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The Politics of Film Aesthetics: Filmosophy, Post-Theory, and Rancière

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Abstract: The question of aesthetics in film-theoretical discourse today is split between, on the one hand, a film-phenomenological or “filmosophical” approach that values the putatively immanent relation between film and the mind and, on the other, the naturalizing epistemology of post-theory, which reduces the question of film aesthetics to one of poetics. What unites these otherwise disparate projects is the consideration of aesthetics divorced from the question of politics; in both cases, the social or political significance of the film–spectator relationship has been summarily purged. In this article, I will offer an alternative account of film aesthetics that draws on Jacques Rancière’s theory concerning the mutually determining relationship between aesthetics and politics. In particular, I will consider the relevance of Rancière’s thesis concerning what he calls the distribution of sensible to current accounts, as well as taking up his novel consideration of aesthetic distance and the “emancipated” spectator. With respect to film phenomenology, I will examine how its film-theoretical program rests on the flawed concept of a de-politicized spectator enchained by the film image. With respect to post-theory, I will examine how its appropriation from cognitive science of the rational agent model of meaning making inappropriately limits the political potential of film aesthetics.

Keywords: film theory; film aesthetics; film phenomenology; filmosophy; post-theory; Jacques Rancière



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The playwright or director would like the spectators to see this and feel that, understand some particular thing and draw some particular conclusion. This is the logic of the stultifying pedagogue. [1] (p. 14)

1. Film Aesthetics Today

With respect to today’s film theory, the question of aesthetics is taken up in complete isolation from the question of politics. This represents a rather considerable departure for the field, for, during the 1970s and 1980s, film theory was dominated by political modernism, an avowedly politicized discourse that sought to account for film aesthetics through the combined resources of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism¹. This discourse was dismantled in the 1990s and remains discredited. In its wake, film theory has been largely fractured but can be said to be dominated by two distinct camps. On the one hand, film phenomenology continues the pure cinema project of the 1920s in seeking to account for film aesthetics in terms of the phenomenological or affective experience of the spectator, a project that culminates in the doctrine of “filmosophy” and its concept of the “filmind” [2]. On the other, post-theory aspires to the condition of a naturalizing epistemology such that aesthetics is reduced to poetics and the spectator’s experience to the mere cognitive process of cue-prompted meaning making [3]. What unites these otherwise disparate accounts, however, is their programmatic exclusion of the consideration of the politics of film aesthetics. In their zeal to undo the legacy of political modernism, both film phenomenology and post-theory not only frown upon this line of inquiry but have self-consciously grounded themselves in principles and premises that make its pursuit unavailable. To be clear, each accepts that individual film texts might carry

political meaning. What they both find objectionable, however, is a film-theoretical practice that is politicized, or, at any rate, grounded in politics².

Developments in the philosophy of aesthetics, however, indicate the need to reintroduce the question of politics into the field of film theory. In this respect, the work and thought of philosopher Jacques Rancière provides a necessary corrective to the overhasty and ill-considered retreat from politics suffered by film theory at the hands of film phenomenology and post-theory. Rancière's innovative thesis concerning the distribution of the sensible, which posits the mutually determining relationship between aesthetics and politics, as well as his accounts of aesthetic distance and the emancipated spectator, are particularly relevant here. In what follows, I draw on this material to argue that, contrary to current accounts, the question of film aesthetics is inevitably a political one.

Both film phenomenology and post-theory justify the exclusion of politics on a critique of interpretation, broadly construed, and the mediation of aesthetic distance that it presupposes. As I will show, it is the desire to abolish this distance that leads, in each case, to the suppression of the liberating political possibilities of film aesthetics. With respect to film phenomenology, I suggest that it ironically inherits from political modernism a flawed concept of the spectator as chained or otherwise held captive(ated) by the aesthetics of film. With respect to post-theory, I will indicate why a poetico-cognitive approach to film aesthetics is inappropriately hostile to the spectator's (political) capacity for aesthetic fabulation.

2. Film Phenomenology

Nowhere in film theory is the question of aesthetics of more central concern than in film phenomenology, the constellation of projects devoted to restoring an awareness of and appreciation for the affective or phenomenological experience induced by the aesthetics specific to film. Along with the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg [4], who was working in relative isolation, the pure cinema project of the 1920s was the first to establish the discourse and its regulative premises and principles [5]. More recent contributors, including Vivian Sobchack [6], Christian Keathley [7], and Daniel Frampton, build on this legacy in the context of a critique of political modernism³. What occupies the attention of film phenomenologists is the ways in which film's unique aesthetic profile unhinges or otherwise recalibrates the relationship that holds between reality and the spectator. In attempting to account for this experience, an equivalence is invariably drawn between film and the mind, as if the film image itself constitutes a kind of thinking whose own aesthetic grasp of reality intrudes on our own. The so-called film/mind analogy, which is fundamental to the discourse, serves in turn to justify claims against the interpretive act, and thus the potential politics of film aesthetics⁴. Three interrelated themes regulate the discourse of film phenomenology and contribute to its claim that the aesthetics peculiar to film naturally preempt the mediating process of interpretation: the opposition to language, the question of ontology, and the condition or sensation of immanence.

3. The Opposition to Language

Perhaps the most fundamental premise of the discourse of film phenomenology is that film resists assuming the condition of language. Contributors to this discourse argue that it is impossible to embody the meaning of a film image in verbal language because film expresses itself directly and intuitively. Pure cinema proponents, such as Antonin Artaud, argue that filmic communication is spontaneous: it functions precisely in the absence of the kind of symbolic mediation that characterizes linguistic expression—and indeed which grants language the functionality that defines it. Artaud suggests that film is meaningful without recourse to the “interpositions or representations” on which linguistic expression depends. Instead, film communicates “by osmosis”, and it does so with “no sort of transposition in words” [8] (p. 412). Separately, and from a wholly distinct perspective, the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg reaches virtually the same conclusion, stating that “[t]he characteristic features of many an attitude and feeling which cannot be expressed

without words today will then be aroused in the mind of the spectator through the subtle art of the camera" [4] (p. 51). More recently, Vivian Sobchack has repeated the claim, arguing that, as a purely phenomenological experience, film's unique aesthetic replicates the primary order of communication of immediate consciousness, rather than the secondary order of language and culture. For Sobchack, film reclaims for consciousness the purity of one's direct encounter with the world, a purity that language and culture serve only to adulterate. According to film phenomenologists, then, a distinctive feature of film aesthetics is its natural resistance to the assaults of language.

