and integrate in their ordinary lives the assumption of equality that Rancière demands for politics to be made.

The paper does not try to give an exhaustive definition of performance or performative arts. Authors as Erika Fischer-Lichte² or Susan Sontag³, among others, already argued that the concept is elusive. However, the article argues that performances are a kind of art that best achieves what Rancière means by "politics".

I. Jacques Rancière: Politics Situated in the Sensible

² E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Routledge, New York, 2008, p. 29.

³ S. Sontag, *Los Happening: un arte de la yuxtaposición radical*, in S. Sontag, *Contra la Interpretación*, Alfaguara, Buenos Aires, 1996, p. 341.

The political thought of Jacques Rancière develops around three key concepts: *the political*, *politics*, and *the police*. For Rancière, the very concept of the political covers a large space: it is at the very basis of philosophy⁴. It embraces two processes: politics and the police are two ways in which the political comes to happen. For Rancière, they are antagonistic⁵.

The police determines competencies (skills) and incompetencies in the community. This means, the police determines who has certain skills to do certain things, and hence distributes tasks. Rancière follows here the platonic division of tasks in the ideal city. As Rancière puts it: «The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task»⁶. Hence, it determines who is counted and who is excluded in the political community⁷ based on the skills and the tasks that individuals fulfil for the community. This operation made by the police is what Rancière coins as a “*partage du sensible*” (a simultaneous partition and distribution of the sensible).

This concept of “partage” must be understood as a double meaning: it works as a device that both distributes and enhances participation of individuals in a community⁸. For Rancière, distribution and enhanced (improved) participation of certain people happens in the same simultaneous operation. This means that the police does not only determine who “takes part” in the political game but also what this “taking part” means. It determines visibility in the community⁹, as different tasks imply different opportunities to access community decision-making.

It should be noted that this "partage" is produced by assigning bodies to spaces. This assignation determines individuals' experience of their community and their own place in it. That is, the partage assigns tasks to individuals, who develop skills related to these tasks, and have an individual experience of what belonging to the community means, based on the tasks

⁴ J. Rancière, *The Disagreement*, University of Minnesota press, Minneapolis (MN), 1999.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the sensible*, Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 70.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 70.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 12-13.

that they develop. Therefore, their experience is linked to the space they occupy and the time they spend on certain things and not on others. For this reason, Rancière's theory is an aesthetics of politics¹⁰, as it flows from the core meaning of "*aesthesis*": sensation and perception¹¹. The individuals feel and perceive their community in a certain way, that is, they not only have a perception of their role but also a bodily experience of their role: they live their role in their community.

As I have said previously, this assignment of particular tasks to particular spaces determines the competencies of individuals, since they spend their time on those tasks and not on others. Being assigned to a task in a particular space means doing some things in a particular space repeatedly over time, i.e. it implies developing, so to speak, a certain life rhythm. This conception is crucial for section III, where I explain the connection of "aesthesis" with space.

Hence, those who devote their time to certain things are competent in those things and not in others. Therefore, the potter develops certain competencies in the workshop that are different from those developed by the orator in the agora. However, there is a subtlety worth noting here. Among these competences is also the competence of political involvement, i.e. the competence to act politically vis-à-vis other individuals in the community, where we can suspect the potter to have a crucially lower participation than the orator. Hence, these "partages" create exclusions from political involvement. That is why the police determines not only how political involvement happens but also who is involved: who is counted and who is not. The usual suspects of these exclusion —uncounted—, Rancière considers, are women or workers¹².

Rancière's concept of "partage" opens up the possibility of understanding cities not so much as public, shared, and community driven spaces, but as restrictive and highly codified

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹¹ C. Caiazzo, *Restructuring the Sensible Fabric: The Political as Aesthetic Space*, in "Rivista di Studi Politici", 17(1), 2022, p. 80.

¹² J. Rancière, *What does it mean to be Un*, in *Continuum*, 21, 2007, p. 563.

parcels. Individuals are expected not only to follow certain norms but more importantly, to develop certain roles — to carry out certain tasks in these spaces.

On the other hand, Rancière opposes the term “politics”. Politics is, according to his idea, an operation that tries to displace the order established by the police. This displacement appears precisely as the contrary to what the police requires: consensus. The police demands consensus because it needs everyone to adequately be in place: do their tasks, work their hours. Hence, “politics” appear in the form of disagreement¹³. What disagreement? Disagreement over both the terms of the "partage" and the terms by which the community has defined what it means to act politically. Then, Rancière argues, the disagreement happens on the assumption that equality rules the community when, however, it does not¹⁴. Disagreement is thus an operation of displacement under the mandate of the police, where actions and meanings are employed under an assumption of equality that does not exist under hierarchy. Politics is, in this sense, the convergence of two logics: the logic of political equality and the police logic of allocating tasks¹⁵.

