

## Article

# Rupture and Response—Rorty, Cavell, and Rancière on the Role of the Poetic Powers of Democratic Citizens in Overcoming Injustices and Oppression

Michael Räber 

Department of Philosophy, University of Lucerne, 6002 Lucerne, Switzerland; michael.raeber@unilu.ch

**Abstract:** In this paper, I discuss the importance of practices of disidentification and imagination for democratic progress and change. To this end, I bring together certain aspects of Stanley Cavell's and Richard Rorty's reflections on democracy, aesthetics, and morality with Jacques Rancière's account of the importance of appearance for democratic participation. With Rancière, it can be shown that any public–political order always involves the possibility (and often the reality) of exclusion or oppression of those who “have no part” in the current order through a particular order of perceptibility, and that democratic action, therefore, requires rupturing acts of political agency on the part of self-proclaimed political actors through which disidentifications and constructions of difference against such existing orders become possible. With Cavell and Rorty, in turn, it can be shown that these rupturing moments, in order to actually become politically effective, require a responsive disposition and a willingness to engage in practices of imagination on the part of those who occupy dominant positions on existing orders, insofar as they must acknowledge the expression of others' sense of injustice. The upshot of my discussion is that a comprehensive account of the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics must simultaneously address the interruption of political action on the one hand and responsiveness on the other, and that Rancière and the neo-pragmatists Rorty and Cavell complement each other insofar as they illuminate the blind spots of their respective approaches.

**Keywords:** radical democracy; aesthetics; cultural politics; pragmatism; Rorty; Cavell; Rancière; Wittgenstein



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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to elucidate the significance of disidentification and imagination for democratic progress and change. This is particularly relevant at a political moment when the lack of alternatives to what are perceived as necessary economic and other constraints in a globalized world limits people's imagination. This makes it increasingly difficult to envision and realize emancipatory political and social alternatives to the current status quo, which steer clear of nationalist populist movements that advocate isolation and the shrinking of the democratic “we.” Addressing the pervasive constriction of social and political imaginaries at a global scale, which perpetuates hegemonic forms of domination, necessitates a philosophical framework that demonstrates how the poetic and imaginative capacities of democratic citizens can serve as central elements within transformative movements. As active and collective practices, these capacities can reshape the bonds that unite our communities and transform our modes of interaction, thereby enabling advancements in the struggle against injustice and oppression. The purpose of this paper is to lay out the key components of such a framework.

To this end, I bring together certain aspects of Stanley Cavell's and Richard Rorty's reflections on democracy, aesthetics, and morality with Jacques Rancière's account of the importance of appearance for democratic participation. With Rancière, it can be shown that any public–political order always involves the possibility (and often the reality) of exclusion or oppression of those who “have no part” in the current order through a particular order

of perceptibility, and that democratic action, therefore, requires rupturing acts of political agency on the part of self-proclaimed political actors through which dis-identifications and constructions of difference against such existing orders become possible. With Cavell and Rorty, in turn, it can be shown that these rupturing moments, in order to actually become politically effective, require a responsive disposition and a willingness to engage in practices of imagination on the part of those who occupy dominant positions on existing orders, insofar as they must acknowledge the expression of others' sense of injustice. The upshot of my discussion is that a comprehensive account of the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics must simultaneously address the interruption of political action on the one hand and responsiveness on the other and that Rancière and the neo-pragmatists Rorty and Cavell complement each other insofar as they illuminate the blind spots of their respective approaches.

Contemporary pragmatist theories of democracy understand our democratic political and social lives and procedures as marked by two opposed moments: that of disruption of rules, practices, and vocabularies on the one hand, and on the other hand that of the making and reforming rules, practices, and vocabularies. I am admittedly painting with a broad brush here when I say that contemporary democratic theories—writ large—can be sorted according to whether they understand one or the other of these two contrasting moments as the central critical driver of democratic transformation and progress: on the one hand, radical democratic theories that promote the first moment as the core of a political conception of democracy in their commitment to agonistic political action and the idea of the “ineradicability of antagonism” [1] (p. 756), and on the other hand, theories that recognize the second moment as the core of a normative conception of democracy in their emphasis on the expressive, articulative and problem-solving qualities of public inquiry, deliberation, and persuasion. Scholarship on pragmatist democratic theory (an overview provides [2]) has argued that pragmatism is a great resource for conceptually integrating these two opposing democratic moments in terms of a larger process of experience, inquiry, and meaning-making, thus also challenging the current divide in democratic theory. The idea is that pragmatism offers a happy marriage of both, the making of intelligent rules, practices, and habits and their reworking. For example, Dewey's social democratic vision of politics has always tried to strike a balance between the two opposing moments of rupture and re-constitution of habits and social customs. In this sense, Deweyan democracy, as Richard Bernstein has argued, holds the middle ground between the two moments in understanding democracy: on the one hand, the agonistic characteristics of democratic politics, which are that democracy needs and flourishes with conflicts and struggles, the consensual qualities of public discourse, deliberation, and persuasion on the other [3] (70ff.). I believe this holds true, insofar as Dewey had regularly emphasized that imagination, qualitative feeling, and aesthetics must be as much a part of a democratic spirit as the capacity and the willingness to make oneself understood to others, to understand others, and to seek common solutions to commonly defined problems. There is, however, a prevailing interpretation of the implications of pragmatism for the democratic theory that foregrounds the problem-solving nature of this process, with deliberative and reflexive cooperation ultimately taking precedence over the affective aesthetic components of human experience and action, thus accounting for difference and alterity as necessary but ultimately transitory elements in a broader process of inquiry (e.g., [4–9]).<sup>1</sup>