4. The Question of Ontology

On the basis of film's anti-linguistic properties, the discourse of film phenomenology returns continually the question of film's ontology. But ontology here must be understood in a rather eccentric sense. To be sure, contributors to the discourse routinely ascribe to film a static and timeless essence—the source of its so-called aesthetic purity. Pure cinema proponents, joining other film theorists like Vachel Lindsay and Rudolph Arnheim, believed that this essence could be deduced by assigning film the status of art and identifying the aesthetic properties that distinguish it from other kinds of art. But beyond the medium specificity arguments of these early accounts lurks a more complex consideration of film's ontology, one that seeks to grasp the distinctiveness of this new medium by way of the novel relations that it composes between reality and the spectator. Very early on, it was recognized that film aesthetics consists of an impression that recalls—without ever fully displacing—the experience of an embodied presence in the real world. What, for these critics and theorists, links the phenomenological apprehension of reality with that of film aesthetics is a sensation of immanence. Indeed, it is precisely this sensation that underwrites the claim that film's mode of address is direct and intuitive, rather than mediated and coded. By virtue of film's power to express without signs, the spectator's experience of cinema is one of immanence such that, phenomenologically, it is reminiscent of the way in which reality itself is apprehended, as if the contiguity that marks our relation to reality is in some measure replicated in the relation between spectator and film, or between screen and mind.

As far back as Münsterberg, however, this discourse has always insisted on the distinction between the two spheres of experience. For Münsterberg, there is no denying that a certain confusion between reality and the film image is intrinsic to film aesthetics. "We are there", he says, "in the midst of a three-dimensional world" and "we have no right" to claim otherwise [4] (p. 68). But Münsterberg is adamant that this confusion is limited to the level of "immediate impression" and is thus a strictly phenomenological experience [4] (p. 65). Epistemologically, on the other hand, we never mistake cinema for reality. Hence, Münsterberg tempers his claim with the following remark: "*Nevertheless, we are never deceived*" [4] (p. 69). From a purely phenomenological perspective, we might find it difficult to distinguish cinema from reality, but even the most militant admirers of film's ontology recognize that, epistemologically, the distinction itself is never in doubt. In fact, it is precisely the inconsistency between what we apprehend phenomenologically and what we are aware of epistemologically that ultimately inspires the discourse of film phenomenology, for it is this very inconsistency that, they argue, accounts for the distinct aesthetics of film. This is a point worth stressing. Generally speaking, contributors to the discourse of film phenomenology recognize that film is no mere recorder and transmitter of reality, and the issue of resemblance is almost always beside the point. Rather, its value and appeal lie in its unparalleled ability to unhinge our relationship to reality, not by miming the real so much as recasting it cinematically in the form of an imaginary space that can serve as a meeting ground for screen and mind.

5. Immanence

It is worth noting that the sensation of immanence as described by film phenomenologists is something more than mere immersion, as if the spectator enters into the cinematic

space of the film as one of its detached observers⁵. Rather, the claim is made that the spectator somehow dissolves into or fuses with the image onscreen, as if their mind loses a degree of its autonomy as a result of becoming entangled with some unspecified, enigmatic aspect of the film image itself. Artaud's fascination with cinema stems precisely from how its purpose seems to be "primarily to express matters of the mind, the inner consciousness, not by a succession of images so much as by something more imponderable which restores them to us with their direct matter" [9] (p. 50). These remarks capture perfectly the progressive withdrawal of distinctiveness between the film—conceived not as a collection of images but as an "imponderable something"—and the mind or inner consciousness with which it is put into direct contact. Münsterberg himself moved beyond the immersion thesis ("we are there") to consider the more complex collusion between mind and film that characterizes the phenomenological experience of film aesthetics. Tellingly, he dismisses the notion that the impression of movement characteristic of film spectatorship is the result of the optical illusion that we now call persistence of vision. The impression of movement, he says, is

a unique inner experience. . . an independent experience which cannot be reduced to a simple seeing of a series of different positions. A characteristic content of consciousness must be added to such a series of visual impressions [such that] the various pictures are held together in the unity of a higher act. [4] (p. 73)

Referring to the apparent depth and movement of the film image, which in reality is flat and static (though serially organized), he claims that both "*are present and yet they are not in the things. We invest the impressions with them*" [4] (p. 78). For Münsterberg, the sensation of immanence is not the result of an ocular effect or a misperception on the part of our senses. Rather, it is something independent of both film and mind, and yet a product of their interaction. That such an encounter provokes something like a confusion of identities is apparent to Münsterberg. As he says, "every shade of feeling and emotion which fills the spectator's mind can mould the scenes in the photoplay until they appear the embodiment of our feelings" [4] (p. 129).

Frampton goes the furthest in exploring the conceptual implications of theorizing film aesthetics in these terms. To account for the experience of entanglement characteristic of the spectator's encounter with the film image, Frampton resorts to a curious concept: the filmind. Like many of his predecessors, Frampton feels the need to confer onto film the status of a thinking subject so as to better conceptualize the sensation of immanence that, on this view, is the defining trait of film aesthetics. The concept of the filmind allows Frampton to explain how film and the mind seem to exchange identities in the imaginary space conjured by film. Because it, too, is composed of thoughts or enacts a kind of imaginative thinking, the film image is not only able to meet the human mind on equal terms but to actually "mingle" with it at the level of thought [2] (p. 10). Frampton characterizes this bond as "mutual and organic" and goes on to suggest that "[t]he film and the filmgoer combine their thinking in a very special way... The filmgoer does not so much 'identify' with the film. . . as 'join' it in the creation of a third thinking" [2] (p. 149). This third thinking constitutes the filmind. Frampton insists that the experience is not to be understood as the assimilation of one thinking process with another, or as the sum total of or interplay between two distinct thoughts. Rather, he contends that this third thinking exists independently of both. As he explains, "this is a third thought without there being a first and a second. We could not identify or isolate the two thoughts of film and filmgoer, only experience (as a filmgoer) the third" [2] (p. 163). As a result, "It can sometimes feel like we are thinking the film ourselves" [2] (p. 163), or, more strongly, that "We are the film" [2] (p. 160). The idea of an ontological identity between the spectator and film is not only consistent with the logic of film phenomenology; it rather neatly sums up its project as a whole.