In view of this, it is key to remember that to better understand Rancière, it must be understood that there is no situation outside a "partage du sensible". That means, in a certain sense, that there is always a police logic. Chiara Caiazza has a similar reading of Rancière here: there is no way out the police, there are only challenges to it¹⁶. Displacements by the logic of equality that occur under disagreement. This displacements are a challenge to a way of understanding the “us” implied and employed by the police¹⁷ when the “partage” is operating. That is, the disagreement is a foundational rejection of how the community has defined itself. However, the key question for this paper is what kind of displacement can lead to this context.

¹³ J. Rancière, *Política, Policía, Democracia*, LOM Ediciones, Santiago de Chile, 2006, p. 71.

¹⁴ J. Rancière, *The Disagreement*, cit., p. 33.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 34. See also better the Spanish version of *On the Shores of Politics: Política, Policía, democracia*, 2006, p. 71.

¹⁶ C. Caiazza, *Restructuring the Sensible Fabric: The Political as Aesthetic Space*, cit, p. 75.

¹⁷ X. Bassas, *Jacques Rancière: Ensayar la Igualdad*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2019, p. 81.

To explore these displacements, two operations must take place that can be analysed: first, the "partage" employed by the police must be revealed by some device. For disagreement to occur, it must be known what is being disagreed about. Secondly, the practices and implicit meanings that shape the community behind this partage must be modified: the disagreement must materialise. The next two sections analyse how art, and in particular performance, can reveal the partage and how it can reshape its meaning. It is argued that this displacement occurs as performances re-signify the spaces they use.

II. Art as the Dissolution of Ornamental Fiction

In some texts Rancière has claimed the idea that politics «starts with this tiny modification in the posture of a body»¹⁸. Laura Quintana, following Rancière's idea, also explores the possibility of displacement in relation to performances (theatre) and dance. She argues that performances can lead to four displacements: “the displacement of the mechanical move, the utilitarian task, the adequate position and the expectations of efficiency”¹⁹ ²⁰. This section develops the former two. Next section focuses on the latter two.

The Displacement of the Adequate Position

In performance there is a rupture of the rhythms established by the police. This rupture is not exclusive to performance theatre as an artistic device, but to many forms of art, all of which, being rituals, involve «ritual acts can in general be considered as communal manipulations of social rhythms»²¹, hence the mechanical moves are replaced by a new sense of corporeality: of one's own body. In the case of performance, the disrupted rhythm is that of a mechanised corporeality: is the *Displacement of the Mechanical Move*. The subject, who previously took

¹⁸ J. Rancière, *A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière*, in *Parallax*, 15:3, 2009a, p. 117.

¹⁹ L. Quintana, *Política de los Cuerpos*, Herder, Barcelona, 2020, p. 109.

²⁰ Partial translation of the original in Spanish: “se desplaza del movimiento (mecánico), la tarea (utilitaria), la posición (de adecuación) y las expectativas (de rendimiento; eficiencia) que le habían sido asignadas.”

²¹ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, Common Notions, New York, 2019, p. 33.

the body as a mere channel of his consciousness, a mere genetic shell, now notices his physical existence: he becomes aware of his wounds and the deformations of his muscles. corporeality has ceased to be understood as a channel and has come to be understood as mediality. The subject is and is in his body; he does not only use it. Existence is briefly de-automatised as the subject is forced to briefly repair the physicality of his existence. For the impact of this displacement to be effective, however, it must present itself in the form of the everyday²². Ritual, as a special occasion, only presents itself as a distortion of rhythm: leisure time. However, it is the everyday that changes the very perception of rhythm. A performance aimed at altering rhythms must therefore be thought of as a “happening”, as something “that happens”. I argue in this section that the most effective artistic device that enhances the transition from police to politics in Rancière’s terms is that art which does not present itself in the form of the extraordinary ritual.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, the spectator's understanding of theatre undergoes a sudden change when physical contact breaks through²³. Individuals, who previously took their bodies as a mere channel for their minds, now become aware of their physicality. Following W. Benjamin's conceptualisation: individuals treat their bodies not only as a channel of communication, but as a "medium". That is, individuals, by regaining awareness of their own bodies, realise that they inhabit their bodies. Individuals stop living in their bodies and understand that they are their bodies.