Taking these debates as a starting point, this paper has three interrelated aims. The first aim is to articulate the aesthetic foundations of (neo-)pragmatist democratic thought with Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell, through which the incompleteness of the prevailing interpretation of the implications of pragmatism for democratic theory is revealed. The second aim is to bring radical democracy and pragmatism into conversation with each other, which has not yet been conducted hitherto (with the sole exemption of [14]). To this end, I bring together some aspects of the “romanticist” pragmatism of Rorty and Cavell [15] with Jacques Rancière's account of the importance of aesthetics to democratic politics. All three thinkers share the view that our democratic theorizing and our democratic practices

ought to be concerned with the question of what practices are best suited to challenge and disrupt existing political and moral languages, imaginaries, and dispositions, and all three suggest in one way or another that such practices are, to use Rorty's expression, "poetic achievement[s] by 'radically situated' individuals and groups" [16] (p. 189). The third aim is more generic and substantive. I argue that a comprehensive account of the aesthetic dimension of democratic politics must simultaneously address the interruption of political action on the one hand and responsiveness on the other and that Rancière and the neo-pragmatists Rorty and Cavell complement each other insofar as they illuminate the blind spots of their respective approaches. Rorty's and Cavell's reflections show how democratic citizens have a responsibility to constantly try to expand their capacities to respond to and be affected by novel democratic demands and claims by those who are suffering due to injustices and oppression. This responsibility lies primarily with those who occupy privileged cultural and social positions in existing orders (linguistic, political, and social), as they are able to respond to the demands of marginalized and oppressed groups in ways that realign and expand the frames and narratives (of which they are the primary co-authors) that define whose demands are perceptible, intelligible, and legitimate. Such considerations are largely absent from Rancière's radical democratic perspective—but they are important to democratic theory since they highlight a central question of democracy, namely how demands and claims can be recognized and become part of democratic orders. However, my discussion will also reveal that this pragmatist perspective, for its part, lacks an elaborated political theory of collective action (which Rancière, for his part, provides) that identifies practices for how marginalized and oppressed groups can seek to emancipate themselves from these oppressions and injustices.

My attempt to establish a family resemblance between these thinkers might seem surprising. First, Rancière, on the one hand, and Rorty and Cavell, on the other, clearly belong to different philosophical traditions—geographically and intellectually—and, as much as is known, have never been in conversation with each other. There has also been no conversation about the similarities between Rancière and pragmatism in contemporary political theory, political philosophy, or contemporary pragmatism. But given the similarities in the way these thinkers talk about democratic progress and how to achieve it, as I will argue, this should be seen more as an omission than an obstacle.

Second, neither Rorty nor Cavell articulated a comprehensive democratic theory, and thus cannot easily be represented as democratic theorists, let alone radical democratic theorists. Rorty refers to liberal democratic institutions, habits, and values as the moral-political backdrop of his own self-described bourgeois liberalism, which is largely a reference to the tradition of liberalism (prominently Mill, Rawls, Shklar) and to Dewey's theory of democracy, without adding anything substantive to that tradition himself. Cavell's contribution to democratic theory seems to be exhausted in an argument for a democratic ethos rather than offering a *political* conception of democracy, as required by radical theories of democracy. Recent scholarship on both these thinkers has, however, pointed out that this view of their philosophical works is too narrow. With regard to Rorty, the strong similarities between his democratic pragmatism and some strands of feminist political theory [17,18], critical theory, and post-foundationalist political theory [19,20] have been rightly highlighted and articulated. As for Cavell, contemporary scholarship on his work [21–24], has drawn some key conclusions for a democratic theory from his views of the democratic self, which is both and at the same time an individual and a collective subject that is marked by a deep entanglement of the private and the public, the voice as being both a personal and public voice, his conception of the individual self and of the just democratic society as split between an attained self/society and a next self/society.<sup>2</sup> Following on from these recent interpretations of the political dimension of Rorty's and Cavell's works, my aim in this essay will be to enrich those interpretations with an aesthetic perspective that emphasizes the importance of the poetic and imaginative powers of individuals and collectives for democratic progress, which then can be related to the similarly aesthetic, radical democratic perspective of Rancière.

Third, it is questionable whether Rorty and Cavell can be taken as warranting a shared poetic pragmatist account of democratic theory, especially since their philosophical positions and methods differ in fundamental aspects (often are at odds with each other), which perhaps also explains why, apart from a few instances, they have not argued with or referred to each other in their published works. Cavell, for example, in isolated remarks explicitly distanced himself from pragmatism (primarily Dewey) as a label for his philosophy (most pronouncedly in [27] (pp. 13–16); also, in [28] and scattered remarks in other of his works). Rorty, in turn, has chided Cavell for what he saw as an annoying tendency to take traditional epistemological questions about skepticism too seriously [29,30] (p. 17). Nevertheless, there is a common topic that runs through their works, which is that our democratic institutions, practices, and ways of living require constant re-working and the possibility of fundamental change, and this possibility of fundamental change depends, on the level of individual democratic citizens, essentially on the capacity and the will to transform the current frameworks or grammars of established political discourses and orders by imagining or responding to the experiences of oppression and injustice on the part of marginalized individuals.

The paper is organized into four sections. In the next section, I elaborate on the radical democratic idea that social and political progress is largely driven by challenges to the framework or grammar of established political discourses and orders and that such challenges have to come from outside of such discourses and orders and have to disrupt them, in this way aiming at re-configuration of them (which, for Rancière, involves reworking our aesthetic (*aesthetic*) sensibilities). In the subsequent two sections, I offer an interpretation of Rorty's poetic cultural politics and of Cavell's idea that the democratic conversation of justice often requires a shift in the ways it is possible to engage in deliberation (in what can sensibly be said and shown and is understood and "seen" as sensible). The final section brings together these interpretations of Rorty and Cavell with the radical democratic perspective of Rancière, mapping out the main differences and similarities, and justifying the claim that their perspectives complement each other.