6. Mediation

In the final analysis, it is this impression or sensation of immanence that authorizes film phenomenology's rejection of the mediating distance and its latent political possibilities.

According to this discourse, film constitutes an aesthetic mode in which the gap between the sign and its referent, as between the image and the model or the word and the thing, is apparently annulled. Frampton speaks for the discourse as a whole when he asserts that, in experiencing film's unique aesthetic, "the film and the filmgoer join in thought, and the process of that encounter provides immediate meaning and knowledge" [2] (p. 149). Referring to its incommensurability with signifying systems like verbal language, Frampton claims that "film seems to have no delay"—no mediation—"in its understandability" [2] (p. 152). Keathley classifies this as a kind of revelatory experience: it permits the spectator to access the proverbial "thing-in-itself", or things in their pre-semiotic state. As he explains, in the marginal details of the film image, "we get a glimpse of nature stripped of false or superimposed significance" [7] (p. 118). Film promises to eradicate aesthetic distance—that vexing gap between sign and referent, image and model, word and thing—that serves to regulate and contain meaning.

There is, however, a price to be borne in submitting to an aesthetics of immanence. Under these aesthetic conditions, the spectator is effectively prohibited from reaching beyond immediacy for structures of meaning other than those communicated directly by the film. This is to say that the spectator posited by film phenomenologists is in some sense captive to the film image. Frampton concedes as much in proposing that film spectatorship consists of the impression that the spectator and film are unified in thought. In the spectatorial encounter with film, the spectator surrenders their autonomy by having the film mind overtake their own thinking process to the point, perhaps, that the ontological distinction between spectator and film no longer holds. The spectator is, in effect, subjugated by or a slave to film's ontology.

7. Post-Theory

Post-theory finds common ground with film phenomenology in taking up mediation and aesthetic distance as a problem to be overcome. However, post-theory's epistemological commitments lead it to propose its own distinct solution. In its stated mission to model film studies on the natural sciences, post-theory adopts the principles and protocols of a naturalizing epistemology. For post-theorists, knowledge has, in principle, an ideal state and is thus acquired teleologically, through the perpetual refinement of hypotheses. Accordingly, the epistemic value of a given claim or hypothesis is thought to be directly proportional to its capacity to withstand tests of fallibility. Hence, post-theory emphasizes research that is limited to the purely empirical, since a claim made with the support of empirical data is considered more impervious to such tests. Moreover, the form that a naturalizing epistemology takes in this discourse is inevitably causal in that it seeks out regulative norms that aspire to, or approximate the condition of, natural law.

8. Poetics and Spectatorship

Post-theory's epistemological commitments lead it to shift the emphasis from aesthetics to poetics, or the study of film craft and related practices, as well as to advance a cognitivist account of the spectator's experience. Rather than examine the implications of film's aesthetic for our relationship with reality or our mode of being in the world, as film phenomenology does, poetics insists on a narrowly procedural program of establishing a taxonomy of cinematic styles or formal strategies and tracing their historical development. As part of this program, post-theory draws on cognitivism to posit a spectator whose role is limited to determining the intent of the author, which is encoded poetically as "cues" in the formal design of the work. Post-theory thereby hopes to deduce causal explanations related to film and its effects and advance claims that can be subjected to tests of fallibility. This is the context in which post-theory addresses the problem of meaning and aesthetic distance.

9. Meaning and Interpretation

To the extent that post-theory aims at cultivating scientific knowledge of art and culture, it is generally skeptical of interpretation as a critical practice. Post-theory agrees that aesthetic distance makes a problem of meaning. But it views interpretation as a failed or inadequate solution to this problem, and its continued deployment an impediment to the adoption of more effective means. This is essentially the argument that David Bordwell advances in his celebrated book *Making Meaning* [10], post-theory's most definitive statement on the question of interpretation and its prospects in a post-theory context. Despite the somewhat guarded nature of his remarks, Bordwell's study is quietly radical, for he proposes what amounts to the wholesale dismantling of the venerable practice of critical interpretation. The problem of meaning is better served, says Bordwell, by poetics, which is more amenable to empirical analysis.

Ironically, the vast majority of his study can be read not only as a contemporary account of interpretation as a critical undertaking but even, and perhaps especially, as a manual on how to renew the practice. On this score, Bordwell makes two notable contributions. The first is functional: Bordwell argues that the responsibility for the regulation of meaning be shifted from text to interpreter. Drawing on the rational agent model of cognition, he argues that meaning does not inhere in the text but is constructed by the interpreter in the form of informed and substantive inferences. While the ingredients from which interpretations are made are located in the text itself in the form of cues, every instance of interpretation, says Bordwell, is ultimately the product of a calculated act of construction on the part of the interpreter. The object of critique here is the classic hermeneutic premise that the text is a repository of more-or-less shrouded meanings and that the interpreter's task is merely to disclose them, layer by layer. But, as Bordwell says, "The critic does not burrow into the text, probe it, get behind its facade, dig to reveal its hidden meanings; the surface/depth metaphor does not capture the inferential process of interpretation" [10] (p. 13). The constructivist interpretive model that Bordwell proposes highlights the institutional foundation of all meaning making. It lays bare the degree to which the critical practice of interpretation relies on determinable habits of routine and inherited conventions, rather than amorphous processes that recall the divinatory or revelatory.