This displacement can take place if, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, performances «produced the similar result of drawing the audience’s attention to the multiple ways in which the actors were using their “real” bodies. These bodies were not seen as carriers of meaning tied to specific dramatic characters»²⁴. What is happening in this context is a return of “aesthetics” to the realm of life and, more broadly, to the realm politics. The spectator was before captured by a simulation, a play. The action was separated from life and there was no device that seemingly fused both realms in one. This change of realm, however, is now

²² L. Quintana, *Política de los Cuerpos*, cit., p. 84-85.

²³ E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, cit., p. 40.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 35.

occurring only insofar as the spectator is changing his role; he is no longer a mere spectator, he is emancipating himself by becoming an actor²⁵. This is the double implication of Rancière's theory: politics leads to certain aesthetics (experiences), as partage conditions people's experience of living. However, aesthetics also leads to politics: forms of feeling the community are forms of acting politically. This second step from aesthetics to politics is what this section explores. If Rancière is right, altering the field of experience, that is, changing the aesthetic realm, may already be an operation of politics against the police.

The precise question to solve is how this realm change can happen. When confronted with some performances, individuals often need to pause in their uninterrupted stream of consciousness and evaluate their own bodies, by the mere exposure to the body of the performer. This is the case with a performance such as Marina Abramovic's *Imponderabilia*. However, in this case, the exposure is more intrusive, as in fact the aim of the performance is to establish physical contact between performers and spectators. This is the point at which the concept of "ritual" needs to be analysed in order to understand what devices can trigger this change.

In the aforementioned performance, the physical interaction between the performer and the spectator forces the latter to dissociate the two realms at stake: the realm of the fictional-not-political and the realm of the real-political. The realm of the fictional-not-political is that way of understanding art as a device separate from life that communicates something to us. The spectator approaches the aesthetic object as an object of ornamentation, a simple object of enjoyment and self-gratification. The realm of the real-political is the realm in which real political action shapes lives. Nothing that happens in art, from this division, is understood as real-political, at most, merely informative. The viewer never understands art as a manipulation of the political community, if anything, only as discourse. This is a common perception of the opposition between fiction as entertainment and fiction as a limited form of political activism.

²⁵ J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso books, London, 2009b.

For the spectator, the realms appear first as the traditional opposition between fiction and reality, in which the play is perceived as a "fictional bubble". Plays may help the community to understand itself, they may communicate ideas or questions, but they do not actually intervene in the community. However, when the play is over, the bubble dissolves and the spectator returns to the real world, where politics takes place.

However, in the direct interaction between spectators and performers something else happens. The illusion of fictionality is no longer sustained and the spectator reacts in two ways: either he or she accepts that the representation is not entirely fictional, and that the bubble has some gaps; or he or she refuses to give up the dichotomy but reacts confused, or even embarrassed, and goes on to inhabit the "threshold". This circumstance is what Bertolt Brecht called the "distance".

Thresholds, as Stavros Stavrides defines them, are aesthetic (sensitive) spaces where dichotomic categories become confuse. Thresholds are an interruption of a categorical flow that no longer accept distinctions like inside-out, identity-otherness and real-fictional²⁶. In this sense, thresholds are spaces where, at first, Rancierian politics can happen, as they can handle an interaction between police logic and egalitarian logic²⁷. Just to remind: a friction between the assumption of equality under a police structure (the partage) that needs to start from the premise of inequality. This question, however, is explained properly in section III.

I focus now on another level of the distinction to develop the question of the Brechtian distance. Both realms (reality and fiction) interact also with a dichotomy of activity and passivity. Todd May explains the theory of Rancière as an opposition of two kinds of equality: passive and active equality²⁸. Passive equality is the formal equality: the equality towards the law, in human rights, and in political statements. May relates this passivity with the common operations of the police²⁹. Active equality, however, is the equality made reality,

²⁶ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 126.

²⁷ J. Rancière, *The Disagreement*, cit., p. 34.

²⁸ T. May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2008.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 3.

through actions, through a physical interaction with the world³⁰. For May, the issue with liberal-egalitarian approaches, streaming from Rawls' theory, is that the citizen is only the passive receptacle of the rights and political actions that define his community³¹, hence, his political participation can be reduced to merely existing.

Following this thread, in the "realm" of non-political fiction, the fictional is taken for passive: it is not reality, it is not really happening, the actors perform, but do not act. The spectators watch, but no longer act. However, the political content is taken as active: the spectators take part in debates, defend the content of the play and so on. On the other hand, the real-political "realm" is quite the opposite: actions have consequences, and life is, let's say, at stake.