## 2. Radical Democratic Action as Rupture and Dis-Agreement: The Case of Rancière

A key tenet of theories of radical democracy is the idea that democratic politics requires recurring moments of disruptive public action that express dissent against oppressive practices and norms and thus serve the intended function of liberating those involved in those actions from those practices or norms, even if only temporarily. From this perspective, politics involves a recalcitrant moment with radical and disruptive elements (see, e.g., [31] (p. 25); [32] (p. 284), as expressed, for example, by Etienne Balibar in the phrase "democracy by resistance" [31] or by Miguel Abensour's notion of "rebellious democracy" [33]. For radical democrats, the "essence of the 'political'" [33] (p. 8) or the "essence of politics" [34] (p. 38) consists first of all in the negative act against something or someone, and thus potentially in conflict and struggle. This idea is based on the view that any political order excludes or suppresses political alternatives [35] (p. 18). Importantly, radical democrats understand disruptive action not simply as reworking or reforming a *status quo*, but in terms of a fundamental realignment of the political itself. Nor can political action in the radical democratic sense simply consist of an inclusive gesture by means of which political alternatives are incorporated into existing discourses and orders. Nancy Fraser [36], drawing on Richard Rorty's appropriation of Thomas Kuhn's distinction between normal and abnormal discourse, has highlighted the radical democratic relevance of this insight. She has been arguing for a practice of "abnormal justice" in which claims to justice by marginalized groups and individuals must be made in terms of challenges to the "frame" or "grammar" of disputes and arguments about justice. While Fraser's idea of abnormal justice was specifically concerned with discourses about justice, and Rorty (as we shall see) was more generally concerned with offering a description of cultural change as a process in which normal discourses are replaced by periods of breakthrough that are then renormalized, they both in their own ways express the radical democratic idea that social

and political progress is in part driven by challenges to the framework or grammar of established political discourses and orders.

While radical democrats are not exempt from criticisms or controversies, their contributions to the discourse on democracy lie exactly in this focus on the potential for disruption through the staging of hitherto invisible appearances and inaudible claims and the reworking of the terrain of political quarrels. This disruptive staging is crucial for democracy because it promotes alternative, counter-hegemonic narratives and discloses alternatives to the status quo, thus aiding to expose structures of domination and exclusion in our social relationships. Additionally, it serves to counteract the depoliticization often found in modern democracies, where political decision-making is ceded to private entities, leading to a lack of political practice and participation.

For these (and other reasons), radical democrats believe that consensus should not be our democratic ideal, as consensus always leaves something and someone unaccounted for. Indeed, the consensus in modern democratic societies is a double-edged sword. While consensus might be a transient state in the process of our political and moral quarrels indicating the reasonableness or rationality of that process itself, it remains always a possibility that it is equally well an expression of hegemony and inequality. Jacques Rancière has elevated this latter possibility polemically to a matter of fact when he says that consensus cannot be the goal of democratic politics but denotes precisely “the non-existence of politics” [37] (p. 43). Politics, in turn, is the real form of conveying dissent, since any dissent questions “the normal state of things” [ibid.] and exhibits a particular “discursive structure” [37] (p. 52), which he calls “dis-agreement” (French *mésentente*, which literally means “missed” or “failed” understanding). Dissenting acts seek to intervene in a social and political order in which the politically and socially privileged and the ruling institutions fail to recognize as valid actors those political agents who challenge the normal state of things. These political agents are then denounced as “dreamers” who just make “noise” [ibid.] and who have apparently left a “common world of reason and argument” behind [37] (p. 53). As a consequence, they are not taken seriously as political agents, and their discontents are dismissed or ignored as unfeasible, radical, extravagant, or utopian. Again, the aim of disrupting consensus, for example through forms of political protest or refusal, is to reconfigure the political terrain itself: the when, where, how, and who can legitimately appear, speak, and be seen and heard, within a political community. In this way, political actors can reveal the level of exclusion and oppression integral to the processes of contemporary mass democracies in novel ways. Rancière’s critique of consensus-oriented theories and practices of democracy, hence, is aimed at extant structures of inequality: socio-economic forms of inequality, but also political and cultural forms of inequality, the latter of which constitute forms of oppression that Iris Marion Young called “cultural imperialism,” consisting “in the universalization of one group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” [38] (p. 285). Following Rancière, genuine political acts are those acts that disrupt, at least for a moment, such normative orders and existing patterns of inequality and oppression when “those who have no part” claim their “part,” as he has put it [37] (p. 9).

Without having space here to go into too much detail about Rancière’s aesthetic take on democratic theory (see, e.g., [34,39–42]), his most valuable contribution to democratic theory consists in showing how attempts by marginalized actors, individual and collective, to re-construct what is imaginable, perceptible, and conceivable politically and socially has critical functions when it comes to counter political and social injustices and oppression. He is perhaps the author among contemporary radical democrats who has most strongly emphasized the role of aesthetics—of staging and appearing—in exposing these relationships. He assigns such disruptive function to popular protests such as the “Arab Spring” and other struggles for equality or against oppression he deems genuine political moments, by which he means moments where meaningful change originates by way of making visible injustices and suffering that hitherto have been invisible or excluded. Such staging of an alternative to existing patterns of inequality and oppression for Rancière cannot only occur



in the context of concrete political protest, but it can also occur in a more indirect and maybe subtler way through art and artistic practices, where what he calls the “distribution of the sensible” becomes fluid and subject to possible transformation (see recently Jason Frank [39]) who interprets Rancière along these lines). Rancière has repeatedly referred to the political power of workers’ poetic action in the 19th century, which he explored in his prominent archival study *Proletarian Nights* [43]. In it, Rancière shows how workers’ lives were subject to oppressive regulation of their time, their activities, and their social places (workers had to devote the day to work, while the night served to regenerate their labor power, etc.). When workers began to use their nights for poetic and philosophical activities rather than for sleep and regeneration, Rancière argues, these activities resulted in the appropriation of activities and times that were “naturally” reserved for the non-working part of society. In doing so, they disrupted the division of social time and activity and acted politically in the radical democratic sense. Aesthetics remains the focal point of his political reflections in most of his other works too. His book *Aisthesis* [44] shows in detail how the supposedly non-political activities and realms of modern arts can be interpreted as doing and eliciting political work, insofar as many transformations in dance, literature, visual arts, etc., disrupted and transformed the norms and practices of what could be shown and recognized as sensible (in terms of both what is perceptible and what is accessible to reason). In other words, these artistic activities are already political insofar as they change the distribution of bodies and sensibilities within given societies.