The second contribution that Bordwell makes is conceptual and taxonomic. Bordwell observes that the kinds of inferences available to the interpreter of film can be reduced to four, which he organizes from least to most abstract: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic. Referential cues are identified with diegetic elements, whether real or imagined; Bordwell also allows that they can take the form of argumentative or categorical structures. Explicit meanings are analogous to propositional or literal statements. This type of cue isolates claims made by, with, or within the film that are overt and unambiguous. Implicit meanings, the third type of inference, also function like statements in that they are thought to represent a specific claim or advance a proposition. But, rather than directly stated, they are considered insinuated, tacit, or otherwise unspoken. The final category, symptomatic cues, is the most abstracted from the referential level. It refers to those meanings that are considered wholly inadvertent, the result of the accidental, the contingent, or the involuntary.

10. Dismantling Interpretation

Bordwell's taxonomy of meaningful cues is comprehensive and elegantly organized. Taken in tandem with his insight concerning the constructed nature of meaning making, the reader could be forgiven for assuming that Bordwell is making the case for the renewal of the practice of critical interpretation, albeit along more rigorously rational lines. But his study concludes with a "sting", as Bordwell himself so modestly describes it. In the final section of the book, Bordwell suggests that rather than renew critical interpretation, and thereby cement its place at the center of humanistic inquiry, the practice ought to be displaced by another: poetics. According to Bordwell, the problem with interpretation is

that it is—in common practice, if not by nature—incompatible with the scientific aims of post-theory. He initially broaches this point in the following passage:

If science aims to explain the processes underlying external phenomena, interpretation does not on the whole produce scientific knowledge. Neither causal nor functional explanation is the aim of film interpretation. Indeed, in a certain sense, knowledge of the text is not the most salient effect of the interpretive enterprise. It may be that interpretation's greatest achievement is its ability to encourage... reflections upon our conceptual schemes. By taming the new and sharpening the known, the interpretive institution reactivates and revises common frameworks of understanding. [10] (p. 257)

This passage raises two specific points in support of the claim that interpretive criticism lacks scientific legitimacy. The first is that interpretation is ill suited—or, at any rate, rarely resorted to—for the purpose of producing causal or functional explanations of the objects that it seeks to account for. This would already disqualify it as an instrument of science. The second point refers to post-theory's interest in isolating the film as a knowable object or artifact, distinct from any extrinsic concerns, including political ones. Bordwell contends that critical interpretation targets not the film as a textual object but rather our conceptual and philosophical frameworks, which are activated and refined during the interpretive process. Consequently, to the extent that knowledge is produced, it concerns these frameworks, which is to say our interpretive faculties as they engage our conceptual or philosophical schemes, and not the film object. As he clarifies, "To understand a film interpretively is to subsume it to our conceptual schemes, and thus to master them more fully, if only tacitly" [10] (p. 257). To be sure, Bordwell concedes that, for this very reason, interpretation is of some academic or critical interest. Yet because too few critics use the occasion of interpreting a text to reflect on their conceptual schemes and frameworks, the entire enterprise is of questionable epistemic value. Whatever its potential, then, Bordwell characterizes the practice that goes by the name of interpretation as largely an empty rhetorical gesture.

According to Bordwell, if there is anything redeemable about critical interpretation, it lies with the first two categories of his taxonomy: referential and explicit cues. Part of his argument against critical interpretation is that it is applied largely for the purpose of constructing implicit and symptomatic meanings, which are the least empirical of the cues and thus the least amenable to tests of fallibility. As a more epistemically sound alternative, Bordwell suggests that critical practice reorient itself in light of two "object-centered" questions, which he nominates as follows: "First, how are particular films put together? Call this the problem of film's composition. Second, what effects and functions do particular films have?" [10] (p. 263) For Bordwell, turning to these questions would ground the study of film in a more solidly scientific basis. As he says, "If criticism can be said to produce knowledge in anything like the sense applicable to the natural and social sciences, these two questions [i.e., composition and effects/functions] might be the most reasonable points of departure" [10] (p. 263). But, he warns, the critic must be careful to avoid falling victim to the bad habits of the interpreter, who "presumes... that the film's composition and effects are the vehicles of its implicit and/or symptomatic meanings" [10] (p. 263). A traditional interpretative critic would assume that "Such meanings determine the film's use of subject matter, ideas, structure, and style; they also govern the film's effects on spectators within social contexts" [10] (pp. 263–264). But such an approach would, once again, lack an empirical and thus scientific basis. So, although composition and effects/functions constitute the primary problems, Bordwell argues that interpretation, which is biased towards implicit and symptomatic cues, is not an appropriate context in which to solve them.

Here, Bordwell makes the case for poetics as a more viable alternative to critical interpretation in addressing the meaning of film. Bordwell's vision for this project is wide-ranging but can be summed up in a few key principles. The first is that a focus on composition and effects/functions requires a renewed emphasis on the surface of the work.

In this respect, Bordwell assigns the critic the task of attending to the work's sensuous veneer, or what he calls its "perceptibility", which would effectively prohibit speculation about a work's implicit and symptomatic cues [10] (pp. 264–265). A second principle springs from the need to produce claims that have a causal logic or that allow for individual works to be assimilated to a system of categorization or classification. Reaching for, if falling short of, predictive value, poetics is a program designed to determine the laws or regulative norms that govern a given film's composition and effects/functions.

A third principle more directly addresses the question of mediation. For Bordwell, the making of meaning is understood as a kind of relay of information or propositions between rational agents—filmmaker and spectator—whose delivery takes place by means of the formal design of the work. This is to say that poetics treats mediation as a process of direct transmission. In a follow-up study dedicated to poetics proper, he is explicit on this point, affirming that "poetics is concerned with how filmmakers use the film medium to achieve effects on spectators", who in turn activate the appropriate mental schemata in order to decipher or make sense of the intended effect [11] (p. 44). Crucially, conceiving mediation in terms of transmission limits the range of cues to which the critic can be attentive. As Bordwell says, poetics seeks to "ascribe expressive qualities to certain referential and explicit meanings", which the filmmaker embeds in the work as form and style [10] (p. 264). This is, therefore, yet another way that poetics marginalizes implicit and symptomatic meanings. Taken together, these principles are used to justify Bordwell's imperative to stop "reading" films—the interpreter's program—and start treating them as knowable objects composed of empirically verifiable attributes.