Both "realms" are linked to a passive-active relationship. However, I argue that the alteration of the two realms through the "emancipation" of the spectator turns art into an in-between space. If the viewer is pushed to blur the conceptual dichotomy, what appears is the "threshold", and some of the things that happen in that space begin to "affect" how individuals understand their community. Also, the mere presence, being there, is already perceived as community changing. However, in May's conceptualization, he seems to mistake this "active equality" of politics for a limited sense of political activism, which is not the same.

Political activism can also happen as a "fictional bubble" in the repertoire of contention³² of our societies³³. Just as the fictional bubble in aesthetics, the demonstration sometimes settles, is made, and then dissolves. Protesters then understand political action as an experience separate from their ordinary lives, taking it mostly as a secondary form of empty "rebellious" experience. The demonstration becomes a ritual, a special occasion, and is in

³⁰ Ivi, p. 11.

³¹ Ivi, p. 31-32.

³² The "repertoire of contention" is a concept developed by historian Charles Tilly. It argues that political activism and political intervention can happen in many ways and under many theoretical frameworks. See, C. Tilly, *The Contentious French*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 3.

³³ I am aware that not all types of political activism work in this way. I argue that, precisely, performance is a powerful tool for producing a deeper political impact in demonstrations and in art in general. Extinction Rebellion (XR) or the collective Boa Mistura can be good examples of alternative ways in which performance can enhance the impact of politically significant groups and actions. Here I argue, precisely, that activism *can be this way*, and I see this as an issue, but not that it is the only way.

danger of even becoming ornamental. I argue that this feeling in some types of political activism has to do with the perception of the field of action as not truly consequential. What I argue is that a personal change in the ways in which individuals perceive, experience, speak about and define their political community is needed to be lasting. Therefore, I argue that there is a connection between Brechtian distance in art and May's understanding of active equality as this dissociation within the impact of political activism. For this reason, it has to do with how aesthetic "ritual" is understood.

The connection is that both rituals are understood in a sense of a "special event". Something that happens as if inside a bubble. However, these rituals do not seem to fulfil the requirements for political displacement to take place. The reason, as Quintana argues, is that displacement is only effective if it takes place in a context of ordinariness³⁴. Political change has to catch the "spectator/participant" unawares and introduce an alteration in his or her sensitive rhythm (rhythm of life).

The problem with this empty understanding of political activism is that it is easily assimilated as a response within a system that already expects the response. The existence of the response is then used as legitimisation of the system. As Andrea Soto explains, "to desecrate implies to already recognize the sacred nature of the thing desecrated"³⁵³⁶. That is, many celebrated actions of political activism fail to achieve Rancierian disagreement (action that presupposes equality) because they are implicitly assuming the policing structure for consensus, which is unequal and based on passivity. Arguing under the premise of the police is implicitly agreeing to their conclusions. However, the disagreement comes from questioning the terms that constitute the frame itself and implicitly assuming equality. This is also what Chantal Mouffe argues against deliberative theories of democracy³⁷ and I understand Rancière's disagreement to follow a similar understanding.

³⁴ L. Quintana, *Política de los Cuerpos*, cit., pp. 84-85.

³⁵ A. Soto, *La Performatividad de las Imágenes*, Metales Pesados, Santiago de Chile, 2020, p. 108.

³⁶ Translation from the Spanish original "Profanar implica reconocer lo sagrado de aquello que se quebranta".

³⁷ C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso books, London, 2000.

The Utilitarian Task

To sum what has been said in the last subsection, the performance inaugurates a space for the subject to reflect on his or her own body. The body is no longer understood as a tool, with a specific use, but as part of the individual: of living. In this sense, performance forces individuals to attend to the expressivity of his or her body. Therefore, it shifts a conception of the use of the body towards an experience of the body. To “experience” the body is, here, to make an experience of all the instances of the police that traverse it. This opens the opportunity to realise politics through dissent: the pure expression of the individual, as a member of the community, in the consciousness of his body, means the recuperation of his body and, at the same time, the expression of his condition of exclusion. Therefore, the contents of art are no longer taken from an individual utilitarian calculus, where individuals value their joy and their objective is to maximise it through the accumulation of sensorial experiences, but as an operation of eminently political and social subjectification. This subsection explains how.

Back to aesthetics, the aesthetic ritual, when understood as a special event or a fictional bubble becomes a distortion of the rhythm. However, it is not an alteration of the rhythm, of the flow of life, but a parenthesis in one’s life. It enhances the fictional bubble. Also, these parentheses are often understood merely as leisure time.

This question can be explained better referring to the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* as developed by Walter Benjamin. *Erlebnis* refers to the “lived experience”, a small and tacit experience that plays a temporal role on the individuation process. For Benjamin, it was a sort of void experience, an irrelevant anecdote that had no lasting influence in the individual. *Erfahrung*, however, refers to an experience that lasts in the memory and in the individuation process of people. Benjamin was afraid that mechanical reproduction was transforming *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*³⁸.