In the next two sections of this paper, I attempt to show that Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell, both in their own ways, have articulated ideas about the importance of imagination and poetic action for democratic emancipation and moral change that in many respects resembles Rancière’s aesthetic take on democratic theory. Like Rancière, they think that our creative and receptive poetic powers, and not reason alone, can shift what is considered sayable, thinkable, and possible in oppressive and unjust social and political orders.

### 3. Rorty’s Poetic Cultural Politics: Not-Seeing, Aspect-Blindness, and Democratic Change

Rorty’s self-described bourgeois liberalism, but also his focus on language as the sole medium of imagination and political action, can be an obstacle to applying his thinking to the politics of disruption sought by radical democrats. As noted by many commentators, Rorty often expressed rather naïve views about the complex dynamics of political exclusion and oppression, perhaps due to his Mill-style liberalism and unwavering faith in piecemeal democratic reform. As Richard Shusterman has pointed out, Rorty similarly had a pronounced disinterest in “a wider range of aesthetic phenomena as effective for manipulating political sentiments,” including the dimension of bodily experience [45] (p. 42). Despite these reservations, however, Rorty’s pragmatism offers a picture of democratic politics and social–political change that shares key political concerns of Rancière. Central to this picture is what Rorty called “cultural politics”, and what he said about the role of imagination and of sentimental education and of the poetic powers of offering new descriptions in social and political progress.

In this section, I will argue that Rorty’s notion of “cultural politics” can be illuminated by Wittgenstein’s notions of aspect dawning and aspect change, since such dawning and change are relevant in connection with the interposition of novel ways of seeing, ways of imagining and speaking, into entrenched perceptual habits and imaginative narratives, which in turn is crucial for effecting cultural change. For Wittgenstein and Rorty, “seeing” involves a certain way of imagining and dealing with what one sees (a particular world-view), which involves not only one’s own direct relations to others but also one’s relation to society and to the social and political institutions in which and through which one relates to others. From this perspective, the aim of cultural politics is to provoke the illumination of an aspect within the framework of an order of continuous aspect perception, which then might bring about a change in “the way we look at things” [46] (p. 122).

Despite his sharp rejection of what he called “cultural politics” up until the mid-1990s, Rorty in his later years advocated for the strategic value of cultural politics, most notably in several articles of his collection of essays *“Philosophy as Cultural Politics”* [47]. The key idea of Rortyan cultural politics, as Shusterman views it, is “that culture is extremely important for politics because culture effectively shapes the public’s affective experience and values” by “criticizing and reconstructing established ways of living, talking, acting, and thinking, but also by proposing new ways of life; new practices and disciplines for improved experience or performance; new ideas of social life and community; new vocabularies, techniques, and roles for self-realization and ethical practice” [45] (p. 39; 42).

In one of those essays, “Pragmatism and romanticism”, Rorty expressed the view that moral and emancipatory progress happens primarily due to the expansion of human imagination. Thus, he says there: “at the heart of romanticism is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason—the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken” [47] (p. 105)—a thesis he defends in this essay, and which underlies his entire later phase, where he articulates a notion of philosophy as “cultural politics”. In the same essay, he goes on to say:

“We should try to think of imagination not as a faculty that generates mental images but as the ability to change social practices by proposing advantageous new uses of marks and noises. To be imaginative, as opposed to being merely fantastical, one must both do something new and be lucky enough to have that novelty adopted by one’s fellows—incorporated into their ways of doing things. The distinction between fantasy and imagination is between novelties that do not get taken up and put to use by one’s fellows and those that do” [ibid.].

As he later wrote in his posthumously published work “the Fire of Life”: “Reason can only follow paths that the imagination has first broken. No words, no reasoning. No imagination, no new words. No such words, no moral or intellectual progress” [48] (p. 520). Here, he reaffirms the primacy of aesthetics, the aesthetics of literature, over the reasoning of philosophy, and even emphasizes the special advantages of poetry over prose in terms of affective effect due to its dense mixture of “imagery, [ . . . ] rhyme and rhythm” [48] (p. 521).

In other words, following Rorty, imagination refers not only to the faculty of constructing images or forms but to the process of linking this faculty to affect or emotion. He believes that primarily literature, whether fiction or poetry, can influence our emotions far more effectively than the abstract logical reasoning of philosophy. In his eyes, literature is not merely a servant of moral reflection, as if it must somehow support the more essential work of moral reasoning. It is the other way around: in the pursuit of moral progress, literature is superior to argumentation, because such progress is achieved only by changing people’s feelings, and literature is more effective than moral argumentation in doing so.<sup>3</sup> Rorty’s examples from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* [50] show how, for him, literature is capable of demonstrating the effects of unnecessary cruelty and human suffering and of our inattentiveness and irresponsiveness to them, as well as the possibility of the extension of solidarity and social hope, and the expansion of empathy and loyalty, or love and fraternity. Such a kind of demonstrating represents a specific aesthetic type of demonstrating, whose meaning lies in showing, representing, and performing, and has to be distinguished from an epistemological or logical meaning of establishing the truth by argument or deduction. As the change in our habits is concerned, the following statement by Rorty illustrates, in a nutshell, how our ability to build up a responsive disposition depends on our imaginative capacities. In an interview on literature and pragmatism, he held that “people can suddenly undergo a gestalt switch as a result of reading a novel” [46] (p. 123). By invoking a gestalt switch, Rorty clearly refers to Kuhn and Wittgenstein, both of whom have spoken about the relevance of this phenomenon for a change in our imagination. Wittgenstein surely is a helpful route further into this topic.