We are now in a position to see how post-theory addresses the problem of aesthetic distance as it relates to meaning. The emphasis on a work's perceptual veneer, the search after causal laws or regulative norms, the fixation on the expressive capacity of form and style—in each instance, it is the referential and explicit cues that occupy the critic's attention. In the form of poetics, post-theory seeks to inhibit the study of implicit and symptomatic cues in order for its claims to meet or approximate the standards of science. This is how it proposes to solve the problem of aesthetic distance. By limiting analysis to referential and explicit cues, post-theory believes that poetics can open meaning up to tests of fallibility. In principle, such a program would virtually eliminate aesthetic distance, that problematic gap between sign and referent, image and model, or word and thing. This is most evident in its desire to reduce mediation to a process of transmission. But, in all cases, the elimination of aesthetic distance is realized by disavowing symptomatic and implicit cues, since these are considered impervious to empirical investigation. For poetics, only the empirical aspect of the work can be reliably called on to reduce aesthetic distance. Rather than adjust its program to account for any structures of meaning outside this limited range, it merely insists on their exclusion.

11. Overcoming Distance

I have tried to show how both film phenomenology and post-theory seek to renovate film theory in part by reformulating the question of aesthetics. However diverse in other respects, both are motivated, I argue, to radically reduce or eliminate the aesthetic distance that separates the spectating subject from the image viewed. The solution in each case is to posit a spectator who does not—or, in any case, should not—interpret. For film phenomenology, interpretation interferes with the spontaneous union of film and mind, during which meaning is communicated in the absence of mediation. For post-theory, mediation is reduced to the process of the more-or-less direct transmission of meaning between rational agents, a process that interpretation would only serve to corrupt.

It is with this critical context in mind that I would like to consider the intervention staged by Rancière on the question of film's aesthetic. In this respect, Rancière's develops a compelling thesis concerning the relationship between aesthetics and politics, which can be summed up in the phrase "the distribution of the sensible"⁶. For Rancière, aesthetics means precisely the deliberate effort to configure the sensible order of referents, models, things into

the coded order of signs, images, words. However, every such aesthetic configuration also, in the same gesture, parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by aligning bodies with certain tasks to be performed at certain places. This double aspect of aesthetics is the basis for his claim that aesthetics is inherently political. The logic according to which the sensible order is carved up and shared—in the form of a film, say—does not only describe a specific relation to the world or to reality. For Rancière, a given distribution of the sensible also implies a certain social order expressed as a set of laws that allocates places in the community, which in turn polices what one can say and do within a framework of common sense or, to use his preferred term, “con-sensus”. But just as aesthetics can knit together a given social reality in the guise of a common sense, so too can it be used to undo that reality and, in a political gesture of “dis-sensus”, oppose it with the principle of axiomatic equality, according to which it is within each and every speaking (or spectating) being’s power to make and undo links between words and things.

Drawing on this principle, Rancière innovates the concept of the emancipated spectator and, in so doing, challenges two specific points propagated by both film phenomenologists and post-theorists. On the one hand, Rancière argues that aesthetic distance is not a problem to be solved but a positive and productive condition, particularly with respect to art and politics. On the other, he posits a spectator whose emancipated condition rests precisely on its capacity to interpret.

12. The Fault of Language

Rancière’s defense of interpretation—and of a spectator defined by its capacity for interpretation—finds its origin in his study *The Flesh of Words* [12]. Rancière begins this pivotal work by taking up the premise of the biblical or metaphysical Word made “flesh” in the material and mortal form of language. Rancière seizes on the distinction between word and thing presupposed in this premise to argue that meaning is invariably a matter of aesthetics. In the beginning is the Word, but its accessibility and circulation among mortals forces it to take material form, and, in the transition from one sphere to the other, a gap is formed, a certain distance that separates what is said from what is meant, from sign to referent, image to model, word to thing. Moreover, given the incommensurability between the immortal and mortal planes, this gap is utterly irreducible: there is no question of identifying with absolute assurance the word and the thing. As Rancière observes, the tentative nature of any incarnation of the Word was noted as far back as Plato: “a strange game is played between words and their body. Since Plato and the *Cratylus* it has been understood that words do not resemble what they say” [12] (p. 3). Words do not coincide with their bodies; there is invariably a gap between the two.

Whereas Plato finds this prospect alarming, Rancière discovers that it is possible to find redemption in the contingency and tentativeness of the Word made flesh if one understands it as the enabling condition of poetry, or art. As Rancière explains, “If chance had not made the very sound of *nuit* light and that of *jour* dark, verse would not exist, which rewards the faults of language” [12] (p. 3). What Plato thought of as a fault of language—its constitutional gap—is actually its most vital feature. Every link made between a word and a thing is ultimately contingent and tentative, a function more of chance than of law. But from this very fact springs the possibility of verse, or poetry. It is the gap between them that allows for the dissolution of any given link and its reconstitution in another form. This is to say that the attachment of a word to a thing is invariably an aesthetic gesture. Every instance of expression is an opportunity to reconsider the ways in which the Word takes on flesh. Meaning is aesthetic because it manifests in those occasions in which we undo a link, or renew it, or forge altogether new relationships between words and things.