³⁸ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, Schochen Books, New York, 1969.

However, Benjamin's argument to explain this shift in the mechanical reproduction of art (and experiences) was linked to the loss of the cultic aspect of art³⁹ through the destruction of the "aura" of the art object. The danger of this shift was to lead people to an increasingly "blasé" attitude to life⁴⁰, i.e., to disaffection, depersonalisation, and common dread. Hence, following Benjamin, representations understood not as "special events" but as changes in the rhythms of life, i.e., introduced as a change in the flow of the ordinary, could not be sufficient to leave a mark on the individual, as they would be inconsequential⁴¹ to them. Hence the danger in this sense is that disagreement will not come about because the individual does not change the way he experiences and perceives his community, let alone alter it by his actions. It could therefore be argued that this ordinariness might even enhance the habitual passivity it seeks to alter.

However, Benjamin also considers that the danger lies in the fact that mechanical reproduction leads individuals to want art as their own property⁴². In that respect, performance arts are harder to be a singular private property, as 1) they happen in a shared space and 2) they are ephemeral. It could be argued that, however, performances could be recorded and distributed as a video (as *Imponderabilia*). Hence, performances can also be turned to commodities.

Nevertheless, it must be questioned, though, what kind of commodity would a recorded performance be. I argue that the goal of the commodification of art is precisely to turn artistic objects as containers of "experiences". The first requisite of the commercialization of industrial art is that there needs to be a consumer, not only an spectator. Consumers need to perceive that there is something being bought: something worth paying for. Worth to their individual "utility". In this case, the commodity can be experience. But experiences in the sense of *Erlebnis* as introduced. Contrary to what Benjamin considers, the artistic object does

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, cit., p. 5.

not lose its cultic trait, but is re-signified. The task of the art object will now be to create a seductive spectacle that serves consumers simply for leisure and personal indulgence⁴³.

Thus, there are two ways in which art seems to appear as a ritual: an ordinary ritual that is politically inconsequential for individuals, or as pure spectacle that is also politically inconsequential for individuals. To explore the possibility that performances are a ritual that escapes both it is necessary to explore the question of ritual closely linked to the question of space.

III. The Use of Space as a Re-signifying Device

In the last section, following Stavrides and Benjamin, I argued that a subtle change in the position of a body, understood as a change in the rhythm of ordinary life, does not seem sufficient. Although the question of ritual can be resolved by performance, the argument seems to lead to a dead end, as the solutions led the art to be politically inconsequential either by being too subtle or too obvious. However, following the displacements of Quintana, in the performances not only the mechanical moves are transformed but, most importantly, the adequate position. The adequate position refers to the position expected in a capitalised city (designed with economic performance in mind), that is, the position of the spectator as consumer, as a passive political agent. This section explores how the interaction of the performance with space leads to the dissolution of ornamental fiction, the constitution of thresholds, the re-signification of concepts and thus moves from the police to politics.

The Adequate Position

The neoliberal city is a form of police that focuses on turning the space into an individualised consumer experience⁴⁴. Rem Koolhaas calls this new space the *Junkspace*: «[it] knows all

⁴³ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 35.

⁴⁴ R. Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, in *October*, 100, 2002, p. 183.

your emotions, all your desires. [...] It comes with a sound track, smell, captions [...] It sponsors a collective of brooding consumers in surly anticipation of their next spend, a mass of refractory periods caught in a Thousand Year Reign of Razzmatazz, a paroxysm of prosperity»⁴⁵. That is, the space in the capitalised city has two goals: 1) personal indulgence and self-gratification, and 2) turning any community event into a personal, individualised experience. This section develops these threads linked to performance.

The space in the neoliberal city that Koolhaas refers as Junkspace is a space designed to sell experiences. It is a space that tries to function as a personality designer. As Stavrides argues: «A bourgeois cult of individuality is necessarily connected to a cult of individual experience. Individuality is supposedly constructed out of an accumulation of distinct and presentable experiences»⁴⁶. Under the neoliberal city frame, the relation between consumer (in the real-political realm) and spectator (in the fictional-not-political) is similar: experiences are turned into commodities and political participation is diminished to consume.

It is also pertinent to note that neoliberalism, while reducing state intervention, is not free from the operation of the police. As Neil Brenner explains: «on the one hand, while neoliberalism aspires to create a “utopia of free markets liberated from all forms of state interference”, it has in practice entailed an intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule upon all aspects of social life»⁴⁷. As I explained in section I, it is difficult to argue from Rancière's perspective that there is a regime outside the police. It is key to note that a state apparatus is not a necessary condition for the police to operate its “partition”, and contemporary cities are by no means free of this partition.