Let me very briefly reference Wittgenstein’s thoughts on what he calls aspect dawning and aspect change. He discusses the concept “aspect” and the correlated concepts “aspect-dawning” and “aspect-blindness” to reflect on some images from Gestalt psychology [51],

for example, Jastrow's duck–rabbit, an image that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. With such images, Wittgenstein demonstrates the difference between seeing—the apprehension of a visual field—and seeing-*as*—the conceptually articulated apprehension of a visual field: we see something as something. Usually, our attitudes conform to what Wittgenstein calls the “continuous seeing” [52] (p. xi, § 118) of an aspect, i.e., our habitual ways of perceiving. Insofar as a change in these habitual ways of perceiving occurs, he speaks of “the lighting up of an aspect” [52] (p. xi, § 140). resp. “noticing an aspect” [52] (p. xi, § 113). Mulhall comments that the continuous seeing of an aspect entails “an immediate, spontaneous reaching for the relevant form of description,” so that words function as a direct description of what is perceived, “without any awareness that it is one of several options” [53] (p. 22). Noticing an aspect, in turn, is described by Wittgenstein as an experience of seeing something in a new way while being certain of its immutability. The fact that this occurs against the background of continuous aspect perception means that it is something hard to achieve; it is “not a matter of willfully ‘flipping’ between different perspectives. Being able to see different perspectives depends crucially on becoming alerted to the broader background against which they are or become intelligible” [53] (p. 244). Wittgenstein puts it like this: “When the aspect changes, parts of the picture belong together which before did not” [52] (p. xi, § 220), and this involves seeing something in a different frame: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*” [54] (p. 63e, § 144).

Wittgenstein calls what those miss who are unable to be struck by novel aspects a lack of “the ability to see something *as something*” and “‘aspect-blindness’” [52] (p. xi, 257). What changes when I overcome aspect blindness is my practical relationship to what I see, that is, nothing directly changes about the object when I get to see a new aspect. Further, what changes when I suddenly see a different aspect of something is not just my opinion about that something, but my attitude towards it. What changes, in other words, is not our epistemic disposition, but our practical relation to an image. Wittgenstein says “the concept of an aspect is related to the concept of imagination. In other words, the concept ‘Now I see it as...’ is related to ‘Now I am imagining *that*’” [52] (p. xi, 254).<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Cavell: Being Held Captive by a Picture

These Wittgenstein themes are even more pronounced in Cavell than in Rorty. Let me illustrate this by addressing Cavell's interpretations of the relationship between Nora and her husband Torvald in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* [27,28]. These interpretations illustrate Cavell's general view of what matters in democratic conversations about injustice, namely, that sometimes the injustices and oppressions of private relationships between people are linked to the injustices and oppressions of moral and political orders that require articulation of specific claims as alternatives to such orders that must come through the projection of unseen and unarticulated ways of appearing and speaking—ways that transcend commonly accepted political and social modes of perception and conversation.

In Ibsen's play, Nora, the protagonist, struggles to convey to Torvald her experience of injustice and of wrong that comes with her position in their eight-year marriage. This struggle of Nora is evident in her argument with Thorvald “concerning whether she was right to borrow money in secret in order to save her husband's life and spare her dying father's feelings, and then . . . skimp on household and personal expenses . . . to maintain interest payments on the debt” [27] (pp. 108–109). Because she no longer wanted to confide in anyone, she forged her dead father's signature. Enraged, Torvald charges her of acting as “a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal!” who caused him irremediable harm, because, he assumes, society would come to believe that he orchestrated the scam since Nora is simply a “thoughtless woman” [55] (p. 59). Consequently, he resolves to terminate their marriage because he cannot trust that a woman such as Nora is qualified of raising his children properly. Later, when it becomes clear that he need not fear any loss of public reputation, he admits that she only “did not have sufficient knowledge to judge” her



conduct and succinctly absolves her [55] (p. 61). But now that Nora has seen his true face, she recognizes that her marriage was false. She was subject to self-deception, to a denial of her true self, and was living in conformity to the rules of a community that did not treat her justly. Any attempts on her part to break out from the confinement of conformity are met by Torvald with incomprehension and accusations. In response to her attempts at emancipation, he makes her understand that he assumes she does not know what she is doing; when she tries to make him understand her position and the necessity of transforming their relationship, he agrees, but only insofar as the change is to affect her. Because of his demonstrative unwillingness to transform himself, she no longer sees a place for herself in their relationship and decides to leave him in order to educate herself. Torvald, in turn, cannot grasp this and declares her crazy, childish, and foolish, as she apparently does not understand “the conditions of the world” [55] (p. 65).