13. The Emancipated Spectator

It is on the basis of this account of aesthetic distance that Rancière elaborates his celebrated concept of the emancipated spectator. To be sure, Rancière is being somewhat ironic in his use of the term, for what distinguishes his concept from previous theoretical

efforts to “emancipate” the spectator is the lack of a programmatic element that would prescribe in advance the means by which the spectator’s bonds are to be broken. Rancière cites many familiar examples of programmatic emancipation, including the Brechtian paradigm of *Verfremdungseffekt*, Artaud’s theater of cruelty, and Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle. Rancière’s target here is what he calls “self-vanishing mediation”, the idea that it is possible or desirable to abolish mediation by closing the gap between word and thing. In this respect, Rancière links the supposed fault in language that these projects wish to repair to another kind of distance, the one between master and student that constitutes the pedagogical relationship. As he explains,

[This] self-vanishing mediation is not something unknown to us. It is the very logic of the pedagogical relationship: the role assigned to the schoolmaster in that relationship is to abolish the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignoramus. [1] (p. 8)

Here, Rancière rehearses his long-standing argument that the pedagogical relationship typically assumes the form of a self-fulfilling tautology: the ignoramus is ignorant because he occupies the position of ignoramus. This position only has coherence as such in relation to another determined position, that of the schoolmaster. The task of schoolmaster is to abolish the intellectual distance between himself and the ignoramus, but, as Rancière notes, “he can only reduce the distance on condition that he constantly re-creates it.” [1] (p. 8). This is because the relationship is predicated not on the principle of disparity—the master has more knowledge than the student—but on the principle of inequality—the master is defined as such by his supposed capacity to identify ignorance, whereas the student is defined by the lack of such capacity. Rancière draws a distinction between a kind of ignorance that is merely a lesser form of knowledge and a kind of ignorance that is considered the opposite of knowledge. The first is the elementary condition of all knowing beings and so implies no hierarchical ordering—in this sense, master and student are both ignorant. The second, however, commits the master to one sphere of experience—the one who knows—and the student to another—the one who is ignorant. This inegalitarian logic informs pedagogy in general:

To replace ignorance by knowledge, [the schoolmaster] must always be one step ahead, install a new form of ignorance between pupil and himself. The reason is simple. In pedagogical logic, the ignoramus is not simply one who does not as yet know what the schoolmaster knows. She is the one who does not know what she does not know or how to know it. For his part, the schoolmaster is not only the one who possesses the knowledge unknown by the ignoramus. He is also the one who knows how to make it an object of knowledge, at what point and in accordance with what protocol. [1] (p. 8)

What pedagogy, so defined, both presupposes as given and confirms in every practical instance is the inequality of intelligence. The result, says Rancière, is intellectual stultification: what the student learns is not only that they are ignorant, but that the alleviation of their ignorance is dependent on the lessons of the schoolmaster.

14. The Ignorant Schoolmaster

This poetic labour of translation is at the heart of all leaning. It is at the heart of the emancipatory practice of the ignorant schoolmaster. [1] (p. 10)

Rancière’s entire philosophical project stems from his commitment to axiomatic equality, one whose primary form is intellectual emancipation. In this respect, he counterposes the stultifying logic of pedagogy to the following concept: the ignorant schoolmaster. To be sure, Rancière is well aware that knowledge is not evenly spread and that there can exist great disparities within and between communities of knowledge. But what he seeks to convey with his concept of the ignorant schoolmaster is that both student and master acquire knowledge in the same manner and from the same capacity for learning. As he explains, intellectual emancipation “does not signify the equal value of all manifestations

of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations" [1] (p. 10). The distinction is subtle, but it makes all the difference. What the schoolmaster and student share is a capacity that defines all intellectual adventures: a capacity for "observing and comparing one thing with another, a sign with a fact, a sign with another sign" [1] (p. 10). Rancière calls this activity the "poetic labour of translation", which, he says, is "at the heart of all learning". As a generic example, Rancière takes up the case of the illiterate being. His defense of those who cannot read is striking and worth quoting in full:

If an illiterate knows only one prayer by heart, she can compare that knowledge with what she does not yet know: the words of this prayer as written down on paper. She can learn, one sign after the other, the relationship between what she does not know and what she does know. She can do this if, at each step, she observes what is before her, says what she has seen, and verifies what she has said. From this ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work—an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it. [1] (p. 10)

The ignorant schoolmaster adopts as axiomatic the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations. As such, they understand the learning process as a labor of poetic translation rather than as the transfer or transmission of knowledge from the intelligent to the ignorant. For them, "There are not two sorts of intelligence separated by a gulf" but rather—where it concerns the capacity for learning—a meeting of intellectual equals [1] (p. 10). What the ignorant schoolmaster does not know, finally, is the inequality of intelligence. Consequently, they are also "ignorant" of the hierarchies that such intelligence implies. As Rancière puts it, the ignorant schoolmaster has "renounced the 'knowledge of ignorance' and thereby uncoupled his mastery from his knowledge" [1] (p. 11).

Conceptually, the emancipated spectator is a corollary of the ignorant schoolmaster, and in two specific ways. The first concerns the learning process itself. For the ignorant schoolmaster, learning assumes the form of poetic translation, whereby signs are correlated with other signs in the construction of new "poems" of knowledge. For Rancière, the same principle applies to spectatorship. In contradistinction to a spectator who merely absorbs the intended effects of the work of art, as both film phenomenology and post-theory suggest, Rancière posits a spectator defined by a capacity to forge new and perhaps unanticipated links between the work and their own aesthetic sensibility. This is a spectator who cannibalizes elements of the spectacle that they witness to craft, in effect, their own work of art. As Rancière explains,

She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. [1] (p. 13)

The concept of the ignorant schoolmaster bears on the emancipated spectator in a second way—namely, with its egalitarian logic, a logic that suspends any determined relation between role and body. The ignorant schoolmaster is formulated as such not in order to conjure a paradox—since, by common definition, the schoolmaster is the opposite of the ignoramus—but in the interest of dismantling the hierarchies that elevate the master at the expense of the student. The ignorant schoolmaster refers to the self-equality of intelligence, irrespective of the disparity in knowledge between any given intelligences. On this view, the designations of master and student are purely contingent matters, since both draw on the same kind of intelligence and are hobbled by the same kind of ignorance in their respective pursuits of knowledge. The role of spectator is likewise a purely contingent designation, for the spectator is not only the one who sees; they are also the one who draws

on a universal capacity for aesthetic fabulation in their confrontation with the spectacle. In this, claims Rancière, they are no different from the artist: “This is a crucial point: spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers” [1] (p. 13). Rancière’s “emancipated” spectator, then, is ironically named because the spectator does not require the services of a liberator, whether artist or critic. The spectator, like the student, already enjoys the condition of emancipation by virtue of their capacity, which they share with all speaking and spectating beings, to forge their own poem on the strength of the spectatorial encounter.