This form of policing is built around the idea that community participation is irrelevant or unviable. It does so by empowering an individualised experience of community. Thus, the neoliberal city presents us with a type of city that is aimed at maximising an individualised experience of community. Hence, as Koolhaas argues «Junkspace pretends to unite, but it

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 84.

⁴⁷ N. Brenner, *Critique of Urbanization: selected essays*, Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel, 2017, p. 44.

actually splinters. It creates communities not out of shared interest or free association, but out of identical statistics and unavoidable demographics»⁴⁸. In the neoliberal city, the only thing individuals need to have in common is a capitalised perspective based on the expression of their interests in terms of supply and demand.

A great example of this kind of spatial ordering can be found in Frederic's Jameson *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In his first chapter, section V, he analyses Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. A crucial feature of the Hotel is that the whole façade is made of reflective glass⁴⁹. The reflective glass has the peculiar symbolism of pretending that the building is self-sufficient. It both excludes the city and reflects it: everything that happens inside is closed to the public and everything that happens outside is "returned" as a mirror effect⁵⁰. The aim is to convey the idea that buildings are self-sufficient autonomous units, and that common space is now unnecessary; that individuals are content to live in their isolated plots. The effect is enhanced in buildings like casinos in Las Vegas where «The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space. This disorients the occupant in space and time. [...] Space is limitless, because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries»⁵¹.

This collection of examples should help us to understand one thing, and that is that the city, and its design, tells a story about the community that inhabits it. In this case, the city as a communal space is understood only as a meeting point for individualised lives. This is the contemporary neoliberal project. The city is not the space where individuals create the community: the community is almost abolished. The city is the consumer spot where individuals satisfy their interests in terms of individualisation of experiences. The role of the individual in this kind of city is reduced to be a consumer. The city is not understood as alive and changing but as a setting, as if it were a film, for consumer indulgence. Contrary to the

⁴⁸ R. Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, cit., p. 183.

⁴⁹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, New York, 1991, p. 40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ R. Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT press, Cambridge (MA), 1988, p. 49.

Keynesian approach of Le Corbusier⁵² or the mechanised Cerdà's plan⁵³, self-sufficiency has the goal to divide the city in parts, and the urban design is directed towards isolation and not towards local interaction.

Having briefly established the key aspects of this police partition, I now turn to the question of ritual linked to space. Following Stavrides' conception, adequation undergoes a rapid change with performances, as they reuse space to assign objects, passers-by and performers different roles that depart from the expected (consumption). The space is simply not used for what it was designed for; performances in the middle of the street are simply a nuisance. However, the impact would not last long if it was just about doing different things in the same places. Instead, what happens is that the different use of space reveals both 1) its arbitrariness and 2) new ideas for defining it. It is not simply a change of bodies, but a change of the meaning that bodies take on in space, and thus of the meaning that space is given to its individuals. It is, in the Rancierian sense, a community participation in the meaning that spaces have for the community. It is therefore an intervention, an interrogation of space and its use, and it starts from the assumption of equality. In other words, performances that re-signify the space in which they take place are political in Rancière's sense. I argue that this is a re-conceptualisation that endures in the participants because it alters their vital rhythms.

Following Stavrides' concept of the threshold, in section II I introduced the possibility that it is the optimal space for the Rancierian concept of politics to take place. The threshold has to occur in a geographically situated space, Stavrides argues, through the interplay of two architectural devices that collide in the urban landscape⁵⁴. I need to argue now, however, the relation between the theory of thresholds and its connection to the ritual and the alteration of the flow of ordinariness that I developed in section II. As a starting point, think that a threshold can be as simple as a door.

⁵² Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, Grossman Publishers, New York, 1973, p. 75-80.

⁵³ P.V. Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (MA), 2011, p. 10-11.

⁵⁴ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 112-114.

George Simmel, whose work Stavrides followed closely, makes a curious argument from this idea. For Simmel, the frontier means that «just as the formless limitation takes on a shape, its limitedness finds its significance and dignity only in that which the mobility of the door illustrates: in the possibility at any moment of stepping out of this limitation into freedom»⁵⁵.

However, Simmel's argument is flawed. The establishment of a border, as Simmel describes it, would imply assuming freedom as mere defiance. If freedom is only possible after the establishment of a norm, its very content is futile, it is mere formality: transgression becomes pie in the sky. Once the border is crossed, there is nothing left on the other side. Not even freedom, which only becomes effective as a transgression of the norm. Thus understood, freedom would die in its own act of realisation. It is evident that freedom cannot be limited to defying established norms.