Nora struggles, in other words, to express what it means and how it feels for her to live in the world she lives. Torvald, in turn, struggles to acknowledge a wrong, namely, to acknowledge her position as a position of injustice. These struggles occur primarily because of a lack of responsiveness on the part of Torvald, which is why Nora ultimately sees no other way than to leave him. He clearly is in the dominant position from where he fails to acknowledge and respond to the expressions of wrong by Nora. It is important to see that this lack of responsiveness is different in kind from a mere disagreement. A disagreement, or misunderstanding, could be cleared up once the married couple would just sit down and talk about their issues. But here we have an example of a missed understanding (a *mésentente* in the words of Rancière), an example of an incommensurability of two frames of perception and norms. What is at stake for them, rather, is the more fundamental matter of whether Nora’s claims can be heard, and her position can be seen at all by Torvald. What is important for Cavell about this play is that Nora is held captive by the norms and demands of the moral consensus (exemplified by Torvald, who is also held captive by them, but in a different way than Nora) and that this captivity suppresses the development of a voice of her own that would allow her to articulate her position of injustice to him. In the play, when she attempts to break out of this consensus by searching for a novel vocabulary and ways of articulating her position, she is not acknowledged but rather delegitimized (as sane, as fully human, etc.), by Torvald. For Nora to emancipate herself from this situation, she needs to provoke a break from the consensus represented by Torvald, hoping that this will show him how his own position is limited. Since, she cannot express herself in the language of the given moral consensus and thus cannot speak intelligibly in the relevant sense, let alone compel Torvald to see differently. She must therefore find her own voice to express her sufferings. In the play, Torvald does not change his mind; rather he takes her words and behavior for the mere noise of a child and the actions of a madwoman. But his inability to understand and see Nora’s suffering is precisely why Cavell discusses this play: because it illustrates the responsibility that persons in privileged, dominant positions have to overcome their own limitations to understand and see others’ suffering, which requires a refined ethos of being responsive and attentive to the Nora’s of the world (and to one’s own limitations).

In alluding to the play, Cavell captures the struggle to articulate senses of wrong and injustice when they cannot be captured by the framework of existing moral and political orders of discourse and perception, but where “misery is clearly unmistakable” [27] (p. 112). For him, the play expresses a fundamental problem of democratic communities: “What if there is a cry of justice that expresses a sense not of having *lost* out in an unequal yet fair struggle, but of having from the start been *left* out” [27] (p. xxxviii). Cavell says, crucially, that what is fundamentally at stake here is that Torvald denies Nora her own voice: he “does not understand the world she lives in, thus depriving her, again, of a voice” [27] (p. 109). More to the point, Cavell suggests, Torvald, by saying to and of her, that “A songbird must have a clear voice to sing with”, he has “managed, for the eight years of their marriage, to control her voice, dictate what it may utter and the manner in which it may utter it” [27] (p. xxxvi). Cavell is clear: “the deprivation of voice in the conversation

about justice”, he says, “is not the work here of the scoundrel”, rather it “is the work of the moral consensus itself, spoken for by the respectable Torvalds of the world (in us)” [27] (p. xxxvii). It strikes me as the most pertinent aspect of Cavell’s discussion of Ibsen’s play for our discussion on aesthetics and radical democracy that he describes what is left for Nora to do in her situation in similar terms as Rancière:

“I am taking Nora’s enactments of change and departure to exemplify that over the field on which moral justifications come to an end, and justice, as it stands, has done what it can, specific wrong may not be claimable; yet the misery is such that, on the other side, right is not assertible; instead something must be *shown*. [ . . . ] What must be shown, acknowledged, is that my consent, say my promise, compromises me; [ . . . ] I must also show, on pain of self-corruption worse than compromise, that I continue to consent to the way things are, without reason, with only my intuition that our collective distance from perfect justice is, though in moments painful to the point of intolerable, still habitable, even necessary as a *stage* for continued change.” [27] (p. 112; my emphases).

The words “shown” and “stage” used by Cavell here clearly indicate that Nora’s emancipatory struggle is as much a matter of findings non-linguistic forms of expression—openly visible gestures of dissent and consent—as it is a matter of finding her own words in the long run.

## 5. Rupture and Response

The upshot of my discussion thus far is that for both Rorty and Cavell, being held “captive by a picture” stands in the way of democratic progress and of undoing injustices and oppression, because progress requires a transformation in the way both the oppressed and the oppressors “look at things”. In other words, overcoming such captivity requires aspect change on the part of those who hold others captive and an evocation of aspect change on the part of those who are held captive by it.

What their reflections show, in particular, is that the manifestation of the sense of injustice of those who suffer it, while crucial, can only be the first step and that this disposition is a necessary second step. In Ibsen’s play, the first step consists of Nora’s attempts to emancipate herself from captivity through her own voice, and the second step would consist in Thorvald being responsive to this voice by looking at her differently (in seeing the wrongness of her situation), which however he does not manage to perform. I read Rorty and Cavell as being particularly concerned with questions of responsivity because those questions are important for conceptualizing how the transfer of disruptive action into a more responsive and inclusive democratic community can happen. And such transfer, for them, cannot be achieved simply through incorporation into existing frames and discourses, but rather must bring about a reworking of those frames and discourses. Their focus, then, is that our struggle for greater justice and less suffering also depends significantly on training our capacities for responsivity, which essentially includes sensitivity to the suffering of others.

Being responsive to the suffering of others involves the passive part of letting oneself be affected, but also the active part of trying to imaginatively identify with that which lies beyond the extant order by paying attention to the requests that those who suffer injustices and oppression make on everyone, and in particular on those who inhabit privileged positions in a given order. When Rorty says that novels have the power to effect a “gestalt switch” in our imagination on the basis of the exemplariness of what is depicted in them, he sees this power to effect a change in our imagination as residing with the author of the novel or play itself, or, in Rorty’s own words, with “strong poets”: “anyone with a lot of imagination who has the courage to try to make everything in his or her field new, to change the way we look at things” [50] (p. 122).