15. The Redemption of Distance

Distance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication. [1] (p. 10)

It is this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists—that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spectator. [1] (p. 17)

The arguments of both film phenomenology and post-theory hinge on the premise that aesthetic distance constitutes a problem in need of a solution. Filmosophy wishes to eliminate the distance by adjusting the spectator’s gaze to the frequency of the film’s organic meaning, which is only possible, goes the argument, in the absence of mediating distance. This requires the spectator to resist the urge to interpret—that is, to translate—this meaning into a concrete expression. For its part, post-theory believes that the distance can be conquered by directing the spectator’s attention to referential and explicit cues exclusively, or to only those effects that can be reliably traced back to the intentions of the filmmaker. Here, interpretation is dismissed on the grounds that it is inevitably biased towards implicit and symptomatic cues, resulting in meaning that cannot be subjected to tests of fallibility. The concept of the emancipated spectator, however, invites us to question the premise that underwrites these projects. To the extent that meaning is aesthetic in its constitution, it makes no sense to speak of distance as a problem. There is a fault in language, to be sure, but we need not follow Plato in condemning the gap between words and things, nor take up his quest to eliminate this gap.

A positive conception of distance is possible on the basis of two premises. The first is that distance is the necessary condition of all meaning. To search after meaning is to organize something intelligible from the fabric of the sensible environment. Were the one to coincide perfectly with the other, there would be no need to make meaning, or to examine or question their association. Meaning, then, flourishes precisely due to the non-identity of the intelligible and the sensible. Put another way, it is the very gap between words and things that lends meaning its rationality. Furthermore, and by the same token, aesthetic distance is the very ground of art. What is art if not a mode of expression in which the tentativeness and contingency that relates a sign to its referent, an image to its model, a word to its thing is self-consciously explored and exploited? Art has coherence only in the context of aesthetic distance. To solve the problem of distance, then, is tantamount to suspending the condition that gives rise to art in the first place.

A second premise that supports a positive conception of distance is that its irreducibility implies a spectator who looks past the identification of words with things to focus instead on their fundamental disjunction. In this respect, aesthetic distance confronts the spectator not as an impediment to communication but as the very source of their emancipation. This is because the spectator can exercise their capacity for poetic fabulation only on the condition that words ultimately fail to align fully with things. As Rancière notes, “This [poetic] capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations” [1] (p. 17). As we’ve seen, Rancière describes this interplay of associations and dissociations as a “poetic labour of translation”. But he often refers to it by its more conventional name: interpretation. For Rancière, the emancipated spectator is the spectator who interprets, which is here defined

in relation to the capacity to dissolve or reconfigure the signifying links embedded in and by the work in accordance with one's own aesthetic judgement.

Rethinking the relationship between distance and interpretation in this way renews both concepts. To the extent that it is irreducible, aesthetic distance calls us forth as interpreters searching after meaning. By the same token, it transforms us into artists and poets who make and undo links at will. Rancière states bluntly that "[aesthetic distance] requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story" [1] (p. 22). Distance is positive, finally, because it is the condition upon which the principle of intellectual emancipation depends, a point captured by Rancière in the following remarks:

This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path. [1] (p. 17)

The Platonic suspicion of aesthetic distance as it relates to the fault of language, then, is unwarranted. Distance is not an evil to be abolished but the very seat of the emancipated spectator, no less than the ground of all art and meaning.

16. On Realities, Shared and Sharable

A positive conception of aesthetic distance on these terms puts the doctrines of film phenomenology and post-theory in a new light. With respect to film phenomenology, the concept of the emancipated spectator challenges this project's conception of the spectator as somehow enslaved by the film image. Film phenomenology neglects to take into consideration the degree to which all spectators share in a poetic capacity to interpret—that is, to appropriate the film image in the aesthetic construction of their own poem. Even if we are persuaded by the argument that there are elements of the film image that transcend the fault of language—and, to be clear, we should be skeptical—this does not necessarily entail that we ought to disregard the emancipated aspect of spectatorship. In this respect, film phenomenology is limited in its capacity to account for the full range of film's aesthetic effects because it excludes from analysis the activity that is fundamental to, if not constitutive of, all spectatorship: connecting what is seen to something not explicitly present in the film—a concept, a sign, another image. Even assuming that we understand a part of the film image intuitively and without mediation, the claim that this alone constitutes film's aesthetic is ultimately untenable. Filmosophy's concept of the filmind, for example, refers to the idea that the spectator mingles their thinking with the film's to the point of ontological confusion. For filmosophy, to "think" or "be" the film in this way circumscribes the aesthetic experience of film. The filmind concept not only disavows the inevitable aesthetic appropriation that the spectator indulges in; it effectively forecloses the possibility of such appropriation. By qualifying spectatorship as an emancipated condition, however, we not only signal a political commitment to the self-equality of all intelligence; we are also better equipped conceptually to account for the experience of film's aesthetic in all its complexity. In particular, we become sensitive to the interpretive activity that is spectatorship's defining feature.

The concept of the emancipated spectator—of a spectator defined in relation to interpretation—also has implications for the post-theory program. To be sure, Rancière agrees with post-theorists that interpretation is not a plumbing of depths but rather a construction of meaning. At the same time, however, he disputes post-theory's claim that meaning can or ought to be identified exclusively with the intended effect of the work, or those effects that are embedded as referential and explicit cues. The making of meaning, we might say, is not reducible to the transmission of an idea between rational agents, even if this is surely one of its aspects. While the concept of emancipated spectatorship does not prohibit the spectator from reconstructing the idea that the artist transmits by means of the work, it is clear that limiting the spectator to this level of meaning runs afoul of the principle of intellectual emancipation. We need not even go so far as Rancière when he

states, at his most blunt, that the “logic of straight uniform transmission” is “the logic of the stultifying pedagogue” [1] (p. 14). It suffices to accept that a theory of meaning limited to the act of transmission is an impoverished theory.