Instead, freedom, I argue, lies not in the transgression of the threshold, but in the intervention of the norm that governs the threshold as a space between two things. Freedom requires inhabiting the threshold. From Rancière's perspective, to recognise a norm is to recognise the power of the police. However, politics happens when the police are recognised from the perspective of equality. When one acts “as if”. That is, when the unequal force of the police is questioned (but not suppressed or transcended in Simmel's sense of the norm). For Rancière's politics to work, police policy must be, in that sense, egalitarian politics.

This is the issue of the ritual as a “special event”. Against the “thresholds city”, Stavrides talks about the “enclave city”. The enclave is a space of resistance against other spaces that are highly normative. However, this means that enclaves agree to the distribution of norms and is established merely as opposition, being founded exclusively as an “exception”. The norm is not suspended, it is only contested, however, this contest is already included in the dichotomic order imposed by the rule as inside-outside, valid-invalid and so on. In this line, Stavrides argues, following Giorgio Agamben's ideas that: «exception is not the opposite of the rule; it is the founding condition of the rule»⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ G. Simmel, *Bridge and Door*, in *Theory Culture Society*, 11:5, 1994, p. 10.

⁵⁶ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 43.

This idea of the threshold is, hence, fruitful to understand how the issue of the special event understood as a move (mechanical) is also an issue when considering space, more precisely, urban spaces. So now I must focus on explaining how it is possible, then, for performances to overcome the problem of the special occasion by introducing into the flow of the ordinary a subtle shift of meaning in the use and appropriateness of individuals to space. To understand this, it will be key to investigate further the interplay between superstructure and infrastructure.

Expectations of Efficiency

Following Stavrides thread, what is necessary is an alteration of the flow of ordinariness⁵⁷, but not an interruption. As the Greek philosopher argues: «Spaces of emancipation are mostly envisaged either as freed strongholds to be defended or as enclaves of otherness. It is important, however, to think of space not as a container of society but as a formative element of social practices»⁵⁸.

For performances and, in my opinion, for political activism in general, the reordering of space (meaning space again) must be done not in the "enclave" way, i.e., not under the ritualistic conception of disruption. In this sense, defiance is simply contestation, acceptance of the norm. What Rancière demands of politics, however, is an infiltration of the forms of doing that alters the forms of understanding. In this sense, Rancière's thinking implies understanding the infrastructural-superstructural relation as reciprocal and simultaneous: occurring on the same plane of reality, the urban This means that we have to question the assumptions we rely on to consider the interaction between spaces and actions. An understanding of space that overcomes the dichotomy between meanings and actions is therefore necessary. Between the real and the possible⁵⁹. What I argue is that the return of the fictional to the realm of reality implies the confusion between political and non-political

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 33

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 18

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 112.

actions, which opens up the rancierian "as if" kind of interaction between the logic of equality in the police framework. This is why, I argue, political activism needs also to consider performative, fictional-perceived, action in their repertoire.

Albert García Espuche, an urban historian from Barcelona, spent more than a thousand pages analysing the historical evolution of a single street in Barcelona, “Montcada” street (home to, for instance, the Picasso Museum). What García Espuche finds out is an urbanistic alteration of the tale of the city⁶⁰. The buildings, mostly the parts that face the street, were modified under an interested perspective of the sociology of the city⁶¹. This perspective said that there was no diversity in the city during the Middle Ages and up to the 19th century, and that Montcada Street was a street that belonged only to the nobles and the rich⁶², hence, that the city was perfectly segmented and organized following tasks, income, and social class. However, this interpretation even contradicted what Le Corbusier presented as the radical change in contemporary cities: that they broke with the spatial connection between the residential area and the workplace, previously very often located even in the same building⁶³.

What García Espuche's work reveals is that the hegemonic history of the city was constructed a posteriori, at the same time as the urban space was designed to signify anew the meaning of the corners, squares and streets. The aim: for the space to tell a different story to its inhabitants, to be understood and used differently now. Space was used as discourse while discourse legitimised its own establishment. This is the interplay that urbanists see between superstructure and infrastructure. There is a close relationship between what space tells us to do and what we tell space to do for us. The interaction between the superstructural (the discourses and ideas about the community) and infrastructural (what the community does and is done) realms is, here, synchronic and reciprocal.

⁶⁰ A. García-Espuche, *La Gent del Carrer Montcada (vol. 1)*, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2020, p. 21.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 36.

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 43.

⁶³ Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, cit., p. 73-74.