What we can emphasize with Rorty and Cavell, then, in view of the radical democratic perspective of Rancière and others—which emphasizes the importance of rupturing moments for democratic change—is the importance of this responsiveness for those rupturing moments to actually lead to signification transformations of extant orders. This emphasis

may then also point towards a shortcoming in radical democratic thought, namely that the latter has a hard time explaining the transition from disruptive moments of staging new demands to the uptake of these demands in a reworked order that allows for these demands to take effect. As concerns Rancière, he has surprisingly little to say about the process of how rapturous moments can be taken up by a transformed social and political order—that is, he has a lot to say about processes of disidentification with hegemonic orders through disruption and insurgent uprisings, but he has little to say about the process of reconfiguration of such orders, through which the actuality of being heard and seen can become established [56–58]. Rorty and Cavell, in turn, do, since they both address their democratic concerns to the Thorvalds in us who occupy privileged positions in the existing social and political order. In other words, their theories speak not primarily to the Noras (to those who suffer injustice), but to their privileged recipients. The appeal of Rorty’s and Cavell’s views certainly lies in how they draw our attention to the possibilities of imagining alternative courses of action on the part of those who have a responsibility to respond: their theories are a call to strive for an expanded imagination and a deepened capacity to respond—both of which they see as key to an ongoing process of eliminating injustice and oppression in democracy.

Conversely, Rorty and Cavell’s emphasis on responsiveness and imagination lacks an explicit political account of how marginalized and oppressed actors can engage in forms of emancipation and bring about aspect change. Rorty did provide many reflections on political issues—as his view of the cultural left, inequality, and authoritarianism in *Achieving Our Country* [59] demonstrate—and offered his notion of cultural politics in terms of the practice of striving to come up with more humane and useful redescriptions. Yet his political reflections remained largely focused on “us” privileged individuals and what is required of us to see and speak for others, but neither on underprivileged others nor on collectives, except for his only truly political essay, “Feminism and Pragmatism” [60]. While in *CIS* he thought that the main drivers of normative social change are strong poets who create metaphoric and private redescriptions, in later works he breaks with this conception of social change by drawing on feminist scholarship. In “Feminism and Pragmatism”, he described a practice of normative social transformation in pragmatic terms that can be used by oppressed individuals and groups. Instead of talking about strong poets, he talks about what oppressed individuals and groups can do to attempt to free themselves from oppression: “If you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters’ descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe. Instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of your judgment of the worthwhile life” [60] (p. 216). As Voparil has pointed out, Rorty in this essay thinks about “linguistic innovation in collective, *political* [my emphasis] terms, thus paving the way for broad-scale social movements to struggle against dominant constellations of meaning” [17] (p. 122). In other words, Rorty in this essay refers to more than a practice of transformative imagination: to a collective transformative practice of speaking and acting differently that changes both the way that members of such collective look at themselves (as a collective identity) and the way that they present themselves and their claims to others. Rorty explicitly emphasizes here that this process is a shared practice: “you have to hear your own statements as part of a shared practice. Otherwise you yourself will never know whether they are more than ravings, never know whether you are a heroine or a maniac” [60] (p. 223). The hope of eliciting aspect change as part of a larger process of normative social change, thus necessarily requires this shared practice, without which responsiveness or reciprocity to “a voice saying something never heard before” [60] (p. 202) on the part of those inhabiting the dominant linguistic and social practices cannot even be hoped for. In this essay, Rorty sounds very much like Rancière when he acknowledges that many contexts of injustices and oppression require that a voice says something never heard before, and acknowledges the problem that in such contexts: “injustices may not be perceived as injustices, even by those who suffer them, until somebody invents a previously unplayed role. Only if somebody has a dream, and a voice

to describe that dream, does what looked like nature begin to look like culture, what looked like fate begin to look like a moral abomination. For until then only the language of the oppressor is available, and most oppressors have had the wit to teach the oppressed a language in which the oppressed will sound crazy—even to themselves—if they describe themselves as oppressed” [60] (p. 203).

What Rorty acknowledges here is that expanding the conversation about justice to include the voices of the oppressed requires breaking open the language of justice at hand because the language of logical argument and persuasion fails to register these voices by inventing novel metaphors and misusing existing ones in novel ways. But despite acknowledging this in this essay, he ultimately offers little more than the outlines of a political theory of how to overcome oppression and inequality. In turn, Rancière’s reflections on democratic practice, as are those of other theorists of radical democracy, involve ample discussions about various aspects of collective emancipatory struggles and of political community. He holds that political emancipation requires a “process of disidentification or declassification” [61] (p. 61), which he describes as “removal from the naturalness of a place” [37] (p. 36) and as involving the inscription of “a subject name as being different from any identified part of the community” [37] (p. 37)—as examples he discusses, amongst various others, the early 19th century workers who disidentified with the given name “proletarians” to dream of a classless society [61] or non-citizens (immigrants) who dis-identify with pejorative terms like “unAustralian” (in the Australian context) by reappropriating them [62].

As for Cavell, Ibsen’s play illustrates for him that struggles for justice and democratic progress cannot be waged solely at the level of existing discursive and perceptual orders, but that they sometimes have to take the form of a disruptive contestation of the configuration of these orders and must be waged on this terrain. The figure of Nora, moreover, illustrates the extent to which an essential component of these struggles is the transformation of the indeterminate sense of injustice into a determinate sense of unfairness, in order to effect a transformation on the part of those who are suffering whom the community cannot see and understand. Cavell points to the ways in which social consensus excludes Nora from participation by deactivating and suppressing her own voice and appearance since she is deprived of the opportunity to express her sense of being wronged. And for Cavell Nora’s act represent a form of disidentification, since she shows herself in a way transformed that put pressure on the status quo. In the play, we do not learn what Torvald’s final response is. Cavell sees signs that Torvald is incapable of any transformative response (“how he picks up these pieces [Nora’s fancy clothes—MR] is as morally fateful for him as Nora’s leaving is for her” [27] (p. 113), and that he thus remains in the *status quo*. This presumed reaction of Torvald to remain unresponsive to Nora until the end is exactly what Cavell sees as the danger when we privileged people imagine that our behavior can be “above reproach” [27] (p. 113). Like Rorty, Cavell’s reflections too remain largely focused on “us” privileged individuals and on “private” rather than political contexts. The disidentifying work conducted by Nora and that of a political protest or political struggle are not the same, and the failure of Thorvald to respond to Nora is not identical to the failures of past and contemporary societies to respond to social and political ills. As Norris rightly argues, for Cavell, “the work of politics” essentially resides “in understanding the nature of the struggle between differing perspectives out of which one’s own discourse emerges” [23] (p. 100).