Language is built on a fault—an irreducible distance—which invites considerations of meanings beyond those that the artist wishes to convey. Accordingly, we cannot do without symptomatic and implicit cues—and the interpretations that they inspire—since the emancipated spectator is defined primarily in relation to structures of meaning that extend beyond the intention of the artist. In this respect, the spectator is ill conceived as a “puzzle-solver” in the cognitivists’ sense; the spectator does not merely process information on the basis of relevant schemata. The spectator is, rather, a collector and manipulator of signs and images—an artist in their own right⁷. An emancipated consideration of spectatorship thus relieves the artist of the responsibility to determine in advance the aesthetic effect that the work is to have on the spectator. Rancière repeatedly emphasizes how such effects cannot be wholly anticipated and that the spectator’s appropriation of the work is not only inevitable but unpredictable.

Another point worth considering is the politics of a sharable, rather than a merely shared, reality. Post-theory’s commitment to a naturalizing epistemology entails the use of fallibility tests as the basis for the determination of the epistemic status of claims. Hence its injunction against implicit and symptomatic cues, which resist such tests. We might plausibly frame empirical programs of this sort, whether they take place in the natural or in the human sciences, as the search after a shared reality, or a reality in which aesthetic distance is virtually overcome. A claim that consistently passes the tests of fallibility put before it serves as a testament to a reality that transcends individual experience. On the basis of explicit and referential cues, which are designed to mitigate or eliminate aesthetic distance, a spectator is able to identify the intended effect of the work of art. In so doing, they can verify that a point in common exists between them and the artist, and that each, therefore, inhabits a shared reality.

The concept of the emancipated spectator disputes neither the premise nor the value of seeking out a shared reality. It does, however, posit a reality that is not only shared but fundamentally *sharable*. Implicit and symptomatic cues draw on the spectator’s aesthetic capacity to assign meaning where none was intended, to dissolve and remake the signifying links that constitute the film or work of art on the basis of their individual experiences and interests. In this way, interpretation not only makes an artist of the spectator; it makes a spectator out of the artist, who now regards their work anew, in light of the interpretations made with and alongside it. By design, a shared reality of the kind posited by post-theorists subsists on a policing consensus in which each body is strictly identified with a specific role—artist, spectator, critic, etc. But to admit to a sharable reality, rather than merely a shared one, is to acknowledge that the same irreducible distance that separates words from things also prevents the pure identification of a given body with a specific role. Implicit and symptomatic cues make possible a political dissensus in which the boundaries between bodies are blurred: the spectator assumes the qualities of an artist, the artist those of a spectator.

This blurring—this sharable reality—confounds empirical investigation because it thwarts the criterion of fallibility. Claims made in the context of aesthetic distance or of a sharable reality are fundamentally litigious because such distance is utterly irreducible: it is always possible to adjust the relations between words and things, as between bodies and roles. Here, the politics of aesthetics is laid bare. To confront a film or other form of cultural expression as an emancipated spectator means precisely to be alive to the tentative nature of the links that the work forges between words and things, as well as to the critic’s own status as both spectator and artist.

An emancipated spectatorship does not designate a privileged starting point, as does post-theory with respect to composition and functions/effects. As Rancière says, “Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions” in the spectator’s appropriation of the poem [1] (p. 17). These are often, if not inevitably, what post-theory calls implicit and

symptomatic cues: they are unintended, but also, and by the same token, more amenable to appropriation. Emancipation for the spectator means precisely that, on the strength of such cues, the work of art serves as an occasion to interpret, to craft a new poem out of the elements of the poem under review. The ensuing interpretation, in turn, serves as the basis for someone else's poem, and so on. Such a mode of inquiry is political in that it keeps faith with the emancipated condition of all spectatorship and all forms of learning. To put it into practice, it requires only that we "refuse, firstly, radical distance, secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories" [1] (p. 17). Through an emancipated form of spectatorship, grounded on rather than hobbled by aesthetic distance, committed to a sharable rather than merely shared reality, film discovers, finally, its political identity.

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Notes

- ¹ For a thorough account of this discourse, see David Norman Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley, Calif: Univ. of California Press, 1994).
- ² This is also true of film scholarship that draws on Cultural Studies in taking, for example, a Queer or Feminist perspective, as well as the kind of ideology critique associated with Robin Wood and Slavoj Žižek. In each case, it is a kind of politicized film criticism centered on the individual film text that is being practiced, rather than a study of film aesthetics more generally, which is the purview of film theory.
- ³ Sobchack in particular is representative of a school of thought that promotes the idea of an embodied spectatorship, or a form of spectatorship that involves non-ocular senses and sensations, such as touch. Laura U. Marks and Steven Shaviro are other notable members of this school. Theories of embodied spectatorship are generally ambivalent, and sometimes explicitly or implicitly hostile, to the question of politics, however.
- ⁴ Writing from the analytic perspective of post-theory, Noël Carroll urges his fellow film scholars to abandon this line of research. See his "Film/Mind Analogies: The Case of Hugo Münsterberg", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 4 (1988): 489–99. My view is that Carroll does not adequately appreciate the distinction between his epistemological premises and the premises proper to phenomenology, to which he is, in any case, unsympathetic.
- ⁵ Christian Keathley captures this impression in the phrase "subjective projection". See Keathley, 73.
- ⁶ His most extensive treatment of this thesis can be found in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London; New York: Continuum, 2006).
- ⁷ Although Rancière's is a novel formulation, the idea that something of the artist is active in the spectator, and that therefore spectatorship cannot be reduced to a process of transmission, is not new. For example, Kant already understood how our pleasure in a work of art is due in part to what he called the "free play" of our imagination and cognitive faculties that the work triggers. See the section "The Analytic Of the Beautiful" in his *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), particularly pp. 71–72. Or consider the following remarks by R.G. Collingwood on the idea of art as play: "That a man who had studied the poets all his life should die looking at the sunrise from high up on Monte Rosa is itself a poem". See Robin George Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis: Or, The Map of Knowledge* (Clarendon Press, 1956), 106.

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