Ritual as a special event sets its action within a different understanding. It sees dialectics as a force that flows from political projects into the infrastructural spaces of cities. An example of this argument is in the work of David Harvey. In his view, this is the specific problem of the “culture industry” employed by capitalism. He argues that the superstructure-infrastructure dialectic would show itself here as a clash between contradictory messages between ideology and materiality. These messages would, however, be seemingly resulted (synthesised) by culture, leading to the advancement of history. Ideology would say: innovation, transgression, authenticity⁶⁴. The materiality would be, however, conservative, and repetitive. Far from being original, it would employ the same structure of productive forces as other industries, with the sole aim of social reproduction. This is, in a way, what happens with many artistic formulas today, often labelled as mainstream: better FX or bigger budgets for films, crazier crossovers, video games with more nano-triangles processing photorealistic landscapes. Materiality would stagnate in a progressive tendency towards the accumulation of everything that is marketable, focusing especially on the particularly accumulable elements, i.e., fixed capital. In this way, the old spirit of capitalist ideology would be transferred to the new through the efficiency of the market.⁶⁵

This is where performances, and some kind of art, can accomplish a displacement of the expectations of efficiency. The space and the forms of art can be employed in the worse profitable way, in the sense that they can be used not only to be non-profitable (avoid being marketable) but also be an interruption of the market flow. The displacement of thresholds that happens in performances comes to dispel the illusion of the progressive dialectic. The repartition of competences would happen, as announced earlier, in the displacement of the “perception of space as use” towards “inquiring about the use of space” while acting in it⁶⁶.

Nevertheless, performances imply a further displacement. They displace the very understanding of the relation between superstructure and infrastructure: they employ a categorical displacement. Individuals that expected discourse to be separated from their

⁶⁴ D. Harvey & N. Smith, *Capital Financiero, propiedad inmobiliaria y cultura*, Universitat Autònoma, Barcelona, 2005, p. 55.

⁶⁵ R. Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, cit., p. 184.

⁶⁶ S. Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, cit., p. 112-114.

acting, as if discourse was leading their actions under a precise rationale (consumption), realize now that their actions tell a differential story about the space in which they happen. Hence, they not only tell the community but make the community. The possibility to understand superstructure and infrastructure as synchronic implies the possibility to understand performances in public space as categorical interventions of dichotomous assumptions. These interventions establish new ways of looking, feeling and understanding space and life. This is why altering the ordinary flow of life is an intervention that overcomes the success of ritualistic understandings of art.

These interventions (artistic and performative) are an opening for the logic of equality to intervene the police partition questioning its own premise. That means, performances need to operate in and through space. To burst in the streets, to reappropriate the city, to reappropriate life⁶⁷.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the requirements for certain kinds of arts to become devices that trigger the operation that Rancière considers "politics". The requirements are, basically, that the frameworks under which the polis develops its "partage" be called into question. Not only in the discursive sense, but above all, that individuals perceive and act differently in the world. That their relationship with the community is effectively altered, not by the exchange of one hierarchy for another, not even by the abolition of hierarchies (something which, following Rancière, seems difficult to do), but by the neutralisation of their power. Rancièreian politics is, in this sense, the politics of acting as if the police were understood in terms of equality, even if this is not the case.

Accordingly, the paper addressed the debate over whether art should be understood and represented as a ritual, or whether it should seek to disrupt the ordinariness of life. I argued

⁶⁷ J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, cit., p. 15.

that the most effective interpretation of art that meets Ranciere's requirements for establishing a politics within a police regime is the interpretation of art as an intervention of the ordinary rhythms of life. I argued, following Quintana's four displacements, how performance as art and as a category can produce both displacements in the way individuals act and in the way individuals understand the categories that underlie their actions.

As argued in this paper, not all artistic manifestations favour the logic of equality in the same way. Politics is a field of forces in which opposing interests and conceptions clash, and not all types of art perform a version of the Rancierian conception of politics, but a more police one. Some sort of art establish and assume hierarchies, fall back on inegalitarian understandings of politics, and define the community as a community of legitimate exclusions. Some sort of art does not establish an egalitarian perspective towards their audience and not even question categorical dichotomies through differential ways of performing, but rather enhance cumulative advantages based on fixed capital (such as the aforementioned examples of mainstream cinema, videogames, music festivals and so on and so forth).

A large part of art (of the forms of making and representing art, but not of the artistic disciplines themselves) takes its public for consumers. A large part of art builds idols around artists and sells their image as a new marketable product. A large part of art takes art objects as special events aimed at 1) self-indulgence and 2) offering individualised experiences. These types of art clash with the type of art suggested in this paper and occupy the other path. In this sense, the type of art suggested in the present document is also an exclusion that the police do not usually consider.