## 6. Conclusions

In this essay, I have pursued two main goals. First, I have tried to trace the similarities that exist between the poetic-aesthetic neo-pragmatists of Rorty and Cavell, on the one hand and the aesthetic, radical democratic perspective of Rancière. Second, I have tried to show that while all three thinkers emphasize the importance of practices of disidentification and practices of acknowledging “disidentificatory” claims by revising extant orders and frames in political struggles for justice in democratic societies, the neo-pragmatists focus

primarily on the latter and Rancière primarily on the former—and that only the combination of those two practices gives a more complete picture of the transformative potential of the aesthetic–poetic perspective on democracy.

In conclusion, I will briefly draw together the most important threads and also briefly discuss what I think results from this for the discussion of democratic theory in pragmatism. I suggested that there exists a significant overlap in the way radical democrats like Rancière and (quasi-) pragmatists like Rorty and Cavell understand democratic progress and social change as being driven to a large extent by citizens’ poetic powers. Whether this proposal is compelling depends, among other things, on whether we grant the aesthetic–poetic interpretation of democratic pragmatism as presented in this essay its due. All three thinkers in their different ways emphasize the political importance for democratic and moral progress of re-working existing social, political, and linguistic frames of speaking about and seeing the position of those disadvantaged, excluded, and oppressed. And all three insist, in varying detail and depth, that for this re-working the two moments of rupture and response are recurrently needed.

I used Rancière in this paper as a proxy for theorists of radical democracy (although I am aware that this of course hides many internal differences). In the first section, I had suggested that Rancière exemplarily holds what is the core premise of radical democracy writ large, namely the view that any political order is always incomplete and thus requires rupturing acts of appearing on the part of self-claimed political actors, through which disidentifications of and constructions of difference vis-à-vis existing social, political, and linguistic orders are possible. Even if radical democratic discourse seems to be quite far from what Rorty and Cavell were philosophically concerned with, their statements about the key role of imagination/of “being imaginative” in the process of developing novel ways of seeing and speaking (of bringing about a gestalt switch) in contexts of social and political injustice add further critical aspects to this discourse. For Rorty and Cavell, the importance of imagination to democracy, in a nutshell, is that it is the human faculty where our capacities to “see” and respond to social and political wrongs are grounded. What societies lack when they fail to even begin to grasp the injustice suffered by the Nora’s of the world is the capacity to envision and imagine an expansion of the meaning of what constitutes a wrong. Political struggles in today’s Western democratic societies over such things as recognition of same-sex marriage or reparations for black Americans are also struggles over the expansion of our (collective) imagination, and this is true for many other political issues that involve the questions of inclusion/exclusion and oppression/emancipation in the context of race, gender, and class. As the recent wave of solidarity in Western Europe towards refugees from Ukraine shows in comparison to the largely absent solidarity with refugees from other regions of the world, the answer to the question of who belongs to “us” and who does not is very much filtered and shaped through a narrow picture of “us” that is rooted in the inability to imagine wider circles, larger common human lives. In short, pluralistic democratic communities need more than the mechanisms of inclusion and representation to overcome injustice and oppression—they also need to question and seek to revise the dominant perceptual and linguistic frameworks in order to even be able to imagine that new and alternative subjects and issues can become legitimate parts of the fabric of their social and political lives.

I started my discussion with a contrast between radical democrats who argue with good reason that democratic politics requires sustained moments of disruption of inherited ways of “seeing others” in the name of equality, and pragmatist democratic thinkers who often theorize democracy through the too narrow normative lens of public deliberation and of problem-solving capacities of democratic citizens. By emphasizing the aesthetic–poetic repertoire of pragmatist democratic thought, I have at the same time questioned this contrast. Such emphasis furthermore suggests that there is a tension within pragmatism between this normative lens of public deliberation and problem solving on the one hand, and the aesthetic–poetic perspective of pragmatist thought on the other. This tension exists insofar as the latter perspective relates to an area of our political lives that



precedes public conversations about justice and problem-solving processes, where the language and sensibilities of what it even means to participate in a conversation, or to be a legitimate claim to injustice or oppression, are established and questioned. I do not have the space here to articulate or adequately address this tension and defer that endeavor to a future investigation. Suffice it to acknowledge that this tension would be the task of contemporary pragmatism: to acknowledge the one-sidedness of prevailing interpretations of the implications of pragmatism for democratic thought.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This prevailing interpretation has been challenged in recent years by some excellent publications that use pragmatism as a resource for a theory of social justice and democratic transformation along the lines of my argument that goes beyond the epistemic-deliberative paradigm. I therefore see my article as a contribution to this growing literature. I would particularly like to highlight [10,11], as well as the edited volumes [12,13].
- <sup>2</sup> Two articles, which served as inspiration for my paper, stand out in particular in the context of Cavell and contemporary discussions in political philosophy/theory: first, the article “Soul-Blindness, Police Orders and Black Lives Matter: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Rancière” by Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen [25], in which Cavell’s notion of “soul-blindness”—derived from Wittgenstein—is applied to questions of democratic justice (in connection with Rancière’s police/political distinction). On the other hand, Aleta Norval’s article “Writing a Name in the Sky: Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription” [26], in which she brings together Cavell’s writings on the relevance of exemplarity for democratic justice with Rancière’s historical writings.
- <sup>3</sup> Elsewhere [49] I (as have others) have articulated what this dynamic of literature’s influence on the imagination looks like in detail for Rorty.
- <sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein: “Do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way? I’m inclined to say the former. But why? —To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state” [52] (p. xi, § 248).